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

## **Report**

### **Tenth meeting of Expert Group on Social Protection Reform in the Arab States Cairo, 5 June 2024**

#### **Summary**

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held the tenth meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform (EGSPR) in the Arab Countries at the Semiramis Intercontinental Hotel, Cairo, Egypt, on Wednesday 5 June 2024.

The meeting complemented a series of nine previous meetings organized by ESCWA, as the Secretariat of the group. Similar to the previous ones, the meeting provided an opportunity for member countries' representatives to peer learn and discuss future regional and country activities related to the work of the group. The meeting discussed : (a) the participation of the group members in providing data and information on social protection developments in their respective countries for the annual digest of social protection reforms in the Arab region, (b) the electronic draft of the social protection platform for the Arab region, and (c) the comprehensive national social protection and reform country profiles, and (d) the indirect functions of social protection: options for designing social protection to promote economic equality.

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## Introduction

1. The COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting impacts have necessitated the need for greater cooperation, coordination, and exchange of experiences on social protection issues in the Arab region. Accordingly, the Intergovernmental Committee on Social Development facilitated by ESCWA recommended at the conclusion of its twelfth session (Beirut, 8-9 October 2019), to form an expert group to follow up on issues of reform of social protection systems in the Arab countries, strengthen regional coordination and cooperation and exchange experiences on the subject, especially in the field of expanding the scope and improving the quality of social protection systems<sup>1</sup>. Accordingly, ESCWA, in cooperation with its Member States, initiated the establishment of the Group of Experts and established terms of reference for its work<sup>2</sup>.

2. To date, twenty ESCWA member states have appointed focal points to represent high-level policymakers specializing in social assistance, social insurance, labour, social development, statistics, and international cooperation. ESCWA plays a pivotal role as the secretariat of the EGSPR, coordinating its meetings and disseminating relevant materials.

3. ESCWA, as the secretariat of the group, has organized nine meetings for the expert group on Social Protection Reform in the Arab States, which are:

- High-Level Virtual Meeting on "Policy Response to the Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19: Social Protection" (22 April 2020).
- Second virtual meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform (2 November 2020).
- Third virtual meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform (8 June 2021).
- Virtual workshop entitled "Targeted Social Protection in the Arab Countries during the COVID-19 Pandemic (25 February 2021).
- Fifth Virtual Meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform in the Arab Countries (19 January 2022).
- Sixth Meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform in the Arab Countries (Amman, 31 May 2022).
- Seventh Expert Group Meeting on Social Protection Reform in the Arab Countries "Second Peer Exchange Workshop: Expanding Social Insurance Coverage for Workers in the Informal Sector" (Beirut, 4 November 2022).
- Eighth Meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform in the Arab Countries (Beirut, 9 June 2023).
- Ninth Meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform in the Arab Countries (Muscat, 21-22 February 2024).

4. To complement this series of meetings, ESCWA, as the technical secretariat of the Group, organized the tenth meeting of the EGSPR on 5 June 2024, in Cairo, as well as via Zoom. The meeting, like previous meetings, provided an opportunity for member states' representatives to discuss the challenges faced by social protection programs in their countries, learn from each other's experiences, and learn about the latest tools developed by ESCWA to support the members of the group in reforming social protection systems at the country and regional level.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/event/materials/tqryr\\_ljn\\_ltnmy\\_ljtmy\\_n\\_drwth\\_lthny\\_shr.pdf](https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/event/materials/tqryr_ljn_ltnmy_ljtmy_n_drwth_lthny_shr.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/event/materials/2100453%20Web%20أنشطة20فریق%20الخبراء%20المعني%20بإصلاح%20الحماية%20الاجتماعية.pdf>.

5. The tenth meeting of the EGSPR addressed the issue of indirect functions of social protection and focused on options for designing it to promote economic equality. ESCWA presented to the members of the Group the tables (Excel sheets) prepared by the Social Protection Team, which had already been sent to them before the meeting to facilitate their participation in reporting on the latest social protection reforms (e.g., new policies or changes in processes) in their countries during 2024. ESCWA presented the electronic draft of the social protection platform for the Arab region. The meeting also allowed the member countries' representatives, particularly Egypt and Mauritania, to share their experiences in developing comprehensive national country profiles on social protection.

## **I. Outcome of the meeting**

6. The meeting included three main sessions, in which four main themes were reviewed and discussed: (a) The participation of Member States in providing data and information to the annual digest of social protection reforms in the Arabic region, (b) the electronic draft of the social protection platform for the Arab region, (c) the country profile reports on the social protection landscape and reform, and (d) the indirect functions of social protection: social protection design options to promote economic equality. The main outcomes of the discussions are as follows:

(a) The members of the EGSPR reviewed the draft reporting template (Excel sheets ) prepared by the ESCWA Social Protection Team to facilitate their sharing and collection of information on social protection reforms in 2024 in their countries and proposed adding a column enabling states to report on additional information that may be specific to the national context or not included under any of the headings placed in the list;

(b) The members of the group took note of the work being carried out by ESCWA to develop a regional social protection platform for learning and exchanging experiences and information in Arabic, English, and French at a later stage. They commended the progress made in this area since the ninth meeting of the Group. They considered finding a mechanism that would enable the members of the group to upload certain national documents or reports related to social protection issues to the platform;

(c) The participants expressed interest in the experiences of States in the process of finalizing the comprehensive country profile of social protection and in the process of coordination and cooperation among all stakeholders at the national level required by this work;

(d) Regarding options for designing social protection reforms to promote economic equality, participants showed high interest in the topic, particularly in its transformative dimension and the inclusive and egalitarian approach to social protection through contributory social insurance.

## **II. Topics of Discussion**

7. The tenth meeting of the EGSPR began with brief opening remarks by Mr. Marco Schaefer, Chief of the ESCWA Social Protection Team, in which he introduced the meeting and the agenda. The following paragraphs reflect the key issues raised:

### **A. Session 1: ESCWA projects on social protection**

8. Mr. Schaefer presented the forms (Excel sheets) prepared by ESCWA and sent to members of the group before the meeting to fill out and use them to report on the latest developments and reforms related to social protection for the year as their contribution to the annual digest of social protection reforms in the Arabic region for 2024. Mr. Schaefer explained the tabulation of the headlines and areas of social protection classified in the forms to facilitate the process of filling them out and then reporting on the new reforms in an organized and consistent manner, which facilitates the drafting of national chapters of the digest in a systematic and balanced form.

9. The participants made some comments queries and observations on the forms, particularly regarding thematic items under the categories of social protection or the social protection functions. The issue of determining the date of the reported reform was also discussed, as sometimes a new law or protection program is announced, but not officially issued or implemented in the same year. It was agreed to include laws or policies officially issued and included in the Official Gazette and document the date of their official issuance. As well as the commencement date of its implementation if it is done in the same year. Participants also suggested that a special section be added to additional information related to social protection that member states might wish to add (to enhance understanding of the reform referred to, and not necessarily for addition in the edited final text of the annual summary). On the other hand, the representative of Oman suggested that the first draft of the digest be prepared in Arabic (if possible), and then shared with the group members for review and feedback before being prepared in English.

10. Ms. Mona Fattah Vahidi, Social Affairs Officer, gave a presentation on the first electronic draft of the social protection platform for the Arab region, which ESCWA is developing to be a single window for access to information and good practices related to social protection as well as an entry point for peer learning and exchange for policymakers, experts and researchers in the Arab region. Ms. Vahidi started the presentation by referring to the results of the e-survey that the group members undertook in their ninth meeting in Muscat in February 2024. The results of the said survey were taken into account during the preparation of the electronic draft of the platform. In this meeting, the platform was live presented and its main services, functions, and content including a variety of publications, news, courses, and tools about and for the Arab region were showcased. Furthermore, she explained that the platform aims to facilitate access to information from official sources about national social protection programmes in the Arab countries as well as their respective reform paths, self-assessment tools and methods, and in-depth analysis for policymakers and programme managers interested in enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of their social protection system or programme. More importantly, the platform will also provide a dedicated space for exchange and interaction between members of the EGSPR.

11. The EGSPR members showed great interest in the e-platform for social protection in the Arab region and commended the progress made by ESCWA in the design of the platform and its home pages. They suggested some minor additions and amendments, especially concerning linking the platform to the official electronic pages of ministries or funds and concerned authorities in member states, as well as allowing team members to upload some national reports and publications on the platform or share them with the rest of the countries through a special forum for the virtual exchange of information and knowledge, and making it exclusive to the group members and secretariat. At the end of the discussion, Ms. Vahidi stressed the need to consider the feedback made by the EGSPR members, to continue building the platform and keep communication with them open on the subject.

## **B. Session 2: Country profiles and social protection reform reports**

12. This session was facilitated by Mr. Raafat Shafiq, Advisor to the Minister of Social Solidarity for Social Safety Net Support Programs, Executive Director of Takaful and Karama Programmes, and Egypt representative in the group. He set the stage for the session by giving a brief overview of the ongoing process of preparing the Social Protection Country Profile and Reform Report in Egypt. He reported that the local collaborator had completed the drafting of chapters I and II, which had been reviewed by the concerned team in the Ministry of Social Solidarity as well as the ESCWA social protection team. The local collaborator team is expected to finalize chapters III and IV in the coming weeks so that the formulation of the action plan for the implementation of the country profile recommendations will begin right after immediately. Mr. Chafik then gave the floor to the representative of Mauritania to report on the progress made in the preparation of the country profile.

13. Mr. Ahmadou Adahi Khteirah, Secretary General of the Ministry of Social Affairs, Child and Family of Mauritania, brief the meeting about the national process of preparing the "Country Comprehensive Profile of Social Protection Systems and Reform Report in Mauritania". He stressed that the Mauritanian government,

especially the Ministry of Social Affairs, Child and Family, and the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, considers this work a serious step towards building a comprehensive and fair social protection system that does not leave any one behind and that the outputs of this work will be at the heart of the national reforms and plans developed by the Strategic Priorities Implementation Monitoring Unit of the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic. Mr. Khteira added that the preparation of the country profile report has served as a platform for national dialogue, knowledge sharing, and consensus-building. It allowed for the gathering of key stakeholders who may not have had the opportunity to cooperate in this way before, reinforcing a sense of ownership and ensuring that the proposed social protection reforms are in line with the needs and aspirations of Mauritanian society. The results and outputs of this process have also been largely relied upon in the preparation of the National Social Protection Strategy, which is currently being finalized. At the end of the intervention, Mr. Khteira thanked ESCWA for its support in strengthening the social protection systems and ensuring the well-being of all residents in Mauritania.

### **C. Session 3: Indirect functions of social protection (Part II) Options for designing social protection to promote economic equality**

14. This session was devoted to resuming the discussion that began at the ninth expert group meeting of the EGSPR. Mr. Schaefer gave a visual presentation on social protection design options to promote economic equality. The presentation began by highlighting the first (ending poverty) and tenth (reducing inequality) goals of the Sustainable Development Goals and their related targets and interlinkages. The presentation then focused on contribution-based insurance on lifecycle risk coverage. The presentation focused on illustrating how a comprehensive aggregation of contributions across all income groups can significantly increase the resources available for social protection while at the same time redistributing income between high-income earners (and therefore high-income contributors to social insurance schemes) and low-income earners (those with marginal ability to contribute to any social insurance system). He explained how comprehensive social protection systems, if properly developed, could allow for a higher degree of financial redistribution in general. Mr. Schaefer stated that the presentation aimed to explore the views of the members of the EGSPR on the subject, especially as it will be the focus of the 2025 Equality Report prepared by ESCWA and some partners, as well as the Fourth Arab Forum for Equality.

15. The members of the group welcomed the topic for discussion in the annual report on equality and stressed the importance of the report presenting practical proposals that are implementable and based on accurate scientific analysis to achieve ESCWA's proposal for a gradual transformation towards inclusive social protection systems that promote equality through inclusive social insurance contributions and fair taxes on the one hand and targeting within universal social protection on the other, taking into account the circumstances and specificity of each country.

## **III. Organization of work**

### **A. Date and venue**

16. The meeting was organized by the ESCWA's Social Protection Team on Wednesday, 5 June 2024, at the Semiramis Intercontinental Hotel in Cairo, as well as online via the Zoom platform.

### **B. Attendance**

17. The meeting was attended by twenty-seven participants from the EGSPR representing Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, and Tunisia. In addition to a representative of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and representatives of ESCWA's Social Protection Team.

## Annex I\*

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\* Issued as submitted.

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## Annex II

### Meeting Agenda

Wednesday 5 June 2024		
Cairo Time (UTC+3)		
15.30–15.35	5 minutes	<p><b>Opening</b></p> <p>Mr. Marco Schaefer, Chief, Social Protection Team, ESCWA</p>
15.35–16.00	25 minutes	<p><b>First session: ESCWA projects on social protection</b></p> <p><u>Moderator:</u> Mr. Marco Schaefer, Head of the Social Protection Team, ESCWA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First electronic draft of social protection, Ms. Mona Fattah, Social Affairs Officer, ESCWA.</li> <li>• Draft report forms submitted to the Annual Summary of Social Protection Reforms in the Arabic Region, 2024 (Volume III), Mr. Marco Schaefer.</li> <li>• Questions and Answers at ESCWA.</li> </ul>
16.00–16.20	15 minutes	<p><b>Session II: Country profiles and social protection reform reports</b></p> <p><u>Moderator:</u> Mr. Raafat Shafiq, Social Protection Advisor, Ministry of Social Solidarity, Egypt</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The landscape and prospects for social protection in Mauritania: an overview of technical cooperation with ESCWA, Mr. Salek Gharib, Director of Studies, Cooperation and Follow-up, Ministry of Social Action, Childhood and Family.</li> </ul>
	5 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Question and Answer.</li> </ul>
16.20–16.40	15 minutes	<p><b>Session III: Indirect Social Protection Functions (Part II) - Social Protection Design Options to Promote Economic Equity</b></p> <p><u>Moderator:</u> Ms. Mona Fattah, ESCWA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Looking Beyond Vulnerability and Coverage: Key Social Protection Design Options to Reduce Economic Inequality, Mr. Marco Schaefer, ESCWA.</li> </ul>
	5 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Question and Answer.</li> </ul>
16.40–16.50	10 minutes	<p><b>The way forward and the conclusion of the meeting</b></p>