Social protection, poverty and livelihoods, Africa

Is social protection reaching Africa, now home to most of the world's extreme poor?

Sub-Saharan Africa is home to 72% of the world's people in extreme poverty, but only 15.4% of its people are covered by any social protection benefit. Even perfect targeting would leave at least 380 million of its extreme poor without cover.

By **James Lumowo**, Research Director.

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In short

- In 2023, 19.1% of Africans were covered by at least one social protection benefit (receiving a benefit or contributing to a scheme), against 52.4% of people worldwide; in sub-Saharan Africa the figure was 15.4%. Africa's coverage rose from 15.2% in 2015.
- Sub-Saharan Africa's share of the world's extreme poor, below US$3.00 a day, rose from 60% in 2019 to 72% in 2026 on the World Bank's latest estimates. Its extreme poor rose by 86 million while the rest of the world's fell by 113 million.
- Because extreme poverty (45.5%) far exceeds coverage (15.4%), at least 380 million extremely poor people in sub-Saharan Africa were not covered in 2023, even if all coverage had gone to them (our calculation). At the 2015–2023 pace, Africa would reach today's world coverage level around 2091.

The evidence

Each figure carries its source, its date and a label for how much weight it can bear. Open 'How we know this' for the method.

Modelled or projected — 2023

19.1%

of Africans were covered by at least one social protection benefit, against 52.4% worldwide. In sub-Saharan Africa: 15.4%.

ILO, World Social Protection Report 2024–26 (modelled estimates)

How we know this

SDG indicator 1.3.1: the share of the population receiving at least one contributory or non-contributory cash benefit, or actively contributing to a social security scheme. ILO models fill in countries without data. 'Africa' is the whole continent; Northern Africa is at 35.8%.

Modelled or projected — 2026

72%

of the world's people living below US$3.00 a day are in sub-Saharan Africa: 586 million of 811 million.

World Bank, Poverty and Inequality Platform, September 2026

How we know this

Extreme poverty at US$3.00 a day in 2021 prices. 2023 and 2024 are survey-based regional estimates: surveys cover about two-thirds of the region's population and other countries are extrapolated. 2025 and 2026 are nowcasts from national accounts growth. Sub-Saharan Africa has about 16% of the world's population.

Modelled or projected 2023

At least 380 million

extremely poor people in sub-Saharan Africa were not covered by any social protection, even if all coverage had gone to the poorest first.

Probatio Africa calculation from ILO and World Bank estimates

How we know this

(45.53% in extreme poverty − 15.4% covered) × 1,259.9 million people = 379.6 million. A floor: coverage also counts people paying into social insurance or receiving contributory benefits, who are less likely to be extremely poor, so the true number is higher.

Modelled or projected 2023

8.1%

of Africans with severe disabilities receive a disability benefit, against 38.9% worldwide. Mothers of newborns with a maternity benefit: 6.7%, against 36.4%.

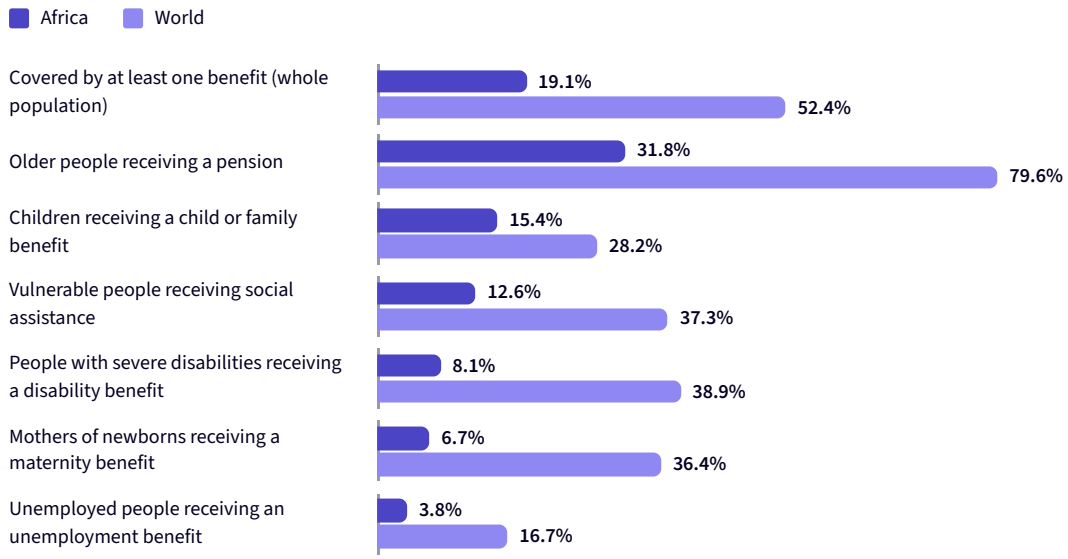
ILO, World Social Protection Report 2024–26 (modelled estimates)

How we know this

Coverage by type of benefit for 2023, through the UN SDG Global Database. Pensions reach the largest share of their group in Africa (31.8%, against 79.6% worldwide).

Who is covered by social protection: Africa and the world, by type of benefit

Share of each group receiving the benefit, 2023



ILO modelled estimates published with the World Social Protection Report 2024–26. 'Africa' is the whole continent.

Sources: 1, 2.

What the data show

The ILO's latest estimates, for 2023, find 19.1% of Africa's population covered by at least one social protection benefit, up from 15.2% in 2015 [1,2]. Worldwide the figure is 52.4%, and 3.8 billion people have no protection at all [1]. Coverage is 15.4% in sub-Saharan Africa and 35.8% in Northern Africa [2].

By type of benefit, Africa's coverage is a fraction of the world's: 31.8% of older people receive a pension (world 79.6%), 15.4% of children a child or family benefit (28.2%), 8.1% of people with severe disabilities a disability benefit (38.9%), 6.7% of mothers of newborns a maternity benefit (36.4%) and 3.8% of unemployed people an unemployment benefit (16.7%) [2]. Pensions reach the largest share of their group; relative to the world rate, child and family benefits come closest, at about half. For maternity, disability and unemployment, Africa's coverage is less than a quarter of the world rate.

Poverty is concentrating where coverage is lowest. On the World Bank's September 2026 estimates at US$3.00 a day, sub-Saharan Africa had 573.7 million people in extreme poverty in 2023, 45.5% of its population, and a projected 586.2 million in 2026 [4,5]. Its share of the world's

extreme poor rose from 59.7% in 2019 to 67.9% in 2023 and a projected 72.3% in 2026, while its share of the world's population is about 16%. Between 2019 and 2026 its extreme poor rose by 86 million while the rest of the world's fell by 113 million[4].

Set side by side, about 1.07 billion people in sub-Saharan Africa were not covered by any social protection in 2023: 28% of the world's unprotected, in a region that held 68% of the world's extreme poor[2,4]. Because the region's extreme poverty rate is three times its coverage rate, at least 380 million extremely poor people were not covered, even if all coverage had gone to the poorest first. In practice the number is higher, because coverage also counts people paying into social insurance, who are less likely to be extremely poor.

The ILO estimates that Africa has the largest financing gap of any region: reaching a basic social protection floor would cost an additional 17.6% of the region's GDP every year[3].

Where sources disagree

'Africa' means different things in different sources. The ILO's coverage figures use the whole continent and the UN's sub-Saharan grouping; the World Bank's sub-Saharan Africa includes Sudan, which the UN places in Northern Africa. The difference to the calculations here is small but not zero.

Figures from the ILO's previous report are still widely quoted but are not comparable with the 2024–26 series, which revised earlier years: it now puts maternity coverage in Africa at 5.8% for 2020[2]. Trends should use one edition only.

In June 2025 the World Bank moved its extreme poverty line from US$2.15 a day (2017 prices) to US$3.00 a day (2021 prices); figures on the two lines are not comparable. Estimates are also revised between releases: the world's extreme poor in 2024 were put at 846.8 million in March 2026 and 824.3 million in September 2026[5].

The ILO reports that sub-Saharan Africa spends 4.0% of GDP on social protection, but does not say whether this includes health care; the world figure is 12.9% excluding health or 19.3% including it[1,3]. We do not compare them as like for like.

What this means for decisions

- Coverage is lowest for benefits tied to formal employment: 3.8% of unemployed Africans receive unemployment benefits. How contributory schemes can reach informal workers, and whether they last, is a central open question.
- With aid falling and a financing gap of 17.6% of GDP a year, the order in which coverage is extended, to children, older people or people with disabilities, is the practical decision. Evidence on what each choice achieves for the money is thin.
- Global targets for ending extreme poverty will be met or missed largely in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Coverage is not adequacy: a household can be covered and receive little. In Nigeria, the emergency cash transfer has lost about half its food value since 2023 (see our Nigeria brief).

Method

- Coverage: ILO modelled estimates for 2023, published in September 2024 with the World Social Protection Report 2024–26 and read through the UN SDG Global Database (SDG indicator 1.3.1 and its components).
- Poverty: World Bank Poverty and Inequality Platform, September 2026 release, at US$3.00 a day in 2021 prices. Regional figures for 2023 and 2024 are survey-based estimates (surveys cover about two-thirds of the region's population; other countries are extrapolated); 2025 and 2026 are nowcasts.
- Unprotected population: (1 − 0.154) × 1,259,889,959 people in sub-Saharan Africa in 2023 = 1.066 billion; world (1 − 0.524) × 8,064,057,930 = 3.84 billion, matching the ILO's 3.8 billion.
- Minimum uncovered extreme poor: (0.4553 − 0.154) × 1,259,889,959 = 379.6 million, a floor that assumes perfect targeting.
- Years to reach today's world coverage: (52.4 − 19.1) ÷ ((19.1 − 15.2) ÷ 8 years) = 68 years from 2023.

Limitations

- Coverage measures whether people receive a benefit, not whether it is enough.

- Our calculations combine ILO rates with World Bank population figures and assume both describe the same people. No source cross-tabulates poverty and benefit receipt for the whole region.
- Coverage data are for 2023 and do not capture the effect of the 2025 aid cuts or programme changes since.
- Poverty figures for 2025 and 2026 are projections from economic growth; where food prices outpace growth, they may understate poverty.

Sources

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