



ISSPF Regional Conference on Inclusive Social Security: Towards a Working Agenda in MENA Region

Summary Report

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1 First panel summary: IFI reforms and their impacts on social security policies in the MENA region

The session opened with Ameni Ben Sik Ali (TOE) introducing the session and its objectives. First, to share regional experiences of how IFIs have negatively impacted social protection, and second identify ways to collaborate and resist these impacts and push for alternatives. Sahar Mechmech (CAFJ) introduced the draft results of the “Crossed-Looks” on social protection reforms in MENA that TOE is preparing. Then, Lea Yammine (CeSSRA) shed light on the experience of Lebanon with IFIs and social protection and suggested opportunities for CSOs to work collaboratively and accumulatively for gradual change to combat the impact of IFIs. After that, Ali Amouzaii (ATTAC Maroc) exposed how IFIs, particularly the IMF, dismantled the universal character of social protection in Morocco and presented the annual meeting of the IMF-WB group in Marrakech as an opportunity for MENA to revive work on IFI’s responsibilities.

1.1 Main conclusions and statements about IFI’s role and reforms, and their impacts in MENA

International financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank have consistently asserted that their loan conditions and policy recommendations are grounded in meticulous, context-specific research aimed at addressing countries’ balance of payment and development issues. Nonetheless, the IFIs’ actions have contradicted their stated goals, as they have dismantled existing inclusive social protection systems and mechanisms that guarantee social security as a right, through austerity and other reforms.

In terms of social security policies, **two key IFIs driven reforms involve:**

- The reduction or complete phase-out of universal food and energy subsidies: In promoting a gradual or complete removal of subsidies, IFI is destroying a system which aims at bridging the gap between actual cost and the income of most people. Paying for the difference between rates and prices of “market value” vs what is affordable is an important social protection tool in a context of high dependence on international markets for essential goods in MENA.
- The implementation of targeting safety-net and cash transfer programs: These programs provide much lower coverage and are characterised by significant exclusion errors, mainly due to inefficient proxy-means-tests (PMT) coupled with inaccurate social registries, both designed by IFIs.

These two major reforms have affected people’s social security rights in MENA countries, particularly disadvantaged vulnerable groups. They also erode people’s access to fundamental human rights, including adequate nutrition, quality healthcare, and a decent standard of living.

Regarding **other specific reforms influenced by IFIs** and their impacts on social security systems, the panel also discussed:

- Budgetary austerity measures recommended by the IFIs, including those related to the public wage bill cuts, do not consider the need for recruitment in the often understaffed and underfinanced public sector of health and education. This has aggravated inequalities in terms of the availability and affordability of these public services.

- Labour market policies influenced by IFIs: they have seen decreased public expenditure on social protection, leading to a shift from formal to informal employment sectors which contributed to increased poverty rates.
- In terms of pension reforms, IFIs prioritise fiscal balance, focusing on diversifying sources of income to generate more revenue and increasing the retirement age to strike financial and quantitative balances at the expense of the inclusiveness of social security systems.

Regarding these influences and impacts, the panel identified two key messages on IFI interference with social security reforms:

- ❖ IFIs should stop pushing States under financial pressure to neglect their human rights responsibilities, especially their obligations to achieve social security rights.
- ❖ MENA States should defend their right to development which includes the right to define their development models including their social security policies.

1.2 Alternatives and recommendations we should promote in MENA:

Numerous alternative approaches have been proposed to replace the paradigm of IFIs. At the core, we should stand for universal and inclusive lifecycle social security schemes as the only system capable of realising social security rights.

To achieve this objective, a set of alternative policies and measures in MENA have been discussed:

- In the short term, not removing subsidies since social security reforms are not reaching all segments of people and are not ensuring the protection of social rights.
- In the short term, improving urgently targeting programs and their mechanisms. In terms of beneficiaries' coverage, these programs should be urgently expanded to respond to the impacts of the multiple crises that MENA countries currently face. Benefit levels should be indexed to inflation or other social and economic factors/shocks to be adequate. These targeting programs should be based on human rights to cover all risks. They should not rely only on cash transfers but should be accompanied by other social services and goods to respond to specific needs. When inclusive social security programs are implemented, targeting programs could remain complementary to better respond to the specific needs of categories of right-holders.
- Increasing fiscal space by creating a more equitable progressive tax system for implementing progressively sustainable and inclusive social security systems. This is also crucial to not rely on IFI funding and its harmful conditionalities.
- Starting by implementing progressive universal benefits according to universal floors.
- Rectifying income disparities in parallel with implementing social redistribution efforts, through the promotion of reforms which aim at providing decent work and salary increases for example.
- Addressing root causes of social security issues such as dependency on international markets and indebtedness, by reinforcing local production capacities for providing essential goods (medicines, food, energy, etc.).

1.3 Challenges we should take into account in MENA

- In a financial crisis context, the presence and influence of International Financial Institutions in the region have been substantial. IFIs often provide financial assistance, policy recommendations, and technical expertise to governments in the region leading to a strong temptation to perpetuate a model of funding through loans and conditional grants, even though this model is neither sustainable nor equitable at present to address the needs.
- The discourse of "There is no fiscal space" prevails in many spheres, including political, administrative, media, and academic circles, and must be combated with consistent and adapted recommendations on budget policies.
- Access to information is very limited. On one hand, IFIs often work behind closed doors when negotiating with governments, and on the other, national databases are not always easily accessible or reliable. Regarding this issue, the outputs and recommendations which emerged during the 3rd panel of the conference could be used to address specific data needs for challenging IFI influence and agenda in MENA.
- Furthermore, there's an absence of a common platform or network for stakeholders involved in the field of social protection, resulting in a lack of cooperation among affected communities, unions, academics, civil society organisations, social protection practitioners, public authorities at the different levels (national, regional). To address these issues, there is a pressing need to establish a realistic vision of regional collaborations and practical action plans for facing IFI influence in developing synergies between stakeholders in MENA.

1.4 Main opportunities and strategic actions to engage a common advocacy agenda in MENA on IFI impacts

The importance of networking at a regional level has been emphasised for fighting against IFI reforms and for promoting alternatives, which are two sides of the same coin in the framework of the resistance to IFI.

In the short-term, IMF-WB annuals in Morocco is a relevant political window for alliance building and for continuing to build a strategic and practical agenda in MENA around several working agendas:

- A MENA agenda on social security that aims to amplify a counter-narrative to IFI paradigms. There's a battle of ideas taking place in contexts where IFI narratives became dominant discourses, nearly convincing people that MENA countries cannot afford universal systems. Therefore, advancing concrete arguments and means to establish such systems can reinvigorate the legitimate popular demands of the various uprisings in our region. This includes a reappropriation of our glossary of terms and jargon which is currently influenced and shaped by IFI.
- A MENA agenda that aims to harness counter-expertise capacities and increase cross-learning on tools to resist IFIs' reforms. There's a real research interest in demonstrating the ineffectiveness of the current social security systems in compensating for the impact of IFI reforms. In other panels of the conference, some experiences were inspiring in producing evidence-based data that show IFI failures in MENA (ex: PMT in Jordan). This battle involves presenting compelling arguments for backing the resistance to the specific IFIs' reforms in the local contexts but also advancing evidence-based campaigns about alternatives and success stories in the region which are challenging IFI paradigms/reforms.

- A MENA agenda that aims to invest in research regarding the feasibility and benefits of universal coverage for building alternative financing to break out of the dependency on IFI funding and conditionalities. Sharing capacities to promote fiscal space is a must in MENA where budget austerity affects social spending and where tax injustices in general are insufficiently covered and addressed at national and regional levels.
- A MENA agenda that enforces and enhances a common voice and impact in terms of advocacy on IFI's role and responsibility for avoiding dispersed voices and efforts towards regional or international stakeholders/targets/frameworks. Organisational efforts should be cross-sectional, involving local, national, and regional actors for regional advocacy which reflects but also better articulates the changes we want to reach at the different levels.
- A MENA agenda that includes strategic action for making the case of social security rights violations in MENA. There is a battle to be won through advocacy or even litigation on the responsibility of States, but also a battle to be built on the responsibility of the IFIs concerning the international conventions on economic and social rights.
- Finally, to ensure social security in the region, a collective MENA agenda should include cooperation among countries to build regional and international financial strategies that support inclusive social security programmes. Cooperation between countries is also crucial for reinforcing regional trade and enhancing local production capacities in strategic sectors such as medicines, food, or energy.

2 Second panel summary: Making the case for inclusive social protection beyond poverty targeting alleviation in the MENA region

Background

Poverty and inequality are enduring structural socioeconomic problems affecting populations in MENA. Income inequality, unequal taxation, unequal ownership of physical and financial assets, and unequal labour opportunities are among the numerous factors that define poverty and inequality. In MENA, poverty and inequality are further layered by gender, disability, legal status in the country, and family affiliations with structures of power (political and/or financial). These inequalities intersect and exacerbate one another throughout the life cycle and have an impact on rights across multiple areas: income, work and employment, social protection and care, education, health and nutrition, and participation and decision-making.

Poverty targeting is among the preferred solutions to poverty alleviation in MENA by international donors and most governments in the region. Poverty targeting is implemented through cash transfer programs that select beneficiaries by estimating their income and welfare. Despite its popularity within social policy circles, it has been demonstrated that poverty-targeted programs are prone to inclusion and exclusion errors and are often subject to management and corruption problems. As a result, these programs often fail to reach many of the people they aim to cover, regardless of how accurate, reliable, and efficient, the targeting methodology may claim to be.

The multidimensional nature of poverty and inequality are among the reasons that call for integrated approaches beyond poverty targeting. Relegating social policies to the margins or relying on civil society to cover existing gaps cannot be a long-term solution to reduce inequality and poverty in MENA.

2.1 Content of the session

Chaired and moderated by Maria del Mar Logrono, Senior Advisor on Access to Justice and Inclusive Social Protection at ARDD, the two-hour session asked participants to make the case of how multilayered and inclusive social policies and protection schemes are, in their experience, potentially better equipped to respond to these structural challenges than poverty targeting approaches.

Among the questions the session sought to discuss were:

- What are the synergies between non-contributory social protection, labour inclusion and the principles of decent work for ending poverty and reducing inequality?
- How does social security contribute to reducing poverty in MENA?
- What are positive experiences in the region, or elsewhere, that can guide a paradigm shift from poverty targeting into inclusive social protection policies and schemes?

The session was structured in two rounds of interventions and offered the following analytical points:

2.1.1 1st set of speakers round:

Shatha Abousrouf, from the Arab Forum for the Rights of Persons with Disability, highlighted two critical points. The first point addressed how public policies intentionally classify citizens under certain categories that legitimise exclusionary practices and keep certain segments of society from accessing

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social security systems. Her presentation also raised the issue of who and how we decide poverty is measured within a country – the poor themselves rarely contribute to discussions or the setting of indicators that say this is what poverty means here or these are the indicators of poverty.

Consequently, this gap calls for a need to improve participation and inclusion of marginalised voices at the policy level to reach standards of meaningful contribution. In this context, it is critical to understand who speaks for the ‘poor’ and who is the voice of the vulnerable (the disabled, the elderly, and children).

Farah Al Shami, Senior Fellow leading the social protection program, Arab Reform Initiative, provided an overview of social protection in MENA. First, the presentation identified three dimensions that help explain the prevalence of poverty targeting in the region: political agendas/regimes dictating who are beneficiaries of services; lack of a strong social contract on both sides - lack of citizenship translates into unwillingness to pay taxes and on the other side the state is not willing to be the provider (SP not regarded as a right to all but as aid or relief); and how poverty targeted programmes especially in corrupt societies or governments have large room for corruption and clientelism.

Her presentation then moves to analyse the humanitarian-development nexus and how social safety nets are a key tension point. On this point, the role of IFIs was identified as negative, since they are directly providing money that renews cycles of social safety nets, preventing universal social protection programmes from happening. Most safety net programs are reactive, small-sighted, and small-scale, and are wasting development money not on protection but intervention-based programmes. Furthermore, proxy means testing mechanisms are an expensive form of targeting plagued with inclusion and exclusion errors that start with the design process and abound in its implementation, leading to furthering social tensions, rather than addressing them.

Imene Cherif, MENA Regional Program Manager, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Focused on the relationship between subsidies and poverty targeting programmes. She highlighted how poverty targeting programmes are designed to compensate or replace subsidy programmes, but in turn, they put strain on budgets while achieving little results due to structural deficiencies concerning high inclusion and exclusion rates, lack of efficient coordination in the design and implementation of programs among government agencies, donors, etc. As a result, while entire segments of the population are harmed by lifting subsidies, poverty-targeting programs can't meet the needs.

2.1.2 2nd set of Speakers round:

Justine Cherrier, Regional Economic Recovery Coordinator at the Danish Refugee Council, addressed the relationship between displaced people and social protection systems. Her intervention underscored the need for social protection systems to be more inclusive and receptive towards displaced individuals.

Conflict and climate change are now the major drivers of displacement – particularly internal displacement. Refugees and internally displaced people need to be provided with durable solutions beyond quick cash assistance. This requires legal and administrative practical steps, part of a comprehensive and inclusive framework for social protection.

Rana Al Ansari, National Social Protection Coordinator, International Labour Organization, emphasised the need for income security across all lifecycle stages amid regional prevalence of low coverage, with some only covered by one social protection benefit. Two national studies provide some room for optimism: an ILO study in Palestine showed that it is possible to combine cash assistance programmes with universal coverage, while a current cash transfer pilot program in Lebanon for persons with disabilities shows the success of inclusive policy design processes.

Adam Coogle, Deputy Director (MENA Division), Human Rights Watch, focused on the findings of their recent study, *Automated Neglect*, regarding exclusion errors in current poverty targeting programs in Jordan. Having the most sophisticated systems and algorithms in place is not a guarantee of enhanced poverty targeting. According to their study, many errors occur because the systems fail to understand the realities of impoverished individuals and their issues, thus disqualifying people for owning a car that is less than 5 years old or misunderstanding how expenses and income are reported.

Exclusion errors in poverty targeting programs, no matter how sophisticated the methodology may look, in the end, pit families against one another and erode social cohesion, potentially fuelling social tension and undermining wider public support for public institutions.

2.2 Main Conclusions and Way Forward: Key Takeaways

- There is a need for a paradigm shift that prioritises the adoption of universal social protection floors. This will enable a move away from poverty targeting to universal coverage. People should not feel stigmatised for receiving support but rather be entitled to ask for their legitimate rights.
 - As part of this shift, governments need to be convinced that their current paradigm of equating social protection to the provision of conditional cash assistance does not solve the problem. Part of the paradigm shift should focus on creating meaningful social protection opportunities for people.
 - A paradigm shift should highlight the importance of social justice and how the marginalised and vulnerable deserve a system that recognises their individual needs within the public sphere, which is currently not in place.
- Ensuring steady minimum income security across the lifecycle is critical to start rectifying current inequalities and renewing a social contract.
- The role of Tax Justice: Domestic resource mobilisation through, for instance, revisiting the taxation system, is a critical step to ensure the feasibility of this transformation.
- Renewing the social contract in each country in a way that establishes roles and responsibilities for each party, and that it is inclusive of all populations in the country.
- Complementing social protection with concrete labour policies aimed at enhancing decent working conditions and thus achieving the ultimate goal of social justice.
- Ensuring accountability of international actors, in particular international financial institutions, in providing the means to enhance adequate social protection through rights-based and realistic social policy initiatives that target national realities and not hamper national efforts in that direction. For instance, cash-for-work programs should not be a synonym for precarious work that hinders conversation concerning decent work opportunities.
- Need to enhance coordination between donors and governments to achieve a common social protection agenda aligned with national priorities that uphold a rights-based development agenda.

3 Third panel summary: Data accessibility and the need for inclusive social security in the MENA region

This panel started with key interventions on the topic by Dr. May Gadalla, Statistics Manager at Economic Research Forum (ERF) and Dr. Tareq Abuelhaj, Senior Associate at Development Pathways.

3.1 Key Challenges and findings in the region

- Household surveys are a key source of data in Arab states, however, not all countries conduct the survey regularly or allow them to be openly shared.
- Data from surveys on household expenditure are usually used for designing cash transfer programmes that target the poor, which explains its poor outcomes.
- Accessing information can often only be done through statistical organisations or international donors.
- Labour Market surveys are another useful source of data about social security that is conducted more frequently and is more accessible.
- As some social protection programmes change and shift, progress on data collection or validity of existing data gets affected. For example, in Jordan Takaful and Karama were once one programme but now they are separate so need to think about how original data on these projects can be used in a nuanced way now.
- Palestine sets a good example of sharing household and labour market survey data.

Refugees:

- Accurate data on refugees is another challenge, as there is no accurate data on numbers or conditions that people are living in.

Conventional vs exceptional programmes:

- When we are looking at data need to consider the impact of exceptional programmes i.e. in response to COVID-19 and how we can measure the impact and look for data on exceptional programmes.

Key data sets are needed for the proper evaluation of social security programs.

- First is expenditure, what is the cost of the programs and who is paying for these programs?
- Second is who are the beneficiaries, what are their characteristics, who is being covered and how many people? Coverage is arguably the most important indicator.
- What are the benefits that an individual gets, compared with the minimum of the national standard like the poverty line or minimum wages? When we compare, we start to get an idea of the efficiency of these standards.
- What are the positive and negative impacts of social inclusion, e.g. mistakes of exclusion and targeting? In the MENA region, data on impact is more scarce and harder to reach than the other aspects.

Financial ministries in Arab states hate researchers, so getting information is not easy because:

- They will often print and scan data as pdf so that you cannot read the information easily.

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- Most financial ministries in the region are not providing this information, while they are obliged to by law.
- While financial ministries refuse to share data openly, they share it with the IMF. Therefore, you can find some of this data on the IMF website, but it is limited.

Again, a lack of access to data results in further errors in poverty-targeting programmes.

- I.e., programmes that run off the assumption that if people have certain assets (car or mobile phone) they are in a certain wealth band, so households will hide these assets before a survey is conducted.
- Household surveys increase the burden on the family to conduct surveys and put pressure on the social contract between the government and the population.
- In Arab countries the standards for social protection are hidden, instead, people have to fill out forms without knowing why or what the benefit may be.
- We should rely on demographic information that cannot be hidden.

3.2 Opportunities and alternatives for the MENA region

NGOs and charities:

- NGOs and charities on the ground have substantial data due to their strong reach within communities. However, it is not kept in a statistical form or has good quality baseline data that could be used for analysis or as evidence. Therefore, building the capacity of NGOs to utilise their existing data can be critical.

The Ministries of Social Development (MoSD) have started to consider the importance of evaluating the impact of their programmes on recipients.

- This presents an avenue for accessing data and building relationships with certain ministries/institutions with high-quality data.

Phone surveys:

- Phone surveys present one alternative as they are rapid, inexpensive to run, and can be widespread.
- Phone surveys are a good methodology during an emergency for gathering information and data.

However, they have drawbacks in that they do not account for the technology divide in who has access to a phone line/mobile phone which will result in some sample bias.

Promote - Why is data and access to data important?

- We need statistics and data for social protection to evaluate programmes, study their efficiency and be able to develop new programmes or assistance.
- Data is important because it can stimulate the impact of these proposals or reforms on current plans, otherwise, we are calling for new programmes without evidence.

Learning from successful countries:

- Palestine is the best statistical organisation in the region, they provide clear data and data is accessible, of high quality and accurate.

Utilise ILO social protection data and SDGs:

Important reports are coming out through these institutions, that focus not only on the national levels but mostly disaggregated by age, gender, etc. We should rely on this data in the MENA region to see how programmes are doing.

Overcoming accessibility issues:

- Need to understand the ministries' language, otherwise we cannot have a dialogue. Without government access to produced data, we cannot speak their language.
- Need to ask questions about policies that are being implemented and how consistent they are with the data provided by governments. We need to capitalise on currently available data and learn how to utilise them.
- Keep pressure on accessing government data. Opportunity for CSOs, trade unions etc to promote fairer access to data.
- Refugees are a big talking point, need to ensure that refugee populations are included in the data.
- Jordan's unified registry is a good step forward but more needs to be done to include refugee populations for total accuracy.
- Pressure the government by producing our own data. There are ways to make our own data, synthetic databases, and publish it online. If governments don't like this data – then we demand them to give us their data if they want to challenge us.

However, in the long term, we need real data to have an efficient and fruitful dialogue.

Agenda for civil society organisations for better data:

- Use the agenda of the SDGs to demand fairer access to data, or to consider how data is used as a conventional tool – because this requires a quantitative-focused narrative.
- Greater participation of the poor/marginalised/impacted in determining poverty lines or highlighting realities.
- Mixed methods approach - the need for statisticians to combine both quantitative and qualitative surveys for more accurate data. A mixed methods approach will further help present the reality of the data.
- Challenge existing data: CSOs could make guidelines around the data that is produced or collected to enforce credibility and verification.
- Moving forward must highlight the political framework that the data sits within, data issues are political.
- Need an Arab movement on the right to access data, CSOs need to adopt critical visions to data production. ISSPF may be the entity to provide this.
- The movement/network may promote an annual shadow report on social justice to raise voices and improve access to data.
- Need to recognise the differences among countries in the region and the different approaches that governments take.

IFIs role:

- Must consider the role of IFIs and how the government will manipulate data for donation purposes. Data from the government may not be wholly accurate and often do not reflect the needs of the poor or the reality on the ground for people. The discourse of IFIs is therefore important when thinking about access to data.

4 Overall recommendations:

Concepts:

- Further collective conceptualisation is needed on where inclusive social security fits in the model of society we want and who will undertake this vision. We need to build knowledge in a regional group on the idea of justice from a political perspective.
- The social contract is at the core of social security, and we must have a unified vision of the social contract that we want.
- There is a crucial role to defend the receding role of the state in the region to keep and expand its social role through promoting tax justice, building inclusive social protection policies, reforming income distribution, creating decent jobs, and providing key public services in health and education.

Challenging the narrative through networks and politicising the public debate:

- There is a key need to shift the narrative around social security in the region and networks such as ISSPF are important to challenge this narrative and discourse, especially those promoted by the IFIs. We need to build a different narrative/discourse through an independent system/network.
- Explore new media channels such as online radio or podcasts that would be an informative tool for all citizens to gain information surrounding their rights to social security.
- Promote awareness campaigns and bring more of the human voices most affected by the current policies.
- Simplify data and information so that it is easily accessible for people to read and utilise.
- Labour unions need to be in the conversation and have their voices heard too.
- There is work to be done with decision-makers to make sure CSOs are present at negotiation tables and have a voice when it comes to loans or conditions provided by donors. We need to push for more public discussion around these loans.

Missing Knowledge and Data:

- Need to incorporate a mixed methods approach in our analysis so that the data reflects reality.
- When we don't have access to data, one alternative is to create our own data sets. We should work toward a cross-country database to create synthetic data sets to challenge governments that will not release data easily.
- Increase the role of CSO in the right for access to data in the MENA region.
- Open data is critical for reducing corruption, when you have access to data you can provide your own interpretation of the data.
- There should be increased advocacy for refugees to be visible and incorporated within the data that is accessible.
- Recognise the political framework within which the data is collected and where it sits.
- Produce shadow reports to increase monitoring and evaluation.
- To better counter the analysis coming from traditional organisations that we don't agree with, we need to understand their language and how they interpret data so that we have better arguments against them.

Overall recommendations

- We should be part of the production of knowledge, not wait for knowledge to be produced by government.
- We should have more knowledge created in a participatory way.

Other needs and areas of collaboration for CSOs:

- More regular events like the ISSPF regional conference are needed in the future to keep the collective regional discussions among CSOs and researchers.
- More discussions are needed to explore the different synergies CSOs have concerning the common challenges that we are facing in the region.
- We need to build the capacities of CSOs in collecting and visualising data.
- We should create an online Arab regional database for real social policies with accurate information and data.
- The role of Tax Justice: Tax is the next frontier of work that needs more attention to provide a missed key potential for fiscal space in our countries.
- We need more evidence on the failure of proxy means testing (PMT) in the MENA region to be able to push back.
- Need to focus more on disseminating knowledge smartly and visually.