

**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

Committee on Social Development
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Activities of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform**Summary**

The Expert Group on Social Protection Reform (EGSPR) was established pursuant to a recommendation by the Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) at its twelfth session, held in Beirut on 8 and 9 October 2019, to support regional coordination and cooperation and the exchange of expertise on social protection issues. The Group has since then reported regularly on its activities to the Committee.

The present document offers a concise overview of EGSPR activities carried out since the fourteenth session of the Committee, which was held in Beirut on 8 June 2023, to obtain feedback from member State representatives on progress made and seek recommendations on prospective areas of focus.

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Introduction

1. Rising poverty and inequality over the past decade have increased the criticality of social protection in the Arab region. While many Arab Governments acknowledge that social protection is fundamental to protecting their populations, and have enacted reforms to expand coverage, delivery and fiscal viability, there is more to be done to ensure that no one is left behind. At present, only 35 per cent of the Arab population is covered by at least one form of social protection, in stark contrast to the global average of 47 per cent.¹
2. Over the last decade, Arab countries have undertaken significant reforms in social protection, including reducing or eliminating universal subsidies, and replacing them by targeted social assistance programmes and other social protection benefits. Yet, recent crises such as the rise in the cost of living, the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts, and climate crises, have underscored the need for further reforms to achieve comprehensive social protection systems that can adapt to evolving social, economic, and political contexts.
3. The twelfth session of the Committee on Social Development (Beirut, 8-9 October 2019) recommended that the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) establish and coordinate the intergovernmental Expert Group on Social Protection Reform (EGSPR) to foster regional coordination and collaboration in social protection reform, while enhancing the scope, efficiency, and effectiveness of national social protection systems. To date, all ESCWA member States have nominated focal points for the membership of the EGSPR, which comprises high-level policymakers working in the areas of social assistance, social insurance, labour, social development, statistics, and international cooperation.
4. Between the twelfth (Beirut, 8-9 October 2019) and the fourteenth (Beirut, 8 June 2023) sessions of the Committee on Social Development, ESCWA organized seven meetings during which EGSPR members discussed social protection priorities, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.²
5. Since June 2023, ESCWA has organized two EGSPR meetings. The present document reports on these meetings in an attempt to obtain feedback from the Committee on Social Development on progress made, and seek recommendations on the way forward.

I. Activities of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform

A. Eighth meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform in Arab countries (Beirut, 9 June 2023)

6. EGSPR meetings promote South-South cooperation through the transfer of successful reform initiatives and peer learning, specifically from countries of the Global South that have successfully expanded their social protection programmes.
7. The eighth EGSPR meeting, organized right after the fourteenth session of the Committee on Social Development, explored policy reform options to expand social insurance coverage to the “missing middle”.³

¹ Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), [Annual SDG Review 2022](#), 2022.

² The seven meetings were: (1) a high-level virtual meeting on “[policy response to the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 epidemic: social protection](#)” (online, 22 April 2020); (2) the “[second virtual meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform](#)” (online, 2 November 2020); (3) the third virtual meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform (online, 8 June 2021); (4) an online “[workshop on targeted social protection in Arab countries during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)” (online, 25 February 2021); (5) the [fifth virtual meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform](#) (online, 19 January 2022); (6) the [sixth virtual meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform](#) (Amman, 31 May 2022); (7) the “[second peer exchange workshop: extending social insurance to persons in non-standard forms of work](#)” (Beirut, 4 November 2022). ESCWA has reported on these meetings to the Committee on Social Development at its thirteenth and fourteenth sessions.

³ The “missing middle” refers to individuals who do not qualify for social assistance benefits but are also excluded from social insurance coverage as they are not employed in formal salaried positions (frequently informal workers).

During the meeting, ESCWA introduced new policy tools, such as the Country-Driven Social Protection Optimization Toolbox, which was piloted recently with the Ministry of Social Solidarity in Egypt and designed to reinforce the performance and efficiency of social assistance policies. ESCWA also presented international examples of best practices to include the missing middle, particularly from the Global South.

8. EGSPR members expressed interest in replicating and tailoring these examples to their national contexts, citing Morocco as a successful experience. They encouraged ESCWA to continue developing evidence-based tools and methodologies to strengthen policymaking and enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness of social protection systems. Members also discussed the importance of including experts working in both major areas of social protection, i.e. social insurance and social assistance.

B. Ninth meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform in Arab countries (Muscat, 21-22 February 2024)

9. The ninth EGSPR meeting addressed graduation programmes as effective strategies to enhance the efficiency of social assistance plans, lift beneficiaries of social assistance programmes out of poverty, and empower them economically and socially. ESCWA presented ongoing and future projects and activities with member States, including comprehensive country profiles on national social protection systems and reforms, the Annual Digest of Social Protection Reforms in the Arab region, and tailored technical support.

10. The meeting, which was hosted by the Ministry of Social Development in Oman, also focused on highlighting the recent, comprehensive social protection reforms undertaken by the country in 2023, in the areas of social insurance, pensions and social care. On the second day of the meeting, the Ministry of Social Development in Oman organized field trips to social care and employment formalization projects for EGSPR members.

11. During the meeting, EGSPR members commended ESCWA for its Annual Digest of Social Protection Reforms in the Arab Region and emphasized the significance of this work as a tool for comparing and evaluating the impact of reforms across Arab countries. There was an agreement on the importance of facilitating the development of comprehensive national country profiles on social protection systems and reforms to aid in analysing programmes, identifying areas for improvement, estimating costs, and fostering cooperation among relevant stakeholders. Members also highlighted the need to develop an Arab-focused electronic platform dedicated to social protection issues, to serve as a virtual forum for knowledge-sharing and collaboration among the group members.

12. EGSPR members also showed interest in the pioneering the "Bab Amal" (Door of Hope) initiative in Egypt, aimed at lifting people out of extreme poverty through the transfer of productive assets and related coaching, and urged ESCWA to continue relevant peer learning and exchange activities, as well as to implement similar efforts. EGSPR members acknowledged the value of field visits during regular meetings to exchange practical experiences and expressed interest in hosting future meetings in their respective countries.

II. Conclusion and future areas of work

13. The frequent requests for technical support⁴ received by ESCWA from member States, which reflect issues discussed during EGSPR meetings, highlight the Group's effectiveness and relevance. Ongoing communication and information sharing through emails and a dedicated WhatsApp group indicate increasing interest and engagement among members.

⁴ Refer to document E/ESCWA/C.2/2024/4 on technical cooperation activities submitted to the Committee at its current session.

14. As the Group's themes and countries' social protection reform needs evolve and become more comprehensive, the importance of including experts in social insurance and social assistance has become more evident. Recent activities have shown increased dynamism within the EGSPR, with members proposing new activities and scope extension for existing ones, such as regular facilitation of self-assessment processes through the development of comprehensive national country profiles on social protection systems and reforms. Additionally, the EGSPR recommended incorporating a ranking of countries' performance in the Annual Digest on Social Protection Reforms to promote peer exchange and competition and enhance performance.

15. The activities of the EGSPR will continue to inform peer exchange and will focus on the following areas, among others:

(a) Promoting continued self-assessment of existing social protection systems and identification of related reform options;

(b) Shifting social protection from reactive humanitarian measures to a proactive Government-led system that anticipates and responds to shocks, to safeguard the most vulnerable and ensure inclusivity for all;

(c) Utilizing data analysis for evidence-based policymaking, to enhance the effectiveness of social protection initiatives;

(d) Adopting evidence-based tools and programmes to facilitate the graduation of social assistance beneficiaries, empowering them economically for self-sufficiency and gradual independence, and ultimately allowing them to transition out of such programmes successfully;

(e) Addressing the "missing middle" by extending social protection coverage to informal and irregular workers, to ensure inclusivity and fairness in the social protection framework.

16. As the secretariat of the EGSPR, ESCWA will continue to coordinate its activities and further design a dedicated virtual exchange forum within the Social Protection Platform for the Arab Region, which is under development. ESCWA has successfully secured initial resources from a recently approved Development Account⁵ project to commence the construction of the platform. Additional resources are anticipated to be approved to finance the actual development of the platform and associated online functionalities. The ESCWA secretariat aims to present the initial layout of the platform to the EGSPR during its tenth meeting scheduled for 5 June 2024.

17. The Committee on Social Development is invited to review the activities of the EGSPR and provide feedback on regional priorities regarding the reform of social protection systems.

⁵ The Development Account is a capacity development programme of the United Nations Secretariat aimed at enhancing capacities of developing countries in the priority areas of the global development agenda. The Development Account is funded from the Secretariat's regular budget and implemented by 10 entities of the United Nations Secretariat, among which are the regional commissions. The Account was originally established in 1997 and since then has programmed over 504 projects for a total budget of \$324 million. For more details, kindly refer to <https://www.un.org/development/desa/da>.