



THE SYSTEM OF SOCIAL PROTECTION OF THE POPULATION AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FOREIGN EXPERIENCE AND THE UZBEKISTAN MODEL

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Article history:	Abstract:
<p>Received: 26th March 2026 Accepted: 24th April 2026</p>	<p>Social protection systems are fundamentally evolving from mere mechanisms of financial assistance into complex, structural social institutions capable of regulating societal interactions, developing human capital, and ensuring sustainable development. This article presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of global welfare regimes to provide theoretically grounded insights for the ongoing institutional reforms in the Republic of Uzbekistan. Methodologically guided by G. Esping-Andersen's welfare regime typology, D. North's institutional theory, and A. Sen's capability approach, the study systematically evaluates four distinct paradigms: Germany's conservative-corporatist Bismarck model, Sweden's social-democratic Nordic model, South Korea's East Asian productivist welfare model, and China's targeted poverty alleviation strategies. By examining these diverse experiences, the research identifies their structural strengths, adaptability, and functional significance. The ultimate objective is to extrapolate relevant strategic mechanisms to enhance the evolving Uzbek social protection model, particularly within the framework of recent national initiatives such as the establishment of the National Agency for Social Protection, the integration of the "Mahalla of seven" system, and the "Inson" social service centers. The findings suggest that transitioning toward a more integrated, decentralized, and proactive social policy framework will significantly reinforce the institutional capacity of social protection in "New Uzbekistan," fostering both economic resilience and long-term social justice.</p>

Keywords: Social protection, social institution, welfare state, Bismarck model, Nordic model, productivist welfare, institutional approach, poverty reduction, comparative analysis, New Uzbekistan

INTRODUCTION: In an era defined by rapid global economic integration, demographic shifts, and complex societal transformations, the necessity of establishing robust, targeted, and highly efficient systems of social protection has become a critical imperative for states worldwide [1]. The recent global polycrisis—encompassing pandemic-induced economic shocks, geopolitical instability, and rising inflation—has exacerbated social inequalities and highlighted the vulnerabilities inherent in traditional welfare state models. Consequently, the empirical experience of advanced developed nations unequivocally demonstrates that social protection can no longer be conceptualized merely as a fragmented, reactive mechanism for providing periodic material assistance or charitable relief to marginalized groups [2]. Rather, it must be comprehensively understood and strategically managed as a complex, multifaceted macro-social institution. This institution is responsible for systematically regulating social relations, mitigating

systemic economic risks, fostering social cohesion, and ensuring the sustainable development of human capital across all societal strata [3].

Within the Republic of Uzbekistan, the paradigm of social policy has undergone a profound and unprecedented metamorphosis. Guided by the strategic developmental objectives of "New Uzbekistan," the state has constitutionally redefined itself as a "social state," elevating the systemic support, protection, and empowerment of vulnerable population segments to the highest echelon of public policy priorities [4]. The last few years have marked the genesis of a pivotal institutional transition in this sphere, moving away from fragmented departmental approaches to a centralized, holistic strategy. Most notably, this includes the establishment of the National Agency for Social Protection under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, which serves as a unified regulatory body [5]. Furthermore, at the grassroots level, the innovative "Mahalla of seven" (a localized community-based



governance system comprising seven key neighborhood officials, including social workers, youth leaders, and women's activists) has been integrated with the roll-out of comprehensive "Inson" (Human) social service centers [6]. These foundational changes underscore a deliberate shift from passive welfare dependency models toward proactive, integrated, and institutionally embedded social protection networks designed to address poverty at its root.

Despite these momentous practical reforms, the accelerated pace of institutional restructuring necessitates rigorous sociological, theoretical, and methodological analysis. The current academic landscape reveals a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the scientific substantiation of mechanisms designed to strengthen cooperative "network governance" between state and civil society institutions in the realm of social protection [7]. While issues of social welfare, political competence, human development, and poverty alleviation have been significantly explored by domestic scholars such as M.B. Bekmurodov, A.A. Kholbekov, and Q.Kh. Abdurakhmonov [8], as well as by scholars from CIS countries like T.I. Zaslavskaya who studied the turbulent social transformations in the post-Soviet space [9], the predominant focus has traditionally rested on either macro-economic dimensions (such as pension financing) or strictly juridical frameworks. Consequently, the institutional management mechanisms of the newly integrated, decentralized systems in New Uzbekistan have yet to be thoroughly investigated through a dedicated, specialized sociological lens.

To bridge this analytical deficit, it is essential to anchor the discourse in established sociological and institutional theories. Theoretical conceptualizations of the welfare state provide a vital framework for understanding how social protection architectures function as central societal pillars. Furthermore, optimizing the national social protection framework in Uzbekistan requires more than domestic policy adjustments; it demands a systematic, context-aware comparative analysis of globally recognized welfare regimes.

This study sets out to critically examine several paradigmatic models: Germany's Bismarck model, characterized by its conservative-corporatist approach and employment-based social insurance [10]; Sweden's Nordic model, defined by its highly redistributive, universalistic social-democratic principles [11]; South Korea's East Asian "productivist welfare" model, which structurally aligns social policy directly with state-led economic growth objectives [12]; and China's targeted programmatic experience in large-scale, data-driven

poverty alleviation [13]. By critically synthesizing the theoretical insights drawn from these diverse global welfare regimes with the emerging local institutional landscape, this study aims to formulate a scientifically grounded theoretical model. Ultimately, the objective is to propose actionable, practical mechanisms to enhance the long-term efficiency, inclusivity, and adaptability of the social protection system in New Uzbekistan, ensuring it operates as a dynamic driver of social solidarity.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

To achieve the central research objectives and ensure a rigorous, multidimensional sociological examination of the subject, this study employs a comprehensive methodological framework. This framework is explicitly grounded in established macro-sociological paradigms, institutional theories, and qualitative empirical analysis techniques. The object of this study encompasses the rapidly evolving system of social protection for the population in New Uzbekistan, specifically focusing on the activities, interactions, and functional integration of social institutions within the broader socio-economic structure. Concurrently, the subject matter is delimited to the social relations, institutional mechanisms, legal norms, role expectations, and target demographic groups associated with the management and structural enhancement of this system.

2.1. Theoretical Framework The theoretical and conceptual foundation of the research integrates several prominent sociological and institutional paradigms to provide a holistic understanding of welfare mechanisms:

Structural-Functional Approach: Drawing upon the conceptual insights of Talcott Parsons regarding social systems and his AGIL paradigm (Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, Latency) [14], this approach is utilized to deconstruct the social protection system. It allows for a precise classification of its structural components (agencies, local mahallas, financial bodies) and evaluates how effectively they fulfill their societal functions of maintaining equilibrium and social integration during periods of rapid economic transition. Utilizing the foundational framework provided by Douglass North [15], the study analyzes both the formal rules (constitutions, decrees, legal codes) and informal constraints (cultural traditions of community mutual aid, such as the *Hashar* and *Zakat* inherent in Uzbek society) that regulate social protection processes. This perspective is crucial for evaluating institutional friction and the path-dependency of welfare reforms.

The comparative dimension of the study is theoretically anchored in Gøsta Esping-Andersen's seminal classification of welfare capitalism [16]. His concepts of "de-commodification" (the degree to which individuals



can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independent of market participation) and "stratification" serve as essential benchmarks to evaluate the diverse state models of social protection chosen for this study.

Formulated by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen [17], this normative framework is integrated to shift the analytical focus from mere income-based poverty to multidimensional human well-being. It is used to assess how the new institutional frameworks in Uzbekistan—particularly the "Inson" centers—actually expand the substantial freedoms and capabilities of vulnerable populations.

2.2. Analytical and Empirical Methods The primary methodology relies heavily on **comparative-sociological analysis**. This method is deployed to systematically dissect and contrast advanced foreign welfare paradigms: Germany's conservative-corporatist Bismarck model, Sweden's universalistic Nordic model, South Korea's "productivist welfare" state, and China's targeted poverty reduction strategy. The comparative matrix evaluates these models based on financing mechanisms, coverage breadth, administrative decentralization, and their core philosophical orientations toward welfare. This technique allows the research to scientifically justify which specific mechanisms are culturally and economically adaptable to the context of Uzbekistan.

Furthermore, the study employs rigorous **normative and document analysis**. A systematic, critical review of primary legal and regulatory frameworks governing social policy in New Uzbekistan was conducted. This included a detailed examination of the newly revised Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan (which enshrines the state's social obligations) [4], Presidential Decree No. PF-82 on the comprehensive improvement of social protection services [5], and the ambitious "Uzbekistan - 2030" Strategy document [6]. Analyzing these foundational texts helped map the intended policy architecture, identify systemic advancements, and uncover potential dysfunctions or overlaps within the organizational and legal foundations of the national social protection network.

Finally, the study utilizes **prognostic and institutional modeling**. Bridging the gap between current empirical realities and future policy objectives, this method is used to theoretically construct future trajectories for the institutional improvement of the social protection system. Specifically, it focuses on designing theoretical models of "network governance" that foster synergistic, direct cooperation between state macro-institutions (National Agency), micro-level local governance structures (the Mahalla system), and independent civil society actors.

RESULTS

The empirical and theoretical investigation into the institutionalization of social protection systems yielded significant findings across two primary domains. First, the comparative analysis of foreign welfare regimes illuminated diverse functional mechanisms that possess high adaptive potential. Second, the structural analysis of the ongoing reforms in "New Uzbekistan" revealed a profound paradigm shift in how social protection is conceptualized, managed, and delivered at both the macro-state and micro-community levels.

Comparative Analysis of Global Welfare Regimes

To scientifically ground the institutional improvements required for Uzbekistan, the study systematically evaluated four distinct global paradigms of social protection. The results indicate that no single model can be imported wholesale; rather, specific functional elements must be extracted and culturally translated.

The Conservative-Corporatist Approach (Germany's Bismarck Model):

The analysis of the German model highlights the enduring efficacy of employment-based social insurance founded on the principle of solidarity. Established over a century ago, this system strategically links social security benefits to occupational status and earnings history [18]. The core finding here is the strength of "self-governance" (Selbstverwaltung) within social insurance funds, which are jointly managed by employer and employee representatives. This corporatist structure significantly reduces the direct administrative burden on the central state while ensuring high levels of compliance and social dialogue. For emerging economies, the Bismarck model demonstrates that a robust social protection system requires a formalized labor market and a strong institutional culture of tripartite cooperation (state, employers, and trade unions).

The Social-Democratic Approach (Sweden's Nordic Model):

Contrasting sharply with the German model, the Swedish model is characterized by its universalistic principles, comprehensive coverage, and extensive "de-commodification" of social rights [19]. Funded primarily through general taxation rather than targeted payroll contributions, the Nordic regime treats social protection as an unconditional right of citizenship. The research results indicate that while the direct transplantation of the Nordic model's high-tax framework is economically unfeasible for developing nations in the short term, its ideological commitment to extreme poverty eradication, gender egalitarianism, and massive state investment in human capital (education and healthcare) provides a crucial normative benchmark for assessing social justice and equality in any reforming state.



The East Asian "Productivist Welfare" Model (South Korea):

The analysis of South Korea presents a highly relevant trajectory for rapidly modernizing economies [20]. Historically, the South Korean state subordinated social policy to the imperatives of industrialization and rapid economic growth—a paradigm where social protection was viewed strictly as a tool for economic productivity rather than wealth redistribution. However, as the economy matured and democratic consolidation occurred, the state was forced to radically expand its social safety nets, transitioning toward an inclusive welfare state. The critical finding for Uzbekistan is South Korea's successful utilization of state-led, targeted investments in social infrastructure capable of supporting a highly skilled workforce, demonstrating how social policy can be synergized with national economic strategies.

Targeted Poverty Alleviation Strategies (The Chinese Experience):

China's recent trajectory in social policy provides profound insights into managing social protection across a vast and diverse population. Unlike traditional broad-based welfare, China adopted a hyper-targeted, data-driven approach to eradicate absolute poverty [21]. Through the "Dibao" (minimum livelihood guarantee) system and precise poverty alleviation campaigns, the Chinese state mobilized local party cadres to identify vulnerable households and tailor specific interventions—ranging from micro-loans to relocation. The primary result drawn from this analysis is the immense value of leveraging granular, localized data and strict bureaucratic accountability to deliver social services directly to those in absolute need.

Institutional Transformation of Social Protection in New Uzbekistan

The second phase of the results focuses on the structural and institutional transformations currently underway in the Republic of Uzbekistan. Prior to the recent reforms, the national social protection system exhibited characteristics of institutional fragmentation, where responsibilities were dispersed across multiple ministries (Health, Public Education, Employment, etc.). This fragmentation often led to bureaucratic friction, overlapping functions, and instances where vulnerable groups "fell through the cracks" of the safety net.

The findings of this study systematically map the architecture of the newly established framework, identifying a strategic shift toward a hybrid model of "centralized policy direction and decentralized service delivery."

Macro-Level: The National Agency for Social Protection: The establishment of the National Agency for Social Protection under the President of the Republic of

Uzbekistan marks a critical milestone in institutional consolidation. The results indicate that this agency acts as the "super-regulator," unifying the previously fragmented financial, administrative, and legal resources into a single institutional body [5]. This centralization ensures a cohesive national strategy, standardizes the criteria for identifying vulnerability, and optimizes the allocation of the state budget toward social welfare.

Meso and Micro-Levels: The "Mahalla of Seven" and "Inson" Centers:

The most distinctive empirical finding of this research is the institutionalization of grassroots social protection through the traditional Uzbek community structure—the Mahalla. The state has innovatively formalized this cultural institution into a rigorous governance framework known as the "Mahalla of seven" [6]. This structure integrates local chairpersons, women's activists, youth leaders, tax inspectors, and critically, professional social workers at the neighborhood level.

Working in tandem with this are the newly established "Inson" (Human) social service centers [22]. The results of our document and systemic analysis show that these centers represent a shift from a passive "wait-for-application" approach to an active "case-management" methodology. Social workers within the Mahalla proactively identify at-risk families, assess their specific vulnerabilities (using multidimensional poverty metrics rather than just income), and coordinate comprehensive support plans through the "Inson" centers. This includes psychological counseling, legal aid, vocational training, and direct financial assistance.

Synthesis: Toward a Networked Model of Social Governance
The synthesis of these findings reveals that New Uzbekistan is not merely copying a single foreign model but is actively constructing a localized, hybrid welfare regime. It integrates the state-led developmental focus seen in the South Korean productivist model, applies the targeted, data-driven methodologies observed in China, and grounds these practices deeply within the unique, traditional institutional fabric of the Mahalla.

The overarching result of this structural transformation is the transition of social protection from a marginal bureaucratic function into a core, integrated social institution capable of fostering profound social solidarity, mitigating structural inequalities, and dynamically supporting the holistic development of human capital across the Republic.

DISCUSSION

The comprehensive analysis conducted in this study suggests that the transformation of the social protection system in Uzbekistan represents a paradigm shift from traditional, post-Soviet welfare delivery to an integrated,



"active-proactive" institutional framework. This transition aligns with broader global trends where social policy is increasingly viewed as a prerequisite for, rather than a byproduct of, sustainable economic development. Theoretical Implications of Institutional Centralization Our findings confirm that the establishment of the National Agency for Social Protection (NASP) addresses a historical "coordination failure" inherent in many transitioning economies. By consolidating disparate departmental functions, Uzbekistan is effectively reducing institutional friction. From a New Institutional Economics perspective, this centralization enhances "institutional capacity"—the ability of the state to effectively implement policy. The discussion here centers on whether such centralization risks over-bureaucratization. However, our evidence suggests that when combined with decentralized service delivery (the "Inson" centers), centralization actually serves to standardize the quality of care and ensure equitable access, thereby minimizing the "postal code lottery" effect often seen in fragmented welfare systems [27]. The Mahalla as a Sociological Innovation in Network Governance

A distinctive pillar of our research is the institutionalization of the Mahalla system. As noted in the results, the "Mahalla of seven" represents a unique experiment in "network governance." In Western sociological discourse, the debate often oscillates between state-provided welfare (Nordic model) and market-based solutions (liberal model). The Uzbek model proposes a third way: community-embedded social governance.

This structure leverages existing social capital—the trust and communal ties inherent in Uzbek culture—to perform tasks that are often costly or inefficient for a central state to manage, such as household-level needs assessment. The discussion must acknowledge that this institutional interface is not merely symbolic; it serves as an "early warning system" for social risk. By placing social workers directly within the neighborhood, the state effectively "socializes" the responsibility of protection, shifting it from a cold, administrative transaction to a high-trust, personalized interaction [28].

Comparative Synthesis: Adaptability and Resilience

When contrasting Uzbekistan's current trajectory with the models studied (Bismarck, Nordic, Productivist, and Chinese poverty alleviation), a critical observation emerges: Uzbekistan is adopting a "pragmatic hybridity." It utilizes the Bismarckian emphasis on formal labor participation while integrating the granular, targeted monitoring mechanisms characteristic of China's poverty alleviation success.

The discussion regarding this hybridity is essential. For instance, the "productivist" elements—where social

policy is aligned with labor market participation—are vital for a young, rapidly growing population. However, we argue that the long-term resilience of this system depends on its capacity to evolve toward a more "inclusive" social state. This means moving beyond poverty alleviation toward "social investment"—investing in human capital (education, health, digital literacy) to prevent vulnerability before it requires state intervention [29].

Challenges: Path Dependency and Professionalization

A critical point of discussion is the challenge of "path dependency." Institutional reforms often face inertia from pre-existing administrative cultures. Shifting from a "gatekeeper" mentality (focusing on eligibility and restriction) to a "social case management" mentality (focusing on empowering the individual) requires significant professional development for the workforce in "Inson" centers. Our research suggests that the digitalization of social records is a vital bridge to overcoming these hurdles. By automating administrative tasks, social workers are freed to engage in the qualitative aspects of their profession: counseling, mediation, and advocacy.

Toward a Future Research Agenda

The findings leave open the question of long-term fiscal sustainability. As the demographic structure of Uzbekistan shifts, the state must balance its "social state" mandate with the need for macroeconomic stability. Future research should focus on the impact of social protection on labor market outcomes, specifically whether these institutional changes correlate with higher workforce participation rates. Furthermore, the role of non-state actors—NGOs, charities, and the private sector—in supplementing the state-Mahalla framework remains an underdeveloped area that offers fertile ground for further empirical study.

Ultimately, the institutionalization of social protection in Uzbekistan is an evolving experiment in state-building. It suggests that a successful welfare regime in the 21st century is one that is both centrally directed for equity and locally anchored for relevance, blending the efficiency of modern technology with the resilience of ancient social fabrics.

CONCLUSION

The systematic investigation into the institutionalization of social protection in the Republic of Uzbekistan leads to the overarching conclusion that the nation is undergoing a fundamental transformation of its social architecture. By transitioning from a fragmented, departmentalized administrative model to a consolidated, "networked" institutional framework, Uzbekistan is effectively redefining the state's social contract. The findings of this study underscore that the efficacy of this new model is derived from its unique



synthesis: the strategic adoption of macro-level administrative centralization, as evidenced by the National Agency for Social Protection, coupled with the granular, culturally-embedded delivery mechanisms of the "Mahalla of seven" and "Inson" centers.

This research demonstrates that institutional excellence in social protection is not merely a product of legislative reform but requires a deep, sociological alignment between formal state mandates and informal community-based norms. The comparative analysis of global welfare regimes—specifically the Bismarckian, Nordic, Productivist, and Chinese poverty alleviation paradigms—has proven that Uzbekistan is not attempting to replicate any single foreign model. Instead, it is pioneering a hybrid institutional regime that is specifically tailored to its demographic realities, traditional social values, and ambitious socio-economic objectives.

The successful implementation of this hybrid regime has yielded significant results in the proactive identification and support of vulnerable households. However, the path toward full institutional maturity requires addressing ongoing challenges such as the professionalization of the social work workforce, the reduction of institutional inertia, and the continued scaling of digitalized, data-driven governance. Our analysis suggests that the future sustainability of the Uzbek model depends on its capacity to evolve from a focus on poverty alleviation to one of comprehensive human capital investment.

Ultimately, the institutionalization of social protection in "New Uzbekistan" provides a compelling case study for transitioning economies. It suggests that the most resilient social institutions are those that operate as dynamic drivers of social solidarity rather than passive mechanisms of wealth distribution. By anchoring the state's protection policies within the traditional fabric of the Mahalla, Uzbekistan is building a resilient governance structure capable of navigating the uncertainties of a globalized economy. Moving forward, the continued empirical evaluation of this framework—particularly its long-term impact on employment participation and social equity—will be essential to refine and scale this localized model into a global best practice for developing states.

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