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Building shock-responsive national social protection systems in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Executive summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building Shock-Responsive National Social Protection Systems in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region

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**BUILDING SHOCK-RESPONSIVE NATIONAL
SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS IN THE MIDDLE
EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA) REGION**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

'Building Shock-Responsive National Social Protection Systems in the MENA Region' is the third in a series of four knowledge products about non-contributory social protection in the MENA region, which are being produced as part of a partnership between the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) and the UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office (MENARO).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is confronted by significant challenges resulting from multiple shocks and complex emergencies: countries in the region face various risks in terms of natural disasters, including earthquakes, floods and drought; violent conflicts, such as in Syria, pose unprecedented challenges related to the scale of human displacement; and the breakdown of service provision caused by conflict is leading to the increasing prevalence of malnutrition and communicable diseases in Yemen.

Furthermore, recent social assistance reforms are shifting the provision of social protection, from being largely based on subsidies to new programmes that have not yet necessarily matched them in terms of coverage. More specifically, non-contributory social protection in the region has been shown to have limited coverage of poor and vulnerable working families with children, with significant gaps in specific groups such as children of pre-school age.

Considering these significant challenges, and in light of recent reforms, this study aims to provide an initial general assessment of opportunities and challenges for shock-responsive social protection in the MENA region. It centres on the following research questions: 1) What are the key considerations in building the resilience and shock-responsiveness of national social protection systems in MENA?; 2) Are child-sensitive and equitable social protection mechanisms sufficiently equipped to face shocks?; and 3) How can national social protection systems be better equipped to implement a humanitarian response to covariate shocks?

Methodology and limitations

Social protection is typically recognised as an important policy instrument to address idiosyncratic shocks, but recently a number of studies have sought to investigate how social protection systems can also be resilient and respond to covariate shocks. In this sense, recent findings suggest that social protection systems are more likely to be able to contribute towards addressing a crisis situation when they are well-established government-funded systems that rely on clear policies (and clear coordination mechanisms, including actors involved in emergency response), available emergency funds (and contingency plans), high coverage of populations and needs, operating with comprehensive data systems, with multiple payment providers and with strong implementation capacity (O'Brien et al. 2018b). Informed by the growing body of evidence on shock-responsive social protection systems, the main objective of this study is to identify opportunities and challenges for enhancing shock-responsiveness in the MENA region, by analysing the cases of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, State of Palestine, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

The criteria used for analysing these cases included the following:

- **Fiscal space and policy frameworks:** trends in social protection expenditure and source of funding (e.g. government, donors, other); availability of contingency/emergency funding (if any); national social protection and disaster management/climate change adaptation policy frameworks/laws and linkages (if any)
- **Coordination and preparedness:** national social protection coordination mechanisms (if any), reported gaps and opportunities; known emergency preparedness measures (if any)
- **Targeting and management information systems:** targeting methods used by the main flagship programme (and other relevant interventions) and trends in coverage; consideration of particularly vulnerable groups (e.g. refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), children, elderly people, people with disabilities) and vulnerability to shocks in beneficiary selection processes; registry coverage (including non-beneficiaries); reported data accuracy, accessibility (including data-sharing arrangements), currency and quality

- **Delivery mechanisms:** mechanisms used by the flagship programme and other relevant interventions; reported payment regularity of the flagship programme; availability of multiple distribution points/providers and/or electronic/mobile modes of payment
- **Implementation capacities:** number of staff, reported capacities and implementation gaps (if any)
- **Monitoring and evaluation (M&E):** reported M&E procedures and feedback into programme design (if any).

The analysis is based on a literature review complemented by results from a survey titled 'Assessing the Readiness of Social Protection Systems to Deliver Cash Transfers during an Emergency and UNICEF's Use of Cash Responses' (see Annex I for the detailed questionnaire used in the survey), designed and administered by UNICEF Headquarters to the respective Country Offices in the first quarter of 2018. Follow-up remote interviews were also held with Country Offices in June and July 2018.

In terms of the study's limitations, the number of cases and the sources available allow for a general assessment of the readiness of the systems; for a more in-depth analysis, interviews with multiple stakeholders would need to be conducted. Moreover, the study focuses on technical aspects, leaving out broader political economy considerations. Finally, the focus is on national-level programmes; therefore, interventions at the local and regional levels were not considered in the analysis, though they may be just as important (or even more so) in terms of shock response.

Therefore, while this study might provide insights into the trends of national programming choices that are relevant for shock-responsiveness, it does not in any way suggest that the programmes analysed here should be used in shock response, nor does it replace a thorough feasibility assessment, should this be considered an option.

Report structure

The literature review encompasses Chapters 1, 2 and 3. Chapter 1 presents the study's overall conceptual framework and a background literature review on shock-responsive social protection. Chapter 2 reviews evidence on system resilience in relation to different types of shocks (conflict, economic crisis and natural disasters). Chapter 3 further unpacks the key system and programme features that are highlighted in the literature as enabling responses to shocks through social protection. Chapter 4 comprises case studies covering Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, State of Palestine, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. Chapter 5 features the conclusion and recommendations. The annexes present the detailed questionnaire of the survey that was administered to UNICEF Country Offices and summarised overviews of the case studies.

Main findings

- The social protection systems reviewed have different levels of institutionalisation. At one end of the spectrum, some countries still do not rely on a social protection strategy, while at the other, there are systems embedded in legislation. Well-established systems are more likely to be more responsive to shocks, and having clear policies is key in this sense.
- The literature on shock-responsive social protection highlights that emergency-preparedness measures can include: having emergency operational manuals and training staff on them; having contingency funds; establishing contingency agreements with service providers; and the use of early-warning systems. However, the review of this study's cases found that such measures are still uncommon.
- The lack of comprehensive national social registries in the region is a key challenge in enhancing system responsiveness, and registry coverage varies significantly across cases. Still, some countries have made significant strides in creating programme databases that include information on a significant proportion of the population and/or on both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, which is important to enable scalability. Furthermore, Egypt, Jordan and the State of Palestine are also taking steps to build social registries, which are important tools for extending coverage beyond the target group of a specific programme.

- Fiscal space is a key consideration in making systems more shock-responsive, as inadequate funding hinders system scalability. The programmes reviewed in this study have generally been expanding their coverage and expenditure over time, but they still need to expand further to reach all poor and vulnerable people. Moreover, explicit contingency funds that could be rapidly mobilised for shock response were not identified.
- The major refugee crisis and huge numbers of IDPs in the region have highlighted the challenges to coordination between humanitarian and social protection actors. Overall, challenges have arisen in terms of harmonising the provision of services across different interventions, a distinct concern for refugee-hosting countries. Iraq is the only country analysed where the right to national social protection initiatives is granted to non-nationals. However, this access is limited in practice.
- Monitoring and evaluation of regular programmes is not very robust in most cases, leading to a gap in evidence-based policymaking. These procedures could also benefit from stronger management information systems.
- Implementation capacity is typically challenged by the precarious situation of programme staff, who in some cases are paid late or do not receive proper compensation for work-related expenses; these challenges can be particularly heightened at times of crisis.

Recommendations

- **Investments in preparedness and coordination are needed to enhance system resilience and responsiveness:** For countries that still do not have a broad social protection strategy, establishing clear social protection policies should be the first priority. Moreover, factoring in scalability in policies during times of crisis can enhance their responsiveness. Furthermore, improving coordination between social protection, disaster management and humanitarian actors, as well as strengthening emergency preparedness measures, can boost system resilience and responsiveness.
- **From programme databases to integrated social registries:** Countries need to expand the coverage of systems and registries to all poor, near-poor/vulnerable people and beyond, and carry out regular data assessments during times of stability, to understand the extent to which social protection databases are current, complete and relevant.
- **Ensuring the scalability of payment systems:** Mapping potential alternative payment providers and having contingency agreements with them is key, as is investing in technology to facilitate payment processes.
- **Towards sustainable public funding of rights-based and responsive systems:** Countries should provide public funding for the provision of regular social protection, and ensure that these funds are ring-fenced—particularly during times of austerity. Contingency funding could also be secured by governments and/or donors, Zakat Funds or insurance mechanisms. Moreover, it is crucial to review the fiscal disbursement flows of social protection and to address bottlenecks, particularly where they impact the timeliness of payments to beneficiaries and programme staff.
- **Developing M&E systems for evidence-based programming:** During times of stability, it is necessary to invest in the development of robust M&E systems that deliver necessary data for evidence-based programming. These can also include resilience-related indicators at the beneficiary and system levels.
- **Investing in implementation capacity to ensure system resilience and responsiveness:** It is crucial to ensure that social workers and programme staff are valued, incentivised and able to carry out their services under regular and extraordinary circumstances. A responsive system needs staff that are properly trained in: emergency preparedness and response, as well as in the use of different mechanisms that enable it (e.g. management information systems, alternative payment providers); and communicating programmatic decisions in potential responses to shocks.



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