EduVision: Journal of Innovations in Pedagogy and Educational Advancements
Volume 2, Issue 11, November 2026
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ISSN (E): 3061-6972
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PRIORITY DIRECTIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SOCIAL POLICY IN SAMARKAND REGION DURING THE YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE (1991–2026)

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Abstract

This article examines how social policy has been framed and implemented in Samarkand Region, the most populous region of Uzbekistan, since independence in 1991. Using qualitative document analysis and process tracing across scholarly studies, strategic documents, international-organization profiles, and official and press reports, the study distinguishes three overlapping policy periods: a gradualist period of inherited welfare commitments and community-based targeting through the mahalla (1991–2016); a period of employment- and poverty-focused reform under the Strategy of Actions and the Development Strategy (2017–2022); and a period of institutional consolidation around the National Agency for Social Protection and the 2030 agenda (2023 onward). Regional evidence is uneven. For the 1990s and 2000s the region can be reconstructed only through national studies, whereas for 2017–2026 regional labor-market, poverty, health, and education indicators are available. The results show that employment, rather than transfers, became the centre of regional social policy; that officially reported poverty in the region fell from 10.5% to 7.5% in 2024, a faster decline than the national fall from 11% to 8.9%; and that implementation relied on campaign-style accountability of local officials and on large investments in schools, kindergartens, and primary health care. The discussion identifies persistent problems, including labor migration, informality, thin unemployment insurance, and dependence on government-reported statistics, and proposes a research agenda based on household microdata and field interviews.

Keywords: Social policy; Samarkand Region; Uzbekistan; poverty reduction; mahalla; social protection; employment; post-Soviet transition.

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Introduction

Social policy in the former Soviet Union began its post-socialist life from an unusual position: at independence every successor state inherited an extensive system of social welfare, including a comprehensive pay-as-you-go pension scheme [1]. The question for each government was therefore not whether to build a welfare state but which parts of the inherited one could still be afforded, who should deliver it, and how far scarce resources should be targeted on those in greatest need. Falling output and living standards pushed transition countries to reconsider exactly this question of targeting [2, pp. 431–447]. Comparative welfare scholarship in the tradition of Esping-Andersen treats such choices as expressions of a political settlement between the state, the market, and the family rather than as purely technical decisions [3], and the post-Soviet cases show how differently such settlements can be struck.

Uzbekistan chose a distinctive path. It followed a gradualist strategy that emphasized social stability, relied on substantial state guidance in a predominantly agricultural economy, and aimed to expand employment while protecting vulnerable groups against abject poverty [4]. An early evaluation by UNU-WIDER concluded that the limited output decline reflected favorable initial conditions, the absence of military conflict, and the lack of radical change, and that social protection measures had softened the impact of transition on disadvantaged groups, even though some measures, such as unemployment assistance, were ineffective and others, such as generous pension arrangements, carried long-term dangers [5]. After 2016 the political and economic orientation changed. The Strategy of Actions for 2017–2021, signed on 7 February 2017, placed development of the social sphere among its five priority areas and named steadily rising employment and real incomes, better social protection and health care, affordable housing, and a stronger role for women among its aims [6]. In January 2022 it was continued by the Development Strategy of the New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026 [7], and in 2023 by the Uzbekistan–2030 Strategy [8]. Social policy in the country is thus a field in which a long period of continuity was followed by a rapid sequence of programmatic change.

Samarkand Region is a particularly instructive case for studying this sequence. It has the largest permanent population of any region in the country, 4,379,791 people on 1 January 2026 according to the National Statistics Committee [9], and it was the first region to exceed four million inhabitants, a threshold it crossed in October 2021 [10]. Its population is predominantly rural: in April 2023 about 2.62 million of the 4.14

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million permanent residents lived in rural areas [11], which corresponds to roughly 63% (author's calculation). A large, mostly rural and young population means that the region faces the core social-policy problems of Uzbekistan, namely employment creation, school and preschool capacity, primary health care, and rural infrastructure, on a scale that few other regions share. Because of its size, outcomes in Samarkand also weigh heavily on national averages, although this is an inference rather than a figure reported in the sources.

Despite this importance, the region has rarely been the unit of analysis in the English-language literature on Uzbek social policy. Existing work either addresses the national level [5, 12] or studies the mahalla, the neighborhood community institution, through household surveys and field research whose sites are not in Samarkand [2, 13]. The present article therefore pursues three questions. First, which priorities have structured social policy in Samarkand Region in each stage of independence? Second, through which institutions and instruments have these priorities been implemented? Third, what do available indicators suggest about outcomes, and how reliable is the evidence? The article proceeds in the standard IMRAD sequence: the next section describes the sources and analytical procedure; the results section follows the policy chronologically and then turns to outcomes; and the discussion interprets the findings, states the limitations, and suggests directions for further research.

Methods

The study uses a qualitative, single-case design with a historical-institutional orientation. The unit of analysis is social policy as it was set out in strategic documents and as it was implemented in Samarkand Region, and the method is document analysis combined with process tracing: policy priorities were identified in the texts that announce them, and the mechanisms through which they were implemented, such as community committees, local administrations, and social-service agencies, were then traced through scholarly studies and reports of implementation. The analysis is organized chronologically into three overlapping periods. The first runs from 1991 to 2016 and covers the inherited welfare system, gradual reform, and community-based targeting. The second runs from 2017 to 2022 and covers the Strategy of Actions and the first stage of the Development Strategy. The third begins in 2023, when the National Agency for Social Protection was created. The boundaries are analytical conveniences, not sharp breaks, and several instruments span more than one period.

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Four groups of sources were used. The first group consists of peer-reviewed and working-paper studies of Uzbek social policy and the mahalla system, which supply the evidence for the 1990s and 2000s. The second group consists of strategic and legal documents, namely the Strategy of Actions, the Development Strategy for 2022–2026 as circulated in the United Nations document series, and presidential decrees on social protection. The third consists of profiles and assessments by international organizations, principally the International Labour Organization. The fourth consists of official statistics and of official and press reports on implementation in Samarkand Region, including reports of presidential meetings and of statements by the Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction. The sources were located through web searches of academic repositories, government portals, and news sites, and all web pages were consulted on 18 November 2026. Where a source could not be opened in full, the study relied on the abstract or on the passage visible in the search result and avoids drawing conclusions that go beyond what that passage states.

Several principles governed the handling of evidence. First, every figure that is reported is attributed to its source, and no figure is estimated where a source does not give it. Second, ratios calculated by the author from reported figures are labeled as author's calculations, and they are used only to give orders of magnitude. Third, statements that go beyond what the sources say are marked as inferences or hypotheses in the text. Fourth, national-level indicators are used for the region only as context and are never presented as regional data. Fifth, official statistics are treated as government-reported figures: the poverty estimates cited here come from the Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction and are described by it as produced jointly with the World Bank [14], but the sources do not always state which poverty line is applied, so figures from different publications are not assumed to be strictly comparable.

The design has four limitations that the reader should bear in mind. The evidence for Samarkand Region in 1991–2016 is thin, and for this period the region is reconstructed from national scholarship, which means that regional specificity cannot be demonstrated. Much of the evidence from 2017 onward comes from official communications and news reports, which tend to emphasize achievements, and no independent evaluation of regional social programs was located. Many page-level locators are unavailable for web sources, which are therefore cited by number alone, while page ranges are given for printed scholarly works. Finally, the study does not

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use household microdata, so it cannot assess distributional effects within the region. These limitations are returned to in the discussion.

Results

The first period, from 1991 to 2016, is documented mainly through national studies, and the regional picture has to be inferred from them. The central institutional fact is that the inherited social-welfare architecture was retained rather than dismantled, while its financing and delivery were adjusted. UNU-WIDER's early assessment described a labor market, a pattern of social expenditure, and a set of institutional reforms deliberately designed to protect disadvantaged people, and it judged that together these measures had softened the effects of transition [5]. The same assessment singled out unemployment assistance as ineffective and warned of the long-term fiscal dangers of generous pension arrangements [5]. A comparative study of pensions in Central Asia and the South Caucasus adds that all former Soviet states started from an extensive pay-as-you-go system and moved, at different speeds, toward defined-contribution designs [1], so that the Uzbek choice to retain much of the inherited system was one of several available responses rather than the only possible one.

The most distinctive innovation of this period was the use of the mahalla as the delivery channel for means-tested assistance. A study first issued by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in 1998 and later published in revised form described a new social assistance benefit in Uzbekistan that was administered by neighborhood community organizations, the mahallas, and evaluated its targeting using household-survey evidence on income, ownership of durable goods, agricultural assets, employment status, and the anthropometric status of children [2, 15, pp. 431–447]. A companion study modeled three separate probabilities, namely that a household knows of the scheme, that it applies for the benefit, and that an application is successful, and it used the findings to illustrate the design problems of decentralized social assistance schemes in developing countries [16]. Later sociological work, based on fieldwork in the Fergana Valley rather than in Samarkand, argued that the mahalla had ceased to be a purely informal local institution and had become the state's main agency for implementing welfare programs and maintaining social order [13, pp. 115–133]. For Samarkand Region this literature has two implications. The first is that the mahalla network was, in all probability, the principal channel through which

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means-tested benefits reached households in the region, which is an inference from the national design rather than a regional finding. The second is that the weaknesses of such targeting, which depends on the knowledge and initiative of households and on the discretion of local committees [16], are likely to have been present there as well.

The second period opens with the Strategy of Actions, which was signed on 7 February 2017 and announced a state program of implementation for 2017 under the label "The Year of Dialogue with People and Human Interests" [6]. Its social-sphere priorities, as summarized in reports on the decree, were a consistent increase in employment and real incomes, improvement of the social protection and health care systems, greater socio-political activity of women, and construction of affordable housing [6]. An official brochure reviewing the strategy reports that its program of actions, which consisted of 320 articles, led to the adoption of 29 laws and more than 900 other legislative acts [17], though this describes legislative output and not social outcomes. For Samarkand Region the earliest quantitative traces of the strategy are found in regional labor-market reporting from spring 2017. According to a report in Kun.uz, the region planned to place 76.6 thousand people in newly created jobs in 2017, and in January and February 6,719 new jobs were created from all sources [18]. Individual entrepreneurship, agricultural processing, and family business provided work for 6,533 unemployed people, and most new jobs were located in the Pakhtachi, Payariq, Tailoq, and Urgut districts and in Samarkand city [18]. The same report states that 318 job seekers were given unemployed status because no suitable work could be found, that most of them were directed to vocational training or paid public works, and that only 51 received unemployment benefits [18]. Three job fairs involving 223 employers and 2,678 vacancies resulted in 142 referrals to jobs [18]. A regional deputy criticized the fairs for poorly presented vacancy information and described cooperation with the mahallas as unsatisfactory, noting that vacancy information was not reaching villages in time [18].

These figures are small and cover only two months, so they must be read carefully. The 6,719 jobs created in the first two months equal about 8.8% of the annual plan of 76.6 thousand (author's calculation), although two months are one-sixth of the year; this may reflect seasonality or the way the plan was phased, and the source does not say. The ratio of 142 referrals to 2,678 vacancies at job fairs, about 5% (author's calculation), is consistent with the deputy's complaint about their low effectiveness.

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The number of recipients of unemployment benefits, 51 out of 318 persons newly given unemployed status, is in line with the national picture presented in an International Labour Organization profile, which states that only 2.5% of the unemployed receive unemployment benefits and that labor-market programs remain small and delivery fragmented [12]. The observation that the mahalla channel was a weak link in 2017 is itself noteworthy, because it suggests that the community institution that had delivered benefits since the 1990s was not automatically an effective instrument for the new employment agenda.

The regional labor-market problem was still prominent four years later. In April 2021, during a meeting in Samarkand, the President stated that 174,000 people in the region were unemployed and that another 223,000 residents were working abroad, and he described unemployment as an assessment of the work of the khokims, the heads of local administrations [19]. The same report quotes him as saying that khokims should return 35–40% of their salaries to the budget and that they should check on the conditions of citizens working abroad [19]. Relative to a total population of slightly more than four million at the time [10], the two figures correspond to about 4% and 5.5% of all residents (author's calculation). Because the denominator is the total population and not the labor force, these ratios are not unemployment rates and are given only to show scale. The statement also shows that labor migration was considered by the political leadership to be a structural feature of the regional labor market and not a marginal phenomenon, and it illustrates a style of governance in which social indicators are attached to the personal responsibility of local officials.

The Development Strategy of the New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026, as circulated in the United Nations document series, set the national framework for the next stage. The strategy defines the aim of conducting fair social policy and developing human capital as a priority, but it sets no numerical target for poverty reduction [20]. Its social provisions include state-funded vocational training for every citizen, a doubling of vocational training capacity, training for one million unemployed persons with the non-state share of training rising to 30%, and training for more than 700,000 unemployed women and girls [20]. In education it foresees more than 7,000 new non-state preschool institutions, a national school-building program that raises student places to 6.4 million by the end of 2026, and higher-education participation of 38% of young people in 2022 [20]. In health care it envisages 46 inter-district perinatal centers and, in 2022–2023, 61 family clinics and 215 family doctors' offices [20]. One

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item relates directly to Samarkand: a "student town" for 20,000 students, hosting at least four branches or campuses of foreign universities, was to be built in the city [20]. The strategy also promises to double state support for non-state non-profit and civil society organizations and to allocate at least 5% of each region's budget to priorities proposed by citizens under a "Citizens' budget" program [20]. The sources used here do not report how far each of these targets had been achieved in Samarkand Region.

The third period is characterized by institutional consolidation. A presidential decree of 1 June 2023 established the National Agency for Social Protection under the President, together with its regional and city departments and the "Inson" social service centers in regions and cities, and the agency was defined as the authorized body for developing and implementing a unified state policy on social protection and social services [21]. At the presidential meeting that presented the reform, it was announced that the trusteeship commissions attached to the khokimiyats would be abolished and their powers transferred to the Inson centers from 1 August [22], which is a concrete example of authority passing from local executive bodies to a specialized social-service structure. The centers were first introduced as an experiment on 15 October 2023 in 28 districts and cities [23], and official sources now describe a network of Inson centers in all 208 districts and cities of the country [24]. Journalistic and official summaries state that dozens of previously scattered welfare, disability, and anti-poverty schemes have been brought under the agency and that the Unified National Social Protection information system supports the work of the centers [24, 25]. A secondary source published by a diplomatic-affairs outlet claims that the new system delivered aid to roughly 2.3 million families by 2023, about four times the 2017 level [26], and this figure should be treated with caution because its basis is not documented. The ILO profile provides a more cautious indicator: the number of households receiving social assistance rose from 0.6 million in 2019 to 1.3 million in 2021 and to between 1.9 and 2.2 million in 2022, and a National Social Protection Strategy aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals was adopted in July 2022 [12]. None of these sources gives figures broken down for Samarkand Region.

The clearest regional outcome indicator is poverty. At the national level, the government reports that in 2020 the incomes of 7.5 million people, 23% of the population, were below the poverty line and that by the end of 2023 the poverty rate had fallen to 11% [27]. It attributes the decline partly to wider coverage of social protection, for which 12.3 trillion soums were allocated in 2023, and to a one-and-a-

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half-fold increase in pensions and benefits, while acknowledging that progress across regions was uneven [27]. In early 2025 the Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction reported a further decline to 8.9% in 2024, which means that about 3.3 million people were in poverty, 719,000 fewer than in 2023, and it attributed the fall mainly to measures on employment, entrepreneurship, and the efficiency of land use for household and agricultural activities [28]. Samarkand Region was among the regions with the largest declines, with its poverty rate falling from 10.5% to 7.5% [14]. This is a reduction of 3.0 percentage points, or about 29% in relative terms, compared with 2.1 percentage points, or about 19%, nationally (author's calculations from the reported rates). The regional rate of 7.5% is lower than the national 8.9% but higher than the 5.7% reported for Navoi Region, the lowest in the country, and well below the 11.9% reported for Khorezm Region, the highest [29]. An analytical article in the Tashkent Times adds that Samarkand was one of four regions that reduced poverty by more than ten percentage points over three years, and that the largest contributors to the national decline from 2023 to 2024 were growth in business income, followed by wage and agricultural income [30]. At the same time, the government has launched a program called "From Poverty to Prosperity," which aims to lift 500,000 people out of poverty in 2024 and one million in 2025 [31], and the President described the national approach as a "multidimensional" program that includes access to quality education and medical services, housing, social protection, and infrastructure, presenting it at a meeting of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank held in Samarkand [32].

Health care is the field in which the most recent regional reform is documented. At a meeting on 7 May 2025, the President announced that a new primary-care model would be tested that year in 15 districts and cities of Samarkand Region and extended to the entire region the following year [33]. According to the report, each medical team would conclude a bilateral contract with the population it serves, people could choose their family doctor, including a private one, primary-care staff would work full-time, and basic monthly pay would be set at USD 500 for a family doctor and USD 300 for a nurse, with a pediatrician available for every 3,000 children [33]. The same report notes that the country has 29 doctors per 10,000 people, that health funding has grown sixfold over seven years, and that the introduction of health insurance had been postponed every year [33]. The source does not state whether the sixfold growth is nominal or real, and it gives no counts of polyclinics or hospitals,

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so the scale of the planned reorganization in the region cannot be quantified from it. Samarkand was thus chosen as a pilot region for a reform whose design is meant to be national.

Education and the physical infrastructure of social services are documented in a report on an inauguration ceremony of 25 August 2026. It states that 139 schools in Samarkand Region were built, reconstructed, or renovated to reduce overcrowding, that 83 schools had earlier operated at more than twice their capacity, and that the ratio in the renovated institutions had fallen to one [34]. The same report notes that about 92,500 children were enrolled in the first grade while only about 50,000 pupils were graduating from the eleventh grade in 2026 [34], so that the first-grade cohort is roughly 1.85 times the graduating cohort (author's calculation), which suggests that demand for school places will continue to grow for years. It adds that 66 kindergartens were being brought into operation and that preschool coverage was rising from 63% to 75% [34], although the report does not make clear whether these figures refer to the region or to a specific set of districts. Infrastructure outcomes include nearly 1,500 constructed, renovated, or commissioned projects within a 2026 allocation of 6.9 trillion soums, centralized drinking water supplied for the first time to 57 mahallas and 82,000 residents, the reconstruction of 23 unsafe bridges, and an urban renewal project in Samarkand city that included a five-story eco-market creating more than 500 jobs [34]. The report does not cover health care, poverty, or tourism, and it gives no regional investment totals beyond those quoted [34].

Discussion

The evidence supports a periodization of regional social policy in which each period is defined less by new goals than by a change in the instrument. In the first period the dominant instrument was inherited universal provision supplemented by means-tested benefits delivered through the mahalla. In the second period the dominant instrument became employment: the labor-market indicators reported for 2017 and 2021, the statement that unemployment measures the performance of khokims, and the official explanation of the 2024 poverty decline all place jobs, entrepreneurship, and land use at the centre of the argument, with transfers in a supporting role [18, 19, 28]. In the third period the instrument is the specialized social-service agency with a digital registry, which professionalizes functions that khokimiyat bodies previously performed [22, 25]. Read against Esping-Andersen's classification of welfare regimes

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[3], this sequence may be interpreted as movement from a state-centered, community-implemented residual system toward a hybrid that combines a productivist emphasis on employment with a more professional social-assistance administration. This reading is interpretive, and the sources do not themselves use that vocabulary.

A second finding concerns the weight that labor migration carries in the regional social contract. The figure of 223,000 residents working abroad in 2021 [19] suggests that remittances and foreign employment function as an informal substitute for domestic employment creation and, to some extent, for social insurance. This is a hypothesis: the sources reviewed do not quantify remittances for Samarkand, and the national release on poverty in 2024 reports that money transfers from abroad accounted for 2.0% in an income breakdown, against 3.1% a year earlier [35], which would be compatible with a growing domestic labor income but is not sufficient to establish that migration dependence has weakened. What the record does show is that the political leadership has tied the responsibilities of local officials to the welfare of migrant workers, an idea that is unusual in social policy discussions and deserves further study as a form of external social risk management.

A third finding is that the style of implementation relies on accountability campaigns directed at local officials, in the form of public criticism, performance targets, and large inauguration events, rather than on formal, published evaluation of programs. The 2021 statement on khokim salaries [19], the 2025 announcement of a pilot in 15 districts [33], and the 2026 inauguration report [34] all follow this pattern. This style can mobilize resources quickly, and the reported drop in the number of overcrowded schools suggests that it has done so. At the same time, it produces information in a form that is hard to verify. The inauguration report, for example, mixes regional and national initiatives in a single announcement, and it does not specify the territorial base of some indicators [34]. The risk for researchers is that the successes reported in such communications cannot be distinguished from the effort to publicize them, and the risk for policy is that programs are judged by the visibility of their launch and not by their results.

The study also identifies gaps that the official narrative leaves open. The ILO profile describes almost half of the national population as having no social protection benefits, social insurance that in practice covers only pensions, a very low share of the unemployed receiving benefits, and informality that was estimated at 59.8% of the working-age population in 2018 [12]. The strategy adopted in 2022 explicitly lists

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the extension of maternity and unemployment coverage and of coverage for informal workers among its long-term priorities and acknowledges that it needs reliable costing and new fiscal space [12]. No figure for Samarkand Region is available, but there is no reason to assume that the region differs sharply from the national picture, given its large rural population and the weight of migration; this too is an inference. The 2017 regional data on unemployment benefits [18] are consistent with it. If the national findings hold in the region, the 2024 poverty reduction would be more vulnerable to shocks to wages, business income, and remittances than to changes in transfers, since social insurance does not yet provide a buffer for workers outside the formal sector.

Several limitations qualify these interpretations. Most importantly, the regional evidence for 1991–2016 is inferential, so the analysis of the first period cannot establish what was specific to Samarkand. The fieldwork on which the sociological picture of the mahalla is based was carried out elsewhere [13], and the targeting studies use national household surveys [2], so their findings are applied to the region by assumption. Second, nearly all of the quantitative evidence from 2017 onward is official or journalistic. The poverty estimates are produced by a ministry, and although they are described as based on research with the World Bank [14], the poverty line is not always stated and the figures reported for 2020–2023 [27] and 2024 [28] may not be strictly comparable. Third, the study could not locate regional data on pensions, benefits, housing, or the Inson centers, so the account of the third period is carried by national sources. Fourth, as the document analysis relied on reports found through web searches, relevant Uzbek- and Russian-language scholarly or statistical material that was not retrieved may exist. These constraints suggest that the conclusions should be regarded as a reasoned synthesis of available evidence and not as a test of causal hypotheses.

Two implications follow for research and policy. For research, the most valuable next steps would be to obtain regional microdata from the household surveys used for poverty estimation, to reconstruct regional social expenditure from budget documents, and to carry out interviews with mahalla chairs, khokimiyat staff, and Inson-center social workers in several districts of Samarkand, so that the practical operation of the three instruments can be compared. For policy, the evidence suggests that the next priority is to translate the employment-centered strategy into more durable social insurance for workers outside formal employment, to publish regionally disaggregated indicators in a consistent format, and to evaluate pilots such

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as the health-care model before expansion. Comparison with other populous regions, such as Fergana and Tashkent regions, would help to determine whether the trajectory found here is specific to Samarkand or common to regions with a similar demographic profile.

Conclusion

This article has reconstructed the priorities and implementation of social policy in Samarkand Region since 1991 from the available scholarly, institutional, and official sources. It finds that regional social policy moved through three overlapping periods: the retention of inherited welfare commitments with community-based targeting through the mahalla, an employment- and poverty-centered reform period that began with the Strategy of Actions in 2017, and an institutional consolidation around the National Agency for Social Protection and its Inson centers from 2023. In the most recent period, the reported results include a decline in the regional poverty rate from 10.5% to 7.5% in 2024, the pilot of a new primary-care model in 15 districts in 2025, and a large program of school, kindergarten, and infrastructure construction reported in 2026.

The principal contribution of the study is to place a regional case within a structured account of how instruments of social policy changed over time and to show, with explicit marking of inference, where the evidence is strong and where it is thin. Its principal weakness is the dependence on government-reported figures and the absence of regional data for the first period. The findings should therefore be read as a map of what is known and what remains to be tested. Future work based on household microdata, regional budgets, and field interviews could assess whether the reported gains are broadly shared within the region and whether they will persist when the economy or the migration environment changes.

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Volume 2, Issue 11, November 2026
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