

Concept paper for online workshop

“Targeted Social Protection in Arab Countries during Covid”

25 February 2021

11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

1. BACKGROUND

Social protection systems, their design and their scope of coverage are shaping social cohesion, social justice, the structure of the labour market, the prevention and the alleviation of poverty as well resilience to economic shocks in any given society. The quality and comprehensiveness of social protection systems influence the trust of people in their government and in its ability to ensure their protection from the impact of disease, old age, work injury or disability, support them through lifecycle events and assist them in their efforts and aspirations to a good life.

The importance of social protection increases manifold during crises. The Covid-19 pandemic, that engulfed the world in early 2020, has already resulted in soaring unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity in many countries around the globe. The overwhelming brunt of this crisis in the Arab region will fall on the shoulders of vulnerable population groups: women, youth, and informal workers with limited access to social protection.¹ In addition, the pandemic will put under threat livelihoods of 55 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in the Arab region.²

To mitigate the consequences of this crisis for population, governments around the world are expanding their social protection systems, with cash-based transfers being one of the most frequently used social protection response measures worldwide.³ According to the World Bank, in the Middle East and North Africa region the scale-up of cash transfer programmes induced by the pandemic exceeded the pre-Covid coverage rates.⁴

¹ ESCWA (2020) Socioeconomic Impact of COVID-19: Policy Briefs (Available at https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/20-00116_rer_mitigatingimpact_covid-19_eng_april8.pdf#overlay-context=publications/socioeconomic-impact-covid-19-policy-briefs)

² Ibid.

³ Gentilini, Ugo; Almenfi, Mohamed; Orton, Ian; Dale, Pamela (2020). Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures. World Bank, Washington, DC. (Available at <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33635>)

⁴ Based on a sample of 5 countries with comparable administrative data.



When providing targeted social protection response, Arab governments to a large extent relied on the existing social assistance infrastructure, and, for instance, on the programmes in place, and related registries and management information systems. Beneficiary registries were used to provide benefit top-ups and additional services to the current beneficiaries of social assistance. Social registries were employed to rapidly scale up assistance programmes while minimizing the time-consuming processes of application and data collection: since socio-economic data of potential beneficiaries was already in social registries, programmes could directly proceed to selection of eligible beneficiaries. At the same time, households and individuals no longer needed to apply to newly launched programmes. Furthermore, links of social and beneficiary registries to other government databases, such as social insurance database or land and car owners' databases, facilitated express eligibility checks and allowed eliminating households that do not qualify for social assistance.

The Covid-19 crisis amounted to a stress test of existing social protection systems that were quickly expanded to reach out to additional vulnerable population groups. For example, informal workers, that were not necessarily considered poor before the pandemic but have lost their jobs as a result of it, were included in social assistance programmes in many countries around the world, since the majority of them lacked access to formal social insurance.

This way, the aim of the workshop is to discuss lessons learnt from the Covid-19 crisis. This includes to (i) assess readiness of targeted social protection systems to crises, (ii) identify possible gaps revealed by the pandemic and (iii) consider medium and longer term changes that should be made to social protection systems as a result of lessons learnt from the Covid-crisis. Although the background conditions and consequences of the crisis vary from one country to another, there's great potential for cooperation and mutual learning among countries in the Arab region.

2. EXPECTED ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND OBJECTIVE OF THE WORKSHOP

This meeting will gather policymakers and government officials responsible for delivering targeted social protection, carrying out targeting and managing registries and management information systems during the Covid-19 pandemic in Arab States. The event will facilitate experience exchange member States. Discussions will be based on two draft working papers, which will be circulated in advance of the workshop: (i) a paper that summarizes existing social assistance programmes and looks into adaptations during the pandemic and (ii) a policy brief on social registries and how these were useful for scaling up assistance.

For instance, participants will:

- (i) discuss readiness of their targeted social protection systems to crises, possible gaps revealed during the pandemic and medium to longer-term reforms of social protection systems that countries plan to make as a result of the lessons learnt from the Covid-19 crisis;
- (ii) exchange knowledge in the field of emergency response and reforming social protection systems based on the lessons learned during the pandemic;
- (iii) provide feedback on the draft working paper that summarizes existing social assistance programmes and looks into adaptations during the pandemic at the workshop or in writing after the event;
- (iv) strengthen South-South cooperation between Arab States in the sphere of targeted social protection and Covid-19 response.



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3. OUTPUTS OF THE MEETING

The meeting will facilitate experience exchange and cooperation among policymakers working on targeted social protection in Arab countries. Participants will engage in discussions on Covid-19 response, identification of vulnerable groups affected by the pandemic, lessons learnt during this crisis and the way forward – i.e. medium to longer-term reforms of social protection systems that countries plan to make based on the experience gained during the Covid-19 crisis.

4. DRAFT AGENDA

11:00 – 11:15	Opening and welcoming remarks by Mehrinaz El Awady , Cluster Leader, Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster, ESCWA
11:15 – 11:35	Targeted Social Protection in Arab Countries during Covid-19 Pandemic: Major Issues and Trends Anton Bjork , ESCWA Q&A session Moderator: Mona Fattah , ESCWA
11:35 – 13:00	1. Delivering Social Protection during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Tunisian Experience Imen Jouini , Head of the Department, General Administration of Statistics, Analysis and Strategic Planning, Ministry of Social Affairs, the Republic of Tunisia 2. Public Aid System in the State of Kuwait Hanaa Alhajri , Undersecretary Assistant for Social Development, Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, the State of Kuwait 3. Covid-19 Emergency Cash Transfer Scheme for Informal Workers in Egypt Mervat Sabrin , Coordinator of Pension Policies, Ministry of Social Solidarity, the Arab Republic of Egypt 4. Expansion of the Takaful Programme at the National Aid Fund in Jordan during the Covid-19 Pandemic Faisal Irshaid , National Aid Fund, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Moderator: Mona Fattah , ESCWA
13:00 – 13:50	Social Protection Post-Covid: Data Analysis for Evidence-Driven Policy Making Balsam Halawi , ESCWA Q&A session Discussion of medium to longer-term changes of social protection systems as a result of lessons learnt from the Covid-19 crisis Moderator: Mona Fattah , ESCWA
13:50 – 14:00	Closing remarks and conclusion

