

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

Committee on Social Development
Fourteenth session
Beirut, 8 June 2023



Item 7 of the provisional agenda

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

The Expert Group on Social Protection Reform (EGSPR) comprises senior representatives of government institutions in Arab countries involved in various areas of social protection, including social insurance, social assistance, health care, integrated registers, and information systems related to social protection. EGSPR was established at the request of 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, especially expanding the scope of social protection systems and improving their quality.

The present document provides a summary of EGSPR activities undertaken between the thirteenth (online, 22-23 September 2021) and the current session of the Committee on Social Development. The Committee is invited to take note of the progress made and advise on possible areas of future work of the Group.

Contents

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
Introduction	1-3	3
<i>Chapter</i>		
I. Activities of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform	4-13	3
A. Preparatory technical meeting for the ministerial forum on “The future of social protection in the Arab region: building a vision for a post-COVID-19 reality”	4-6	3
B. Fifth EGSPR meeting: reforming social protection systems in Arab countries	7-8	3
C. Sixth EGSPR meeting	9-11	4
D. Seventh EGSPR meeting	12-13	4
II. Conclusion and future areas of work	14-18	4
Annexes		
Annex I. Terms of reference of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform		6
Annex II. Members of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform in the Arab Region		8

Introduction

1. The Expert Group on Social Protection Reform (EGSPR) was established at the request of 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, especially expanding the scope of social protection systems and improving their quality.
2. The Committee on Social Development recommended that ESCWA coordinates the work of EGSPR, including hosting meetings, and providing updates to the Committee. Accordingly, ESCWA established the EGSPR and put forward terms of reference for its work (annex I). These were shared with ministers of social affairs of ESCWA member States and, accordingly, focal points were nominated as representatives in the Group by each State (annex II). EGSPR comprises 20 high-level policymakers working in the areas of social assistance, social insurance, labour, social development, statistics, and international cooperation.
3. ESCWA assumes the role of EGSPR Secretariat. Since the twelfth session of the Committee on Social Development, it has organized eight meetings of the Group, four of which were reported on during the thirteenth session of the Committee on Social Development, held online on 22 and 23 September 2021. The present document reports on the four subsequent meetings held since then.

I. Activities of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform

A. Preparatory technical meeting for the ministerial forum on “The future of social protection in the Arab region: building a vision for a post-COVID-19 reality”

(Online, 21 October 2021)

4. As a member of the Regional United Nations Issue-Based Coalition (IBC) on Social Protection, and in coordination with the regional offices of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the International Labour Office, the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth and the socialprotection.org platform, ESCWA organized a preparatory technical meeting for the high-level ministerial forum on social protection with the members of the EGSPR.
5. The preparatory technical meeting showcased countries’ experiences, challenges and priorities related to four key topics: (a) social protection coverage; (b) shock responsiveness of social protection systems and programmes; (c) financing of social protection; and (d) governance and coordination of social protection systems. EGSPR members drew lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and discussed their vision for social protection in the Arab region following the pandemic.
6. Following the preparatory technical meeting, ESCWA drafted a declaration of principles for social protection in the Arab region post-COVID-19. EGSPR members played a crucial role in developing the document and ensured that it was endorsed by relevant ministers. Accordingly, the Ministerial Declaration of Principles was endorsed by all 20 ESCWA member States in the “[Arab Ministerial Forum 2021: The future of Social Protection in the Arab Region: Building a vision for a post-COVID-19 reality](#)”, held online on 30 November 2021. The principles agreed upon addressed the need for increased social protection coverage of excluded groups and for enhancing financing of social protection. It is noteworthy that 60 per cent of all social assistance reforms initiated or announced in 2022 in the region were related to changes in social protection coverage, while 54 per cent tackled financing issues (with some covering both issues).

B. Fifth EGSPR meeting: reforming social protection systems in Arab countries

(Online, 19 January 2022)

7. The fifth EGSPR meeting on “[Reforming social protection systems in Arab countries](#)” was attended by 27 participants comprising Group members and other regional social protection experts. It focused on the

following issues: (a) the role of subsidized health insurance contributions to cover the hard-to-reach; (b) the ESCWA Social Protection Programme Rapid Assessment Framework (SPP-RAF); (c) the ESCWA template for establishing comprehensive national country profiles on social protection systems and reforms; and (d) the Ministerial Forum Declaration. The meeting was also an opportunity for EGSPR members to exchange experiences and discuss future work, namely on how to include informal workers in social protection programmes and how to finance social protection.

8. Group members commended the efforts of ESCWA in developing practical tools that member States can rely on to enhance social protection systems and increase their effectiveness and efficiency. The meeting also acknowledged the above-mentioned Declaration as a first of its kind in the Arab region, providing guiding principles toward well reformed social protection systems.

C. Sixth EGSPR meeting

(Amman and Online, 31 May 2022)

9. During the “[Expert Group on Social Protection Reform in the Arab Countries: 6th meeting](#)”, ESCWA presented its tools and technical assistance services to support member States, including support for graduation of social assistance beneficiaries through upskilling and job-matching, the ESCWA Skills Monitor, the SPP-RAF analytical framework, the trilingual social protection glossary, the social protection annual digest, the thematic policy papers, the social protection country profile template, and other related capacity-building activities.

10. ESCWA also presented its electronic platform dedicated to social protection issues in the Arab region, serving as a comprehensive repository of social protection material in both Arabic and English, and including a virtual forum for EGSPR members to communicate and exchange experiences. A WhatsApp group was created to connect EGSPR members and support the roll out of the electronic platform.

11. At the end of the meeting, participants stressed the importance of peer exchanges both among Arab countries, and between them and the global South. ESCWA was requested to facilitate further peer exchanges.

D. Seventh EGSPR meeting

(Beirut and Online, 4 November 2022)

12. The seventh EGSPR meeting was held on the sidelines of the “[Peer exchange meeting on extending social insurance to persons in non-standard forms of work](#)”; it focused on socioeconomic inequality in food security. EGSPR members discussed the issue of inequality in the Arab region, providing examples of outdated civil laws that entrench inequality. They agreed that access to public services and social protection in Arab countries is neither equal nor universal, and many groups are left behind. Consequently, they recommended that ESCWA identifies who is left behind and how (for example food security), focusing on multidimensional poverty rather than monetary poverty.

13. EGSPR members compared the current food insecurity crisis with the 2008 financial and food security crises and linked the current one to increasing unemployment due to COVID-19, as well as to food supply disruptions and price hikes following the war in Ukraine. They discussed solutions to the current food crisis and noted that food subsidies and cash transfers are relevant short-term measures. To sustainably guarantee food security, the Arab region would need to enhance agricultural output and increase local food production.

II. Conclusion and future areas of work

14. The above-mentioned four activities provided an interactive platform for knowledge and experience sharing among the EGSPR members. The requests for technical support received by ESCWA from member states on the issues raised and discussed by members of EGSPR are a testimony to the effectiveness of the

work of this group towards implementing its set role in supporting reform paths on social protection in Arab countries.

15. ESCWA also invited EGSPR to participate in major regional events such as the Arab Forum for Equality (Amman, 30-31 May 2022). Bilateral collaboration and exchange of knowledge was also organized between Jordan and Kuwait, for which ESCWA organized a study tour (as part of twinning exercise). A delegation from the Kuwait Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour thus visited the National Aid Fund and the Ministry of Social Development in Jordan from 27 to 31 March 2022, in order to deepen collaboration on social protection issues between the two countries.

16. Upcoming EGSPR activities will continue to provide a platform for peer exchange and will focus on the following areas:

- (a) Self-assessment of existing social protection systems and reform needs;
- (b) Transitioning social protection provision from a humanitarian response to government-led implementation;
- (c) Translating social protection strategies into feasible action plans;
- (d) Data analysis for evidence-based policymaking for social protection;
- (e) Addressing the missing-middle; extending social protection coverage to informal and irregular workers.

17. ESCWA, as secretariat of the Group, will continue to coordinate the work of the group and establish a dedicated virtual exchange forum. ESCWA will also facilitate internal discussion among group members to refurbish the set-up and modality of work to enhance the efficiency of the group and ensure the inclusion of all relevant parties to cover all dimensions of social protection as per the context of each country.

18. The Committee on Social Development is invited to take note of EGSPR activities and to comment on regional priorities for reforming social protection systems.

Annex I

Terms of reference of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform

Introduction

Social protection systems, in their various forms, aim to enhance social cohesion and social justice, structure the labour market, prevent and alleviate poverty, and enhance resilience to economic crises in society. Effective social protection is essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilling the principle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of leaving no one behind. Moreover, social protection is a fundamental human right.

The quality and comprehensiveness of social protection systems influence people's trust in their Government, and in its ability to ensure their protection from the impact of disease, old age, work injury or disability, support them throughout the life cycle, (for example, during maternity), and assist them in their efforts and aspirations for a dignified life. Universal social protection can enhance mutual trust and social cohesion, especially in countries that have experienced violent conflict.

At the close of its twelfth session, the Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) recommended the following: "Establish an expert group under the Committee on Social Development tasked with following up on social protection reform in the period between Committee sessions. An evaluation of its activities should be submitted to the Committee on Social Development at its thirteenth session. The expert group's proposed functions include strengthening coordination and regional cooperation and exchanging experiences on social protection issues, including expanding the scope of social protection systems and improving their quality".

The following terms of reference outline the proposed framework for the work of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform (EGSPR) in Arab countries.

Objectives

The Group serves as a key framework for collaboration on issues related to social protection reform between Arab Governments and ESCWA during the inter-sessional period of the Committee on Social Development, especially in the following areas:

1. Strengthening relationships and collaboration in the field of social protection policies between Arab countries, and with ESCWA.
2. Promoting national discussions on the need to integrate and harmonize the various components of social protection systems, including social insurance, social assistance, health care, integrated registers and information systems.
3. Strengthening regional and subregional cooperation to expand social protection systems and improve the delivery of their services, through the exchange of information among member States.
4. Ensuring that Member States are aware of ongoing and planned ESCWA activities on social protection and that ESCWA is also aware of member States' activities in this field.
5. Following up on issues related to social protection in the period between Committee sessions.

Membership

EGSPR is composed of one representative for each ESCWA member State. Given the responsibilities of the team, EGSPR members must have objective knowledge and experience in social protection (social

insurance, social assistance, health care, integrated registers, and information systems that manage social protection) and social development issues. Other experts may be called upon if the Group so decides.

Responsibilities of EGSPR members

EGSPR members have the following responsibilities:

1. Acting as the main body to receive and respond to communications from ESCWA on social protection issues, including through communications with ministries and other relevant stakeholders, when needed.
2. Informing ESCWA of national developments in the field of social protection, including those related to institutional, legal, and political processes, and relevant data and statistics.
3. Participating in the Group's in-person and online meetings, and in other meetings related to social protection (or its components) and social development.
4. Exchanging information with other members on experiences, innovative practices, and result evaluations related to providing social protection services or reforming national systems.
5. Developing and implementing, when possible, biennial work plans and reviewing performance against desired results at each formal meeting.
6. Submitting a biennial report on the Group's achievements in each subsequent session of the Committee on Social Development.

EGSPR secretariat

ESCWA acts as the Group's secretariat. In line with available resources, the secretariat is responsible for maintaining channels of communication between members, convening in-person and online meetings, proposing the agenda for each meeting, disseminating EGSPR documents to focal points, and supporting the planning and implementation of activities.

Working methods

The following are the Group's working methods:

1. The Group shall hold an in-person substantive meeting at least once a year.
2. Group meetings shall be supplemented with expert meetings and online meetings to discuss substantive and procedural issues, and ensure continuity of work as necessary.
3. The Group may invite non-member experts (such as representatives of non-member States of ESCWA in the Arab region, United Nations institutions, research institutions and organizations working in the field of social protection) to participate in the meetings as observers or experts. The ESCWA secretariat is responsible for inviting non-member experts in consultation with EGSPR members.

Time frame

The ESCWA Committee on Social Development, at its successive sessions, shall review the Group's work plan and terms of reference, and make any necessary adjustments to its working methods or responsibilities.

Annex II

Members of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform in the Arab Region

Country	Name	Professional title	Ministry/organization
Algeria	Ms. Wahiba Werkab	Sub-Director in charge of International Social Protection Agreements	Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Social Security
Bahrain	Mr. Abbas Maatouk	Chief of International Relations	Ministry of Labour and Social Development
Egypt	Mr. Raafat Shafiq	Social Protection Adviser	Ministry of Social Solidarity
Iraq	Ms. Zekra Abdel Rahim	Director-General of the Department of Social Protection	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
Jordan	Mr. Barq Al-Dmour	Secretary-General	Ministry of Social Development
Kuwait	Mr. Khaled Al Kahtani	Secretary-General	The Supreme Council for Family Affairs
Lebanon	Mr. Abdullah Ahmed	Director-General	Ministry of Social Affairs
Libya	Mr. Mustafa Fathi al-Juaibi	Chairman of the Administrative Committee	General Authority for the Social Solidarity Fund, Tripoli
Mauritania	Mr. Aly Soumare	Secretary-General	Ministry of Social Affairs, Childhood and Family
Morocco	Mr. Rachid Kadida	Director of Social Development Department	Ministry of Solidarity, Social Inclusion and Family
Oman	Mr. Mohammed bin Ali al Saadi	Director-General of Social Welfare	Ministry of Social Development
State of Palestine	Mr. Assem Khamis	Acting Deputy Minister	Ministry of Social Development
Qatar	Mr. Ghanem Mubarak Al-Kuwari	Assistant Undersecretary for Social Affairs and Vice Chairman of the National Committee for the Affairs of Woman, Children, the Elderly and People with Disabilities	Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs
Saudi Arabia	Mr. Sultan al-Jories	Undersecretary for Social Security and Empowerment	Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development
Somalia	Mr. Mohamed Nazif	Advisor	Ministry of Social Affairs
Sudan	Mr. Gamal Al Nile	Undersecretary	Ministry of Social Development
Syrian Arab Republic	Ms. Awatef Hassan	Director, Social Policies	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour
Tunisia	Ms. Maha Mazrioui	Director of the General Administration of Statistics, Analysis, and Strategic Planning	Ministry of Social Affairs
United Arab Emirates	Mr. Hussain Al Shaikh	Advisor	Ministry of Community Development
Yemen	Ms. Najlaa Ahmed Omar Awad al-Sayyad	Executive Director of the Social Welfare Fund, and Director of the Protection Programme at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Aden
