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Report

**Expert Group Meeting on Social Inequalities in the Arab Region Post-COVID-19:
The Road to Structural Transformation
On-line meeting, 1 September 2021, from 15.00-18.30 (Beirut time)**

Summary

The expert group meeting on Social Inequalities in the Arab Region Post-COVID-19: The Road to Structural Transformation was organized by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in cooperation with UNESCO, Arab Regional Office, and was held on 1 September 2021.

Participants from international organizations, academia together with ESCWA discussed the draft report which focused mainly on social protection measures introduced by governments to contain the spread of COVID-19, the effectiveness of reallocation of resources and their sustainability beyond the COVID-19. The draft also focused on innovation in different sectors such as education, health and social protection. The present report provides an overview of the meeting's discussions, conclusions, and recommendations.

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Introduction

1. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in partnership with UNESCO, Arab Region held a virtual expert group meeting on the forthcoming publication “Social Inequalities in the Arab Region Post-COVID-19: The Road to Structural Transformation”, on 1st of September 2021.
2. The meeting brought together a group of regional and global experts with the aim to vet the publication and review the following:
 - (a) The responsiveness of policy interventions during the pandemic, including resources and expenditure allocation, in the context of existing social policy frameworks.
 - (b) Analysis of impediments to realizing the “social goals” of the SDG, namely 3,4, and 10 and supporting the Leave No One Behind (LNOB) agenda.
 - (c) The global horizon for innovation in social policy and emerging experimentation in the use of technology and innovation to minimize inequalities and widen social inclusion.

I. Recommendations

The expert group meeting concluded with the following recommendations:

- The conceptual framework on life cycle approach needs to be fully reflected in all chapters.
- In chapter one, the changes on social policy that took place after the Arab Spring should be included.
- The timeframe for chapter two needs to be clarified.
- There needs to be more accuracy regarding the conditionality of Takaful and Karama programmes in the case study on Egypt.
- There needs to be reference to the food subsidy programme in Egypt which was substantive as it covered 70 million Egyptian.
- The gender perspective needs to be included in chapters 2, 3 and 4.
- The title of the report should be changed to reflect more the content.

II. Topics of discussion

A. Session I: Chapter on Policy Context and Conceptual Framework

3. Ms. Rana Jawad, ESCWA Consultant, started the session by introducing the definitions of social policy and social protection. The conceptual framework of the report was then introduced which is based on a life course approach to social policy and examination of the institutional configuration of COVID-19 social protection response. Ms. Jawad outlined the social policy context of Arab countries and then presented a quantitative overview of some key indicators in the region related to poverty, inequality, employment, health, and social spending. Following the visual presentation, Ms. Jawad argued that poverty trends in the Arab countries reflect longstanding structural barriers to wealth redistribution and equitable economic and political participation across a range of demographic variables, she shed light on the heavy reliance on informal and private sector as providers of social protection, whereby social assistance programmes show a preference for unconditional cash transfers and food and in-kind transfers.

B. Session II: Regional Social Protection Responses to COVID-19

4. In the second session, Mr. Stephen Devereux, ESCWA Consultant presented the social interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic, categorized as follows: (1) Establishment of social assistance funds which were raised as donations. (2) Social assistance funds which include cash transfers, waiver of utility bill, in-kind transfers/voucher (School feeding). (3) Social insurance which covers unemployment benefits. (4) Loans and tax benefits which involves reduction of individual loan, tax relief and VAT exemptions. (5) Labour Markets such as paid leave or work from home and (6) health related support.

5. He also noted that social assistance measures constitute the major share of COVID-19 social protection interventions in the Arab region and in the world, just above 50 per cent. This was shown through a bar graph representing the fiscal support for social protection, aggregated for policy measures related to social assistance, loans and tax benefits, social insurance, and labour market interventions.

6. Moreover, he further introduced four graphs which summarize the measures undertaken in Arab sub-regions to combat the outbreak. In terms of diversification of interventions, Tunisia, Egypt, Mauritania, and Kuwait top the list in Maghreb, GCC, LDCs and Mashriq sub regions respectively. He emphasized on the diversity of interventions which allow reaching more targeted beneficiaries on individual and household level.

7. A figure was then presented to evaluate the effectiveness of measures taken by selected Arab countries to confront COVID-19, in comparison to other countries' social protection, according to two dimensions of social flaws which are horizontal coverage and vertical adequacy. It was shown that several interventions had high coverage, reaching more than half the national population in at least seven countries, including Morocco's programme of support for informal workers and families. However, the adequacy of these cash transfers to meet household needs was low, averaging <20% of national average income or spending in all five MENA region programmes. Overall, the measures are said to be insufficient due to low coverage of social systems, legislative shortcomings, low health coverage and inadequate benefits. Such fact call for more inclusiveness, comprehensive protection and poverty reduction impacts.

8. Mr. Devereux presented the recommendations of a regional civil society dialogue that took place in Jordan during 2020 to evaluate the measures taken by Arab countries regarding COVID-19. Mr. Devereux then raised the role of social assistance programmes in addressing the pandemic and presented three key characteristics: (1) type of assistance, (2) conditionality and (3) targeting criteria.

9. Ms. Rania Al Jazairi, First Social Affairs Officers at ESCWA presented two regional case studies from Egypt and Morocco. Morocco ended up establishing a solidarity fund and a considerable vertical and horizontal expansion of the cash transfer programme benefitting more than half of the population. The success of the cash transfer programme was not limited to its expansion, but also to its effective disbursement using innovative technologies. COVID-19 responses were regraded as an opportunity to reform the social protection system whereby Morocco pledged to make provision of social security to all Moroccans a national priority for the next five years.

10. The Egyptian government augmented its support during the pandemic and provided an array of services to the neediest population. The horizontal expansion of the Takaful and Karama programmes delivered cash assistance for vulnerable groups in crises times. The programme showed flexibility in identifying new beneficiaries. The eligibility criteria were calibrated to fit the crisis mode that the country was entering, and the new category of persons in need of assistance due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Inter- governmental coordination was enhanced by electronic platforms such as "G to G" to identify needs through the cross-

checking of beneficiaries' database. In addition, the use of new technologies for the delivery of services such as ATM outlets and transfers through mobile phones proved highly efficient.

11. Mrs. Al- Jazairi concluded by stating that in the Arab region, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of social protection measures demonstrated strong political will with the substantive disbursement of funds to alleviate the needs of vulnerable populations, and social solidarity through the innovative use and creation of solidarity funds. Another important observation is the shift in policy during the pandemic, from targeting only the poorest populations to also including the “missing middle”, which shed light on the structural challenges that preceded the pandemic in terms of neglecting the social rights of this group of workers. Ms. Al-Jazairi added that in many Arab countries, the pandemic accelerated stronger partnerships and greater collaboration between different stakeholders.

C. Session III: Re-examining Sustainability and Resource Allocation

12. During this session, Ms. Zahraa Barakat, Research Assistant at UN-ESCWA, stated that the pandemic measures presented risks for macro-economic stability by presenting an overview of the increases in fiscal deficits for all Arab countries in 2020 because of decline in oil prices. She mentioned that this raises concerns regarding the sustainability of the countries' economic response given the continued social and economic needs in the recovery period.

13. Ms. Barakat introduced figures to compare the total fiscal support in billions of dollars by Arab sub-regions showing the highest spending took place among GCC states at \$69.9 billion, whereas, the Maghreb countries accounted for the lowest fiscal stimulus at \$3.24 billion. Comparing the fiscal stimulus worldwide, average size of fiscal relief packages in the Arab region was smaller than other regions around the world (apart from Sub Saharan Africa). Taking a closer look to the fiscal stimulus by type of policy area, Ms. Barakat revealed that Arab countries spent 18 % of fiscal support on social protection, 15.6 % was spent on health-related support, 38.3 % goes to economic policy and around 28% went to non-disaggregated support.

14. Moreover, Ms. Barakat addressed the contribution of external sources for which data is available. Bilateral and multilateral donors, philanthropic organizations, and the private sector all played a role in contributing to the response of COVID-19.

15. Ms. Rana Jawad co-presented during this session and highlighted successful regional and global experiences that can be learnt from or further developed .She drew attention to the gaps in social protection in Arab countries such as poorly developed social protection systems, lack of “an existing tax-financed system, absence of an adequate tax base and gaps in the timely procurement of equipment and supplies”.

16. Ms. Jawad concluded by listing key factors that influence sustainability of social protection response in addition to the structural changes for the Post-COVID-19 recovery period, with possible recommendations for ensuring financial sustainability.

D. Session IV: Global and Regional Innovations in Social Policy

23. Mr. Anasse Bouhlal, UNESCO Beirut's Programme Specialist for Higher Education started the session by focusing on the shifts in delivery of government services which were brought through the pandemic especially in education. He highlighted UNESCO'S efforts in supporting teaching and learning material development to enhance the capacity of education during the crisis. He introduced the innovations in education that gained ground in several countries in the Arab region such as online learning platforms, TV-based learning, radio-based learning and other online platforms such as YOUTUBE TV.

24. The new solutions set many challenges and much needed innovation for the sector. Some of these challenges include: (1) Equity in access to online learning has been a major concern in the region. (2) Teacher preparedness to deal with online learning was another challenge faced during this crisis. (3) Online and remote learning have put a heavy burden on parents and caregivers who are unable to support their children, due to a variety of reasons. (4) Universities and other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) also stopped face-to-face teaching. The impact on HEIs was abrupt and there were no contingency plans, other than to attempt to continue classes remotely.
25. Mr. Stephen Devereux co-presented the session and highlighted global evidence in innovation in health care. Four main areas of innovation in social protection have been observed: (1) Extension of coverage to categories of people who were previously excluded. (2) Adaptation of social protection interventions to changing circumstances, due to COVID-19 restrictions. (3) Increasing use of digital technologies for beneficiary management. (4) Growing convergence between humanitarian relief interventions and developmental social protection.
26. Mr. Devereux pointed out to the importance of school feeding while anticipating several limitations. For one thing, the quantity and quality of food provided at home was generally lower than that provided at school. The nutritional impacts of school feeding at home were diluted, this also raises the issue of discontinuities in regular school feeding programmes. Children receive meals only on schooldays, excluding weekends and holidays, which reduces their potential food security and nutritional impacts.
27. Examples in Libya, Tunisia and Brazil were introduced to shed light on innovation in terms of school feeding and digital delivery of social protection.
28. During the discussion, participants raised main interventions relating to the absence of the time frame in chapter two. They also highlighted that the report lacked information about vaccination-related programmes. The participants noticed that there was a mismatch between the report title and its content. In addition, the changes that occurred in social policies after the Arab Spring were not included in chapter one. Participants suggested that adding data on women beneficiaries and women participation in the response against COVID-19 is worth noting.
29. The Social Justice team welcomed the comments and responded to the inquiries by informing the audience that a timeframe will be added to chapter two. Also, a paragraph on changes to social policies following the Arab spring shall be added to the report. Vaccination campaigns were not included in the report since, the focus was primarily on social protection rather than other sectors such as health -related policies. Ms. Al-Jazairi ended the session by stressing on the importance of the universal or minimum basic salary which was not done in region and was done globally in Spain only.

III. Organization of work

A. Date and venue of the meeting

30. The meeting was held on MS Teams, on 1 September 2021, from 15.00-18.30 PM (Beirut time).

B. Attendance

31. The meeting brought together a group of regional and global experts. The list of participants is in the annex to the present report.

C. Opening

32. Ms. Rania Al Jazairi, First Social Affairs Officers at ESCWA welcomed the participants and opened the meeting by introducing the audience to the objectives and methodology of the report.

D. Agenda

33. Participants adopted the provisional agenda as follows:

- Introductory Remarks
- Session One: Policy Context and Conceptual Framework
- Discussion led by Rania Al-Jazairi and Rana Jawad
- Session Two: Regional Social Protection Responses to COVID-19
- Discussion led by Rania Al-Jazairi and Stephen Devereux
- Session Three: Sustainability and Resource Allocation
- Discussion led by Zahraa Barakat and Rana Jawad
- Session Four: Global and Regional Innovations in Social Policy
- Discussion led by Stephen Devereux
- Concluding Remarks.

Annex I

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