



Issam Fares Institute for Public
Policy and International Affairs
معهد عصام فارس للسياسات
العامة والشؤون الدولية

Social Justice and Food Security:

The Right to Food Justice in the Arab Region



Virtual
Meeting

Wednesday 20 October 2021
(14.00-16.30 • Beirut time)

Concept Note



Background

Social justice is a major goal that Arab countries are seeking to improve the standard of living of citizens while combating poverty and inequality. Rising unemployment, especially among women and youth; the swelling of informal sectors; weak social protection; increasing social exclusion as well as growing political instability are all long-lasting challenges facing social justice the region.

Climate change and food insecurity are additional challenges contributing to social injustice and leaving people behind. Ending hunger and ensuring access by all people “to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round” is an SDG 2 target that is essential for the achievement of all interlinked SDGs, and consequently social justice. Hunger and malnutrition yield less healthy and productive individuals, with unequal access to resources and opportunities to improve their livelihood and participate in development. These challenges have recently been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic which has exposed existing vulnerabilities for all social groups and exacerbated the deep economic and social inequalities in Arab societies.

Most Arab governments rushed to mitigate the health crisis by adopting unprecedented measures such as curfews and border closure, sending shock waves to labor-intensive economic sectors and resulting in huge losses in jobs and hours of work. In the absence of inclusive social protection systems and the spike in food prices, the ensuing crisis pushed additional households into poverty and had a disproportionate effect on the poor and vulnerable who, even prior to the pandemic, were struggling to afford food and other basic needs. These include women who engage in unpaid or care work and are more likely to lack social protection, young and informal workers, in addition to migrant workers, refugees and displaced populations, among others.



The pandemic has also exposed the fragility of the region's food systems and aggravated food insecurity. Currently, around 51 million people are undernourished in the Arab region¹ while 137 million people are suffering from moderate to severe food insecurity² largely due to climate change, protracted conflicts and economic downturns. In addition, undernutrition, overweight and obesity among school-aged children and adults in the region continue to rise owing often to poor diets posing risks to public health.

These worrying trends are compounded with environmental challenges related to climate change, scarcity of water and arable land, increased desertification and soil and biodiversity degradation as well as declining agricultural production and rising food prices. In addition, higher affluence, rapid demographic growth, urbanization, migration and displacement have increased demand for food in the region. To cover the deficit, Arab countries rely heavily on food imports, adding pressure on their already strained budgets. For example, the dependency on wheat imports is 63.3 per cent making the Arab region more vulnerable to food prices fluctuations. Critically, about one third of food produced in the region is lost or wasted because of disrupted food chains, over-stocking or inadequate storage.³ Combined, these challenges will have negative consequences for food security, public health and social justice at local and national levels and are likely to hamper the goal of achieving Zero Hunger by 2030.

The anti-poverty, or social justice approach to food security stems from the premise that the region has an adequate food supply and food insecurity results from unequal access and distribution both within and among countries. Food justice is a holistic and structural view of the food system that considers access to sufficient and nutritious food as a human right and addresses structural barriers to that right. The concept of food justice strives for equal access to nutritious food, but also for an end to the structural inequities that lead to unequal health outcomes. Thus, considering the four dimensions of food security, namely availability, access, utilization and stability and taking into consideration the interlinkages between food security and other national policies of relevance are key to ensure food justice and its role in achieving socially just outcomes. Moreover, ensuring food access and a resilient food system in the region will not only impact progress in achieving Zero Hunger but will positively impact our economies, health, education, equality and social justice as well as the other sustainable development goals.

The exacerbation of the challenges that the region is facing as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and its cumulative effects on the food and agricultural sector, has made it imperative to find sustainable solutions that meet the real and basic needs of the region while guaranteeing the right to food for all and mitigate the risk of similar shocks on the population, especially on the poor and the most vulnerable. At the national level, breaking down sectoral silos and developing integrated economic and social policies that mainstream the principles of social justice, protect people from falling into poverty and food insecurity while contributing to other SDGs is an urgent priority for Arab countries. A whole-of-society approach to policy making, as well as regional collaboration and solidarity to support national efforts in this area are also key. In this context, the response of Arab governments to the COVID-19 crisis can be used



1. FAO, 2021. Hunger and malnutrition in the Arab region stand in the way of achieving Zero Hunger by 2030, UN report warns. Available from: <http://www.fao.org/neareast/news/view/en/c/1413273/>

2. <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb4902en/>

3. ESCWA, 2021. Concept note of the webinar on food security policies and social justice: an integrated approach, 3 February 2021.



as an opportunity to address some of the long-standing structural challenges to food insecurity and social justice in the region, and to build back better.

As the world gears up towards the Food Systems Summit, convening this dialogue will ensure that it adds to the conversation following the Summit by engaging with some of the themes of the Track 4 on advancing equitable livelihoods for all people at various points within food systems⁴ and by looking at policy solutions that advance the Summit recommendations in the Arab region. Particularly, the discussion will focus on the importance of redressing power imbalances and providing solutions for reinforcing equitable and affordable food systems for all and ensuring that the concept of food justice is anchored so as not to leave anyone behind. A significant part of the discussion will focus on vulnerable and marginalized groups as the yardstick by which to measure improvements in social justice and food security.

Objectives

The Social Justice Policy Dialogue (SJPD) Series are designed to engage policy, academic and/or government experts on the latest social development issues to identify and suggest practical policy solutions that promote social justice and equality. The need for these dialogues was made clear during a series of webinars that ESCWA – in collaboration with NYU’s Centre for International Cooperation (CIC) – launched at the beginning of 2021 to explore regional and global trends on a variety of social development topics, including Food Security. The webinar on food security and social justice examined trends and macro-policy interventions, identified key messages to stave off food insecurity from a social justice perspective, and highlighted the need for additional analyses and more concrete and targeted policy interventions.

Thus, the first SJPD will be jointly organized with the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI). It will attempt to link food security to social justice outcomes by looking at the main challenges faced by vulnerable groups in accessing food and the type of support they would need to enhance their resilience to food access. This SJPD will also look at means and measures to ensure food availability and equitable access to food for all in the short and medium terms and how the different roles of the stakeholders should be leveraged to mitigate against future shocks. Sustainable solutions for advancing inclusive food chains and equitable livelihoods under different stressors (COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts, and climate change) will also be proposed. Finally, it will identify the key policy interventions and practical measures needed to mainstream the principles of social justice into food security policies, taking into consideration the outputs of the Food Summit.



4. Action Track 4 will work to contribute to the elimination of poverty by promoting full and productive employment and decent work for all actors along the food value chain, reducing risks for the world’s poorest, enabling entrepreneurship and addressing the inequitable access to resources and distribution of value. Action Track 4 will improve resilience through social protection and seek to ensure that food systems “leave no one behind.”

Some of the questions that will be raised during the Dialogue include:

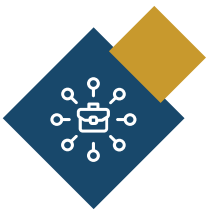
- ◆ How did the pandemic affect the link between Food Security and Social Justice?
- ◆ What short and long terms measure need to be taken by governments to ensure the right in accessing healthy and nutritious food for all?
- ◆ What types of collaborations and partnerships are required to promote the principles of Social Justice into Food Security policies?
- ◆ How can the Arab region benefit from international experiences in mainstreaming the principles of Social Justice into Food Security policies?
- ◆ How can governments ensure that policies enhancing access to sufficient and nutritious food are implemented at local and national level especially in protracted conflict situation?
- ◆ What can countries do to promote Social Justice and Food Security within the context of climate change?
- ◆ What strategies are needed to empower women to cope with pandemics and their aftermath in terms of access to healthy and nutritious food?
- ◆ What is the role of agricultural cooperatives in promoting Food Security and Social Justice in view of the multiple challenges facing the Arab region?

The messages and recommendations emanating from the Dialogue would inform ESCWA's work on social justice and contribute to following up on the recommendations of the upcoming Summit on Food Systems. Social justice and food security are an integral part of Action Track 4 of the Summit, which calls for the introduction of a human rights-based approach in food systems to support inclusive food systems and addressing inequities in accessing resources and distributing value. It calls for supporting ownership, control of resources and assets, access to markets and services or strengthening people's rights as well as addressing the specific barriers that stand in the way of structural transformation towards inclusion. This would ensure that policy solutions generated in the discussion are used to support member States.



Participants

The participants of the Dialogue will include concerned policymakers from the region; social justice and food security experts; academia; as well as representatives of international, regional and national stakeholders, research institutes and think tanks.



Organization of Work

The policy discussion is scheduled to take place virtually on 20 October 2021 from 14.00-16.30 p.m., Beirut time. Deliberations will be held in either Arabic or English and simultaneous interpretation will be provided in both languages.



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