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Social protection policies in the Middle East and North African region (MENA): new priorities, new debates

About this research

Governments and international development agencies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are taking a greater interest in issues of social welfare and social protection. The turbulent events of the “Arab spring” have only served to heighten the need for this. Yet, there is little clarity as to what social protection might mean or how it might be organised in a region which has, so far, not developed a clear political rationale for equality and social rights.

This policy brief presents research undertaken by Dr Rana Jawad (University of Bath) which began in 2000 into the social welfare systems in the MENA region. It offers a broad mapping of the institutional structures that underpin social policy there. In addition to long-standing programmes of universal food and fuel subsidies, the research highlights the complex interplay of informal social assistance for vulnerable groups who cannot work and employment-based welfare provision which gives preference to male and public sector workers. In consequence, welfare systems in the region primarily address the symptoms rather than the causes of poverty.

The current policy move in MENA is towards unconditional cash transfers for the poor. However, this offers only a limited solution to the social issues facing the region. The emerging social protection discourse, led by various international development agencies (including, the World Bank, the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Development Programme), must avoid becoming a catch-all umbrella term for targeted social assistance programmes which are more focused on short term consumption smoothing. It is argued that there is an urgent need to develop comprehensive and integrated social policies which promote social cohesion and equality.

A number of recommendations are made for the development of new social policies in the region, and the role civil and religious activism can potentially play.

Key findings

The research found that:

- Other than universal food and fuel subsidies, the welfare systems of the region have historically either been employment-based social security favouring male and public sector workers; or a combination of in-kind and in-cash social assistance for vulnerable social groups that are dominated by female-headed households and orphans. As a result, two-thirds of MENA populations do not have any form of formal social security.
- Kinship ties, community and religious organisations play a key role in providing emergency social assistance to those who have no recourse to formal state-based welfare benefits. They also run large networks of hospitals, health clinics, schools and universities which charge fees.
- Most governments in MENA favour policies that emphasise economic and human capacities development through mainly private-sector investment. This means that social welfare considerations are mainly focused on alleviating the symptoms rather than causes of poverty.
- International organisations such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme exercise a major influence on social policy agendas, towards targeted social assistance for the poor.
- The new agenda for social policy in the region is focused on the provision of social safety nets and unconditional cash transfers for the poor, with only very limited emphasis on measures to promote social cohesion or social rights. Community and religious organisations have the potential to act as valuable contributors to a more comprehensive and integrated social policy agenda.

Research findings in context

Dr Jawad's research has mapped out the institutional configuration of social welfare provision in the MENA region. This has involved detailing formal public interventions in the social welfare sphere - their objectives, modes of delivery and evaluation - and has focused in depth on three specific country case studies - Lebanon, Turkey and Iran. This research is of clear importance for poverty-reduction and social protection policies that are of concern to national governments, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international development organisations.

The contemporary context of social policy in the region may be described as follows:

Whilst Middle Eastern countries profess to respect core values of human development, justice and prosperity for all their citizens, their social policy objectives display a primary concern with economic development and national economic growth. Social concerns appear to play only a subsidiary role in public policy. This means that social inequalities as well as inadequate access to vital social services remain key features of many countries in the region.

All countries in the region have in place public social protection systems that combine labour market programmes, social insurance programmes, and social assistance programmes. State-provided benefits tend to be universal (such as family allowances or food subsidies) or contribution-based, whilst those provided by the NGO sector tend to be means-tested. Although social security coverage rates tend to be higher in the MENA region in comparison to the rest of Africa and Asia, actual coverage can vary widely from 8% in Yemen to 87% in Libya. This is due to the structure of the labour market (for example, public or private sector) and the institutional arrangements that cover different categories of workers. It is estimated by the World Bank that only one-third of MENA populations are enrolled in formal social security schemes. This low rate contrasts with the fact that some MENA countries are among the richest in the world.

The consequences of the existing welfare systems of the MENA region are that socially deprived groups, who are not in receipt of employment-based social security, rely



on social safety nets such as public works, food or fuel subsidies, cash transfers and social funds. However, these social assistance programs are based on a philosophy of poverty relief - addressing the symptoms and not the causes of poverty - which is not part of a wider, more coherent strategy for social cohesion and social rights. There is little monitoring and evaluation of these programmes. Hence, there are duplications between programs, leakages that reduce the benefits received by the poor and vulnerable, and ineffective distribution systems.

For these reasons, the research has also focused on social welfare assistance programmes delivered by NGOs which are already in operation in the region. These have highlighted how NGOs and community based groups mobilise spontaneously around issues of social deprivation, and have amassed a great deal of experience in the provision of social assistance. Often they rely on religiously-based fund-raising activities, such as during the month of Ramadan, or they invoke religious teachings on helping the orphans and supporting the family as the basic unit of society. Though such grassroots activism may sometimes be regarded as primitive or potentially political in nature, particularly where the group in question is an organisation with a strong religious background, this research highlights examples of good practice and how such forms of local activism may help to build civic values and good practice examples for future social policy making.

Policy implications

It is helpful to consider the policy implications of the research at a sub-regional level in terms of three country groups: the oil-rich Arab Gulf states and Iran, the North African countries, the Levant countries. Before considering the key policy implications for each sub-region, there are some general points that need to be considered:

- Government policies in MENA should move away from definitions of poverty as a phenomenon alleviated by social assistance programmes. Instead new conceptualisations of the social contract need to be developed, based on a view of social rights which guarantees citizens access to welfare provision beyond the family.
- Government social policies should be expanded beyond targeted social assistance, subsidies and unconditional cash transfers, which for the extremely poor are viable options only in the short and medium term.

- Whilst laudable, the emerging discourse of social protection does not as yet address broad issues of social inequality in the MENA region and remains focused on consumption smoothing.
- Religious parties and movements have emerged as key actors in the social welfare sphere in MENA. They have broad based support and several decades of welfare experience behind them. They can contribute to the development of future social policies.

At a sub-regional level, the key policy implications are the following:

- In the oil-rich Arab and Persian Gulf countries, which have funded social and welfare services from oil wealth, government policy needs to move away from the Rentier state model and devise policies that support and utilise the productive human capital of their economies. In this way, a greater emphasis may be placed on citizenship and social rights (as opposed to state benevolence) as the foundation for future social policies.
- In the North African region, constitutional reform needs to be carried out swiftly so that there can be real economic growth and a reduction in traditional regional inequalities. There is a stark urban-rural divide in these countries which has implications for social and economic policies. The emergence of Islamic political parties attests to the deep rooted links between religion and social welfare in MENA. Social policy can and should seek to harness the positive contribution of religious values and activism, since these are a vital dimension of public action in the social welfare sphere.
- In the Levant region, for the time being, there is a security crisis which will no doubt focus efforts towards humanitarian and emergency aid. Social policies need to support social cohesion and nation building efforts. Universal social welfare provision can be an important way of healing civil rifts. In Turkey there is renewed emphasis on family-based and philanthropic social welfare provision, prompting concern about the possibilities for a social rights-based system there.

(Israel has a qualitatively different welfare system from the other countries discussed in this brief, and is not covered here.)

Key message from the research

In the countries of the MENA region, the overarching policy orientation is towards universal food and fuel subsidies, targeted social assistance for the poor, and a limited employment-based social insurance system. As a result, the focus of policy is on mitigating the needs of socially vulnerable groups; not on addressing the causes of social and economic inequalities. This situation has been challenged by the turbulent events of the Arab spring. **An earnest discussion of rights, duties and social solidarity is now the most urgent social policy issue this region faces.**

Brief methodology

The research reported in this policy brief was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It was primarily qualitative in nature, encompassing a large number of in-depth interviews with state officials, non-governmental organisations and service-users in a large number of countries spanning Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Tunisia. The populations covered were both Muslim and Christian since the research focused primarily on Arab populations. Secondary data from the World Bank, UNDP, International Labour Organisation and International Social Security Association on social welfare expenditures in the countries in question was also collected as part of this research.

Contact the researcher:

For more information about this research please contact:

Dr Rana Jawad
Department of Social & Policy Sciences
University of Bath
Email: r.jawad@bath.ac.uk
www.bath.ac.uk/sps/staff/rana-jawad/

More about this research:

Jawad, R., 2013. Reinstating Social Policy in the Arab World: Some New Analytical Perspectives on Religion and Social Citizenship. In: Parker, J., Ashencaen Crabtree, S. and Azman, A., eds. *Social Welfare Responses to the Consequences of Civil Unrest in the Muslim World*. London: Routledge.

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(Forthcoming, 2014) *Social Protection Policies in the North African Region*, Consultancy Report for the African Development Bank and International Development Research Centre (Egypt)

The MENA Social Policy Network is a recently established University of Bath Institute for Policy Research (IPR) network, providing a first port of call for information on social policy and social welfare-related topics in the MENA region. It promotes: academic research in relation to social policy in MENA; information on social welfare issues for use by the wider public; and academic resources for university level students in the subject areas of social policy and social welfare in MENA. Visit the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) network in social policy online at: www.bath.ac.uk/ipr/our-networks/middle-east-social-policy/ for more information.

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