

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

Committee on Social Development  
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**Activities of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform****Summary**

The Expert Group on Social Protection Reform (EGSPR) comprises senior representatives of government institutions in Arab countries involved in various areas of social protection, including social insurance, social assistance, health care, integrated registers, and information systems related to social protection. EGSPR was established at the request of the Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) at its twelfth session, held in Beirut on 8 and 9 October 2019, to support regional coordination and cooperation and the exchange of expertise on social protection issues, especially expanding the scope of social protection systems and improving their quality. EGSPR work areas are guided by the normative activities of the work programme of the ESCWA Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster, and in close coordination with other working groups to maximize the benefit of ESCWA multidisciplinary expertise.

The present document provides an overview of the EGSPR terms of reference and the activities it has undertaken since its establishment, in accordance with its mandate and work priorities. The Committee on Social Development is invited to take note of the progress made, and to guide the future work of the Group.

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## **Introduction**

1. Social protection is a human right. It is essential for preventing and alleviating poverty, ensuring minimum standards of living, and strengthening people's resilience to life risks and shocks. Social protection systems promote social cohesion and social justice, and are essential to building human capital and enhancing people's trust in their Governments.
2. The importance of social protection increases twofold during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the start of the pandemic, existing social protection systems have been expanded in some Arab countries to provide additional assistance to the poor, and cover vulnerable population groups. Despite this progress, the COVID-19 crisis has revealed multiple gaps and deficiencies in the provision of social protection and emphasized the need for further reforms, prompting many Arab countries to consider and review their social protection systems, with a view to expanding their coverage, improving their efficiency and quality, and ensuring effective access to all citizens, especially to health-care services. Most Arab countries have also adopted initiatives and programmes to strengthen emergency preparedness and response systems. In this context, significant opportunities are available for exchanging experiences, sharing knowledge, and ensuring collaboration between Arab countries.
3. In response to the need for increased collaboration and exchange of experiences on social protection issues in the Arab region, the Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), at the close of its twelfth session, held in Beirut on 8 and 9 October 2019, recommended forming an expert group to follow up on issues of social protection reform, and to enhance regional coordination and cooperation and the exchange of experiences in this field, especially in expanding the scope of social protection systems and improving their quality. ESCWA took the initiative to establish the Group and put forward terms of reference for its work.
4. In April 2020, the proposed terms of reference for the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform (EGSPR) were submitted to ministers of social affairs of ESCWA member States for approval, and to nominate a State representative (focal point) to the Group. As no comments were received from member States on the terms of reference, they were adopted and have been in force since then (annex I).
5. Seventeen member States nominated focal points for membership of the Group, comprising high-level policymakers working in the areas of social assistance, social insurance, labour, social development, statistics and international cooperation (annex II). ESCWA has assumed the role of EGSPR secretariat, organizes its meetings and publishes relevant material.
6. The establishment of the Group coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing negative economic and social effects. The Group played a pioneering and effective role in identifying best practices to strengthen social protection systems and transfer them to Arab countries after adapting them to national specificities. The present document reviews the activities of the Group since its inception, and provides proposals on areas for future collaboration.

### **I. Responsibilities of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform**

7. EGSPR responsibilities include the following:
  - (a) Strengthening relationships and collaboration in the field of social protection policies between Arab countries and with ESCWA;
  - (b) Promoting national discussions on the need to integrate and harmonize the various components of social protection systems, including social insurance, social assistance, health care, integrated registers and information systems;
  - (c) Strengthening regional and subregional cooperation to expand social protection systems and improve the delivery of their services, through the exchange of information among member States;

- (d) Ensuring that member States are aware of ongoing and planned ESCWA activities on social protection, and that ESCWA is also aware of member States' activities in this field;
- (e) Following up on issues related to social protection in the period between Committee sessions.

## **II. Activities of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform**

### **A. High-level virtual meeting on “Policy response to the social and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic: social protection”**

(Online, 22 April 2020)

8. ESCWA, in partnership with the International Labour Organization, organized an online meeting attended by EGSPR members and high-level policymakers working in the field of social protection in ESCWA member States. Representatives of employers' organizations also participated. The meeting aimed to exchange experiences and encourage peer learning to strengthen Arab countries' capacity to design, implement and monitor social protection programmes aimed at mitigating the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

9. Participants discussed the expected effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic growth, labour markets, unemployment, poverty and food insecurity in the Arab region. Participants were also briefed on policies responses to the pandemic, its repercussions for various countries around the world and some Arab countries, and on the measures and social protection programmes that had been adopted, especially those targeting vulnerable groups. ESCWA presented the COVID-19 Global Stimulus Tracker that it had developed, which sets out financial and political programmes in response to the pandemic. The meeting provided an opportunity for participating countries to benefit from the experiences of countries that have effective social protection systems, which enabled them to respond to the effects the pandemic in a more inclusive manner.

### **B. Second virtual meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform**

(Online, 2 November 2020)

10. The second meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform presented a tool designed by ESCWA to help build a multidimensional national poverty index, and develop evidence-based social policies at the national level. Most EGSPR members participated in the meeting, and commended the tool. ESCWA has started using the tool to determine initial poverty rates in some Arab countries, at their request.

### **C. Third virtual meeting of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform**

(Online, 8 June 2021)

11. ESCWA held the third EGSPR meeting in two sessions: a morning session on strengthening consumer protection in health service delivery in view of the COVID-19 pandemic; and an evening session dedicated to presenting a project funded by the United Nations Development Account on “Strengthening social protection in response to epidemics: identifying vulnerable groups, assistance, recovery and building resilience” (2020-2021).

12. The morning session was held in collaboration with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean of the World Health Organization (WHO). Participants, including representatives of consumer protection authorities and ministries of health in Arab countries, discussed health services, including electronic services, based on a study conducted by ESCWA on health system coverage and health insurance in the Arab region and their relationship to social protection programmes. They also discussed an UNCTAD study entitled “Strengthening consumer protection in the provision of health services (including e-health) in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic”. ESCWA collaborated with UNCTAD to publish the study in Arabic. Participants also reviewed WHO support to Governments in developing inclusive and equitable health policies and strengthening national health systems by continuing to provide basic health services during the pandemic and ensuring financial protection.

13. The evening session informed EGSPR members of the activities provided by the project on “Strengthening social protection in response to epidemics”, especially those related to building the capacity of member States in strengthening social protection systems after the pandemic, in general, and analysing data and registers related to protection programmes, in particular. ESCWA made a presentation on its methodological framework for data analysis, and highlighted the technical support it provided to the Jordanian National Aid Fund in Jordan in that field. The representative of the Fund gave an overview of current collaboration with ESCWA. In conclusion, ESCWA briefed EGSPR members on its proposed programme of work on social protection issues for the coming period, including preparing publications on social protection systems for each country, in partnership with relevant ministries.

**D. Online workshop on targeted social protection in Arab countries  
during the COVID-19 pandemic**  
(Online, 25 February 2021)

14. EGSPR members, policymakers and individuals responsible for implementing targeted social protection programmes, and managing registers and information systems in Arab countries participated in the workshop. Participants discussed an analytical study conducted by ESCWA on the expansion of targeted social protection, especially for informal workers, and innovations in identifying and providing support to vulnerable population groups. The meeting also presented an analytical framework developed by ESCWA to assist member States in analysing data in social registers, improving the application process and verifying potential beneficiaries, and strengthening of their social protection systems.

**III. Future areas of collaboration**

15. The next EGSPR meeting is expected to focus on the following areas:

- (a) Post-COVID-19 social protection: improving quality and coverage rates and strengthening emergency preparedness and response;
- (b) Integrating and coordinating social assistance and social insurance programmes;
- (c) Subsidized health insurance in the Arab region: trend towards higher and more effective rates of coverage and financial protection;
- (d) Data analysis for evidence-based policymaking in the area of social protection;
- (e) EGSPR participation in the activities of the United Nations Development Account project on “Strengthening social protection in response to epidemics”, focusing on successful experiences in the region, producing and distributing analytical publications, and engaging relevant stakeholders in capacity-building and knowledge-sharing meetings and in providing targeted technical assistance.

16. The Committee on Social Development is invited to take note of EGSPR activities and to comment on regional priorities for reforming social protection systems.

## Annex I

### Terms of reference of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform

#### Introduction

Social protection systems, in their various forms, aim to enhance social cohesion and social justice, structure the labour market, prevent and alleviate poverty, and enhance resilience to economic crises in society. Effective social protection is essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilling the principle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of leaving no one behind. Moreover, social protection is a fundamental human right.

The quality and comprehensiveness of social protection systems influence people's trust in their Government, and in its ability to ensure their protection from the impact of disease, old age, work injury or disability, support them throughout the life cycle, (for example, during maternity), and assist them in their efforts and aspirations for a dignified life. Universal social protection can enhance mutual trust and social cohesion, especially in countries that have experienced violent conflict.

At the close of its twelfth session, the Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) recommended the following: "Establish an expert group under the Committee on Social Development tasked with following up on social protection reform in the period between Committee sessions. An evaluation of its activities should be submitted to the Committee on Social Development at its thirteenth session. The expert group's proposed functions include strengthening coordination and regional cooperation and exchanging experiences on social protection issues, including expanding the scope of social protection systems and improving their quality".

The following terms of reference outline the proposed framework for the work of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform (EGSPR) in Arab countries.

#### Objectives

The Group serves as a key framework for collaboration on issues related to social protection reform between Arab Governments and ESCWA during the intersessional period of the Committee on Social Development, especially in the following areas:

1. Strengthening relationships and collaboration in the field of social protection policies between Arab countries and with ESCWA.
2. Promoting national discussions on the need to integrate and harmonize the various components of social protection systems, including social insurance, social assistance, health care, integrated registers and information systems.
3. Strengthening regional and subregional cooperation to expand social protection systems and improve the delivery of their services, through the exchange of information among member States.
4. Ensuring that member States are aware of ongoing and planned ESCWA activities on social protection, and that ESCWA is also aware of member States' activities in this field.
5. Following up on issues related to social protection in the period between Committee sessions.

#### Membership

EGSPR is composed of one representative for each ESCWA member State. Given its responsibilities of the team, EGSPR members must have objective knowledge and experience in social protection (social insurance,

social assistance, health care, integrated registers, and information systems that manage social protection) and social development issues. Other experts may be called upon if the Group so decides.

### **Responsibilities of EGSPR members**

EGSPR members have the following responsibilities:

1. Acting as the main body to receive and respond to communications from ESCWA on social protection issues, including through communications with ministries and other relevant stakeholders, when needed.
2. Informing ESCWA of national developments in the field of social protection, including those related to institutional, legal and political processes, and relevant data and statistics.
3. Participating in the Group's in-person and online meetings, and in other meetings related to social protection (or its components) and social development.
4. Exchanging information with other members on experiences, innovative practices and result evaluations related to providing social protection services or reforming national systems.
5. Developing and implementing, when possible, biennial work plans and reviewing performance against desired results at each formal meeting.
6. Submitting a biennial report on the Group's achievements in each subsequent session of the Committee on Social Development.

### **EGSPR secretariat**

ESCWA acts as the Group's secretariat. In line with available resources, the secretariat is responsible for maintaining channels of communication between members, convening in-person and online meetings, proposing the agenda for each meeting, disseminating EGSPR documents to focal points, and supporting the planning and implementation of activities.

### **Working methods**

The following are the Group's working methods:

1. The Group shall hold an in-person substantive meeting at least once a year.
2. Group meetings shall be supplemented with expert meetings and online meetings to discuss substantive and procedural issues, and ensure continuity of work as necessary.
3. The Group may invite non-member experts (such as representatives of non-member States of ESCWA in the Arab region, United Nations institutions, research institutions and organizations working in the field of social protection) to participate in the meetings as observers or experts. The ESCWA secretariat is responsible for inviting non-member experts in consultation with EGSPR members.

### **Time frame**

The ESCWA Committee on Social Development Committee, at its successive sessions, shall review the Group's work plan and terms of reference, and make any necessary adjustments to its working methods or responsibilities.

## Annex II

## Members of the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform

Country	Name	Professional title	Ministry/organization
Bahrain	Abbas Maatouk	Chief of International Relations	Ministry of Labour and Social Development
Egypt	Raafat Shafiq	Social Protection Adviser	Ministry of Social Solidarity
Iraq	Hussein Ali Abdul Hussein	Vice President of the Social Protection Authority	Social Protection Authority
Jordan	Ahmed Abu Haider	Director of the Policy and Strategies Department	Ministry of Social Development
Kuwait	Hana al Hajri	Assistant Undersecretary for Social Development	Ministry of Social Affairs
Lebanon	Abdullah Ahmed	Director-General	Ministry of Social Affairs
Libya	Mustafa Fathi al-Juaibi	Chairman of the Administrative Committee	General Authority for the Social Solidarity Fund, Tripoli
Mauritania	Mohamed Mahmoud	Secretary-General	Ministry of Social Affairs, Childhood and Family
Morocco	Abdul Samad al Amrani	Social Development Manager	Ministry of Solidarity, Social Development, Equality and Family
Oman	Mohammed bin Ali al Saadi	Director-General of Social Welfare	Ministry of Social Development
State of Palestine	Daoud al Dik	Undersecretary	Ministry of Social Development
Qatar	Ghanem Mubarak Al-Kuwari	Assistant Undersecretary for Social Affairs and Vice Chairman of the National Committee for the Affairs of Woman, Children, the Elderly and People with Disabilities	Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs
Saudi Arabia	Wadah al-Rakad	Director of Planning and International Cooperation	Ministry of Social Development and Labour
Saudi Arabia	Sultan al-Jaries	Undersecretary for Social Security and Empowerment	Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development
Sudan	Mohamed Hussein Abdel Qader	Undersecretary	Ministry of Social Development
Tunisia	Maha Mazrioui	Director of the General Administration of Statistics, Analysis and Strategic Planning	Ministry of Social Affairs
Yemen	Najlaa Ahmed Omar Awad al-Sayyad	Executive Director of the Social Welfare Fund, and Director of the Protection Programme at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Aden

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