Towards integrated social policies in the Arab region

Summary

The present document argues that social policies in the Arab countries show fragmentation at the sectoral level, or across sectors, or in the means of implementation, which affects the efficiency of these policies and reduces their benefits. It provides examples of such fragmentation at various levels and introduces a six-phase practical model to help policymakers move from fragmentation to integration while designing and implementing national policies.

The present document is complemented by document E/ESCWA/C.2/2021/8 on some of the tools developed by ESCWA to support member States in designing integrated social policies. The Committee on Social Development is invited to review the analysis presented in it and provide comments thereon.
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Introduction

1. For decades, the Arab region has been witnessing occupation, conflicts, refugee and displacement crises, oil and other shocks, political instability, widening economic and social gaps and other challenges that have stifled growth and impeded sustainable development. Now also faced with the unprecedented implications of COVID-19, all Arab States, whatever their situation, have exerted tremendous efforts to enhance social development schemes, including employment, social protection and poverty reduction schemes. States are also working towards gender equality and reaching out to traditionally marginalized groups such as women, young people, the elderly and persons with disabilities.

2. Yet, when examined, social policies in the Arab countries still show fragmentation at the sectoral level, or across sectors, or in the means of implementation. For example, national strategies to combat violence against women are not necessarily linked to national labour market plans to ensure that women survivors of violence are integrated in the labour force and are financially independent. Similarly, education strategies are not linked with labour market strategies, thus resulting in a gap in the transition from school to work. As a result of such fragmentation, national policies have not yet achieved their desired goals and do not fully reflect the commitment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to “leave no one behind”.

3. The present document does not intend to provide a definition of integrated social policies or a conceptual discussion of the matter. It rather provides a practical approach to how to implement the concept on the ground. It starts with contextualizing policy fragmentation at three levels: within the same policy or sector; across policies or sectors; and at the level of implementation. It then provides a practical approach to address this fragmentation. The present document cannot be isolated from document number E/ESCWA/C.2/2021/8 presented under agenda item (9), which provides a menu of some of the policy tools developed by ESCWA to support member States in implementing this practical approach.

I. Fragmentation within the same policy or sector

4. An assessment of national strategies and polices formulated to address social priorities reflects internal fragmentation and gaps, as they lack a whole-of-society approach and do not necessarily reflect the needs and aspiration of all society groups. For example, most Arab countries have put in place thematic strategies on education, health, inclusion of persons with disabilities, etc. However, the gender lens is absent from most of them or is sporadically considered. These policies rarely take into consideration the needs of all women, nor have they been developed with their full participation. They also often do not pay full attention to a particular group of women (with disabilities, or survivors of violence, etc.). Gender equality is mostly dealt with as a standalone issue in a separate policy concerning women, which has proven to be insufficient to ensure equality. This fragmented approach might be due to several reasons, such as lack of data or the capacity to mainstream a gender perspective in all policies.

5. Another example can be seen in labour market policies and strategies which, in some countries, disregard the needs of persons with disabilities. The civil service systems and regulations do not necessarily encourage the recruitment of persons with disabilities. On the contrary, they identify good mental and physical health, and being free of disease, among the key criteria for employment.

6. Examining national policies against the four pillars of social justice, namely rights, equality, equity and participation, also reveals the lack of a sound integration mechanism between the various national stakeholders. Even when a policy is well thought out, if the coordination process is fragile or the mechanism for policy decisions and initiatives is truncated, it is most likely that the policy will fail to reach its goal.

II. Fragmentation across policies

7. The reliance of most Arab countries on money-metric poverty as the main way to measure poverty and to develop poverty reduction policies is a case in point. This approach helps policymakers identify the number
of poor households and the locations where people living below the national poverty line are concentrated. Arab countries then set up cash transfer programmes to support the poor and vulnerable population (often defined as those just above the poverty line). In order to reach out to the households entitled to these transfers, a set of proxy means indicators is established. These are multidimensional indicators as they capture living conditions and access to select services that have been seen in household budget surveys to correlate with poverty. The thresholds are set to measure monetary poverty in order to establish eligibility for government assistance. Large databases have been created in many countries to register the recipients of these cash transfer programmes or, in some cases, applicants for these programmes. Some registries are established through a census approach where all population in a given territory is assessed and registered accordingly.

8. While this is a good example of “across policy” integration (measurement and support systems are harmonized), this approach only tackles a specific part of poverty, limited to the monetary aspect. Poverty, however, is also an intergenerational concern as poor households almost always have less access to services that would help them in the formation of their human capital and that of their children. Restricted access to good quality education and health-care services tends to make poverty inheritable, and children that grow up in poor households are very likely to remain poor. When education and labour market policies are not specifically devised to offer targeted, good quality services to children and young people from poor households or living in marginalized areas, policies to combat poverty will remain fragmented and largely unsuccessful.

9. Moreover, with the transition to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the world, including Arab countries, will lose many of the current lines of work. Unemployment is expected to increase in the Arab region to affect 65 million people by 2030, partly resulting from automation in production. At the same time, the agility of this Revolution in automating activities makes the new jobs of the future difficult to predict using current measurement techniques. To formulate efficient job policies, Arab countries must update their capacity for assessment, namely to determine the ever-changing skill sets needed for newly created job categories. Without an updated monitoring technique, information on the impact of technological change on available skill sets cannot be properly analysed, and the gap between the technology development and job sectors will remain.

10. This gap will cause further fragmentation between education and jobs. Indeed, despite advancement in primary and secondary educational attainment in the Arab region in the past three decades, educational progress has not translated into the ability of the population to join the labour market, as people do not necessarily have the adequate skills for newly created jobs. Also, in the absence of up-to-date and active labour market policies, the mismatch between market demand (especially in the formal sector) and education is translated into higher informal sector activities in most Arab countries.

III. Fragmentation related to means of implementation

11. An integrated approach to social policies requires funding commensurate with development objectives. The objective of ensuring social justice by providing equal opportunities to all population groups in urban and rural settings alike needs a fair allocation of resources that allows for accumulation of human capital. Whether or not this is the case in Arab countries is hard to see because government financial statistics of social expenditures are inadequately developed, and there are significant information gaps on subnational expenditures.

12. Whether Arab countries have centralized or decentralized planning systems, they often show social spending by sector or by area/governorate. However, available databases do not necessarily show the social expenditure on subsectors, such as budget spent on vocational training at the village or district level and the amount of funds spent on each beneficiary. This applies to other sectors such as health and how much of the budget allocated to the health sector was spent on the elderly or persons with disabilities. When a country has a database to capture expenditure on a specific group, such as persons with disabilities for example, this database is usually not linked to other databases capturing the budget spent on the education of persons with disabilities in a certain area of the country. There is a lack of a comprehensive understanding of social
expenditure at the micro level when such an understanding is necessary for social policies at large and particularly social protection and poverty alleviation initiatives.

13. Data disaggregated by sex, age and urban and rural distribution is central to implementing integrated social policies and leaving no one behind by moving away from assessing aggregate progress to ensuring progress for all population groups at a disaggregated level. Disaggregated data will help draw a picture of who is excluded, how and why. It will also show which groups are experiencing multiple forms of discrimination and inequalities so that responsive policies can be designed to target them. The supply of statistical information necessary to monitor progress and evaluate impact is weak in the Arab region. For example, violence against women, which is identified as a key factor hindering the achievement of gender equality, is among the highest in the world, with 35.4 per cent of ever-married women in the Arab region having experienced one form of intimate partner violence.¹ Despite this high prevalence, only 7 out of the 22 Arab countries have ever had a standalone survey on violence against women since 2000. They are Egypt (2015); Mauritania (2011), Morocco (2019), State of Palestine (2019), Saudi Arabia (2005), Sudan (2009) and Tunisia (2010). Eight countries have included a module on violence against women in a health survey, which is usually not comprehensive and has a health focus. They are Algeria (MICS, 2006), Comoros (DHS, 2012, MICS, 2012), Djibouti (MICIS 2006), Iraq (IWISH 2011), Jordan (DHS, 2017–2018), Libya (PAPFAM 2014); Somalia (MICS 2011 and SHDS 2018) and Yemen (DHS 2012–2013).²

14. Despite the availability of household surveys on a regular basis for most Arab countries, the use of these surveys for designing national multidimensional poverty indices has been rather limited. One of the main challenges to this end has been the extensive period required for undertaking national consultations relying on traditional computational tools (such as STATA software), which are not user friendly. This results in valuable time being lost to this process as, especially when the national multidimensional poverty index is being introduced for the first time, it can take up to several months or even more than a year to produce results. This greatly reduces the value addition and relevance of these results from a policy perspective. Another challenge facing poverty analysis is that most of the existing poverty indices are constructed at the household level, with the exception of the multidimensional overlapping depreciation analysis (MODA) of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), which is designed to capture child poverty at the individual level. Overcoming this challenge will require a concerted regional and national effort to introduce new multidimensional poverty indices (such as an MPI for youth or for women).

15. In conclusion, the existence of social policies does not automatically generate efficiency leading to equality and welfare of societies. It is their integration and complementarity that create the synergies and appropriate mixes for their positive impact to trickle down to people. The uptake of the concept of integrated social policies by Arab policymakers was evident in their responses to COVID-19, especially in how they expanded health coverage and increased cash transfers in a coordinated and timely manner. To sustain this momentum, all technical challenges at the level of executing integrated social policies should be addressed. This requires a set of practical policy tools that would allow policymakers to design policy options to best use their limited national resources.

IV. From fragmentation to integration

16. There is a need for a national framework to facilitate the move from fragmentation to integration. This requires following various practical steps using policy tools. Figure one offers a simple framework, while document E/ESCWA/C.2/2021/8 offers a menu of policy tools that supports its implementation.

¹ See E/ESCWA/ECW/2019/5, p. 3.
² See E/ESCWA/SD/2019/4, p. 139.
Policy integration framework

A. In-depth national socioeconomic analysis

1. Identify national multidimensional poverty rates

Poverty measurement is an important exercise for policymakers to understand if economic growth is reaching all people and contributing to reduced poverty and inequalities in both opportunities and outcomes. When doing so, policymakers should move from measuring monetary poverty, which chiefly focuses on income, to assessing multidimensional poverty which takes into consideration non-income dimensions, such as health, education and living conditions.

National multidimensional poverty measures should inform poverty reduction strategies focused on social and economic policies, including those related to social protection, sectoral policies (education, health, employment, etc.) and economic policies, such as fiscal and inflation policies.

Measurement of multidimensional national poverty should be an entry point to identifying poverty hotspots in a country as well as identifying persons in need to respond to those needs and ensure that no one is left behind. Multidimensional poverty measurement should also guide social protection schemes, including cash transfer or greater social security coverage, to ensure that they lead to inclusive growth.

2. Undertake a socioeconomic diagnosis of society

Using income and expenditure surveys, policymakers can understand society and classify households into one of five categories: extreme poor, poor, vulnerable (those between poor and middle class), middle class and rich. Such analysis should be done not only at the household level but also at the individual level, using innovative methodologies to understand poverty among various groups, such as women, persons with disabilities and the elderly. Societal diagnostic analysis will show absolute and relative deprivation faced by different groups across different stages of the life cycle. It will also show the intersecting deprivation faced by
specific groups, as well as the multiple discrimination faced by a group of the population that makes it more likely to be the furthest behind and the most in need of immediate support. This will help direct national and international investments to reduce income and wealth inequalities, identify relevant social protection schemes for each group, develop responsive labour market policies, develop solidarity wealth taxes that can address inequalities and prevent the vulnerable group from falling into poverty. Such analysis of society will help determine if the middle class is shrinking, creating a new vulnerable group, or expanding, and understand the impact of this change on the poor. It will also enable policymakers to create linkages between such a trend and that of a new vulnerable group falling into poverty due to a certain economic shock or a natural disaster.

22. Undertaking in-depth diagnostic analysis requires disaggregated data across the various areas. It is important to complement official national data on development indicators with data and information from a range of sources, including national human rights institutions, United Nations observatory and supervisory bodies and reputable civil society organizations. Complementary information may include relevant qualitative assessment on issues such as inequalities, conflict, political environments, risk analysis, etc. Triangulating national data in a consultative process is an essential step to ensure a common understanding among the relevant ministries and national stakeholders. Throughout this process, stakeholders should regularly identify data gaps and exert efforts to complement existing data to better understand the subpopulations and their respective needs.

3. Undertake estimates and projections

23. Estimates and projections should be recurrent national exercises to enable policymakers to understand the costs of action and inaction. This will provide the evidence-based information needed to make sound decisions and understand losses or gains of national economic potential. For example, it is important to have clarity on the estimated national budget required in certain areas, such as closing the poverty gap, based on various scenarios (simulating times of peace and times of uncertainty due to shocks). In order to better plan and allocate resources, it must also be kept in mind that, due to the socioeconomic implications of COVID-19, the cost of covering the poverty gap jumped from $38.6 billion per year in 13 Arab countries in 2019 to $45.1 billion in 2020.3

24. Having a price tag for certain commitments, such as achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and each of their targets while taking into consideration links between them, is also essential for the purpose of national planning. This requires developing regional and national methodologies that take into consideration data availability and limitations, which are essential for linking a certain level of investment to the achievement of a certain target.

25. Costing and estimate exercises should also be carried out in other thematic areas, such as gender equality, violence against women and unemployment of certain groups within society. Forward looking exercises and estimates are also essential to monitor the anticipated changes in the job market due to technological advancements to be able to harness job opportunities emerging from the advent of new technologies.

B. Aligning national efforts with international frameworks

1. Mapping international indices

26. International indices rank countries according to a select set of socioeconomic and governance indicators, such as education levels, gross domestic product (GDP, political participation, transparency, etc.). Examples of the most used indices include the Human Development Index, the Global Gender Gap Index, the

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Women, Peace and Security Index and the Ease of Doing Business Index. These indices are usually derived from international and regional conventions and mutually reinforce each other.

27. Despite the shortcomings of many of these indices, they are often used for international and regional comparison. Oftentimes they are used by donors and other international organizations as benchmarks and serve as important factors influencing decisions on their investments.

28. In order for Arab countries to improve their ranking in these indices, policymakers should be regularly checking their results and comparing their status with countries with similar economies, countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), or those with a similar political and governance structure. There is also a need to simulate various scenarios of ranking in these indices along different policy options, identify the impact of the different approaches; examine the multiple benefits and risks of a specific approach and reallocate national budgets and limited resources to address priorities. This will enable policymakers to make reasonable trade-offs stemming from scarce national resources and better utilize them.

2. Ratification of international instruments, conventions and agreements

29. Due to the strong linkages between the status of a country’s engagement with regional and international frameworks and the ranking in indices, there is a need to align countries’ efforts with them.

30. Ratification of the nine core international human rights instruments, as well as regional conventions, such as the Arab Convention on Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, is a starting point and a reflection of political will to galvanize action, bring change and generate momentum for national reform to ensure that rights enshrined in these conventions are respected, protected and fulfilled. Ratification/accession to these instruments should not be tied to reservations which, at many times, defy their objectives. Ratification/accession should also be accompanied by a national mechanism that ensures implementation, alignment of national laws, policies and practices with international commitments and periodic reporting and engagement with treaty body mechanisms tasked with monitoring the implementation of these treaties.

31. Ratification of other conventions, such as the core conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) including C001 Hours of Work, C102 Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, C183 Maternity Protection, and C138 Minimum Age Convention, is instrumental to ensuring an inclusive and enabling environment for employment and subsequently national growth.

32. Other sources outlining international commitments such as Security Council resolutions and internationally agreed declarations, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDGs, the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, the International Convention on Population and Development, which are adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, are also a major normative source for global collective commitments. When translated nationally, they can secure equitable and sustainable development for all.

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4 The nine core international human rights instruments are: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD, 21 December 1965); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 16 December 1966); International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 16 December 1966); Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 18 December 1979); Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT, 10 December 1984); Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 20 November 1989); International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW, 18 December 1990); International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CPED, 20 December 2006); Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 13 December 2006).
C. Political will and stakeholder engagement

1. Ensure political will and buy-in

33. The willingness and determination of policymakers to introduce sustainable change are central to achieving the desired progress. Political will needs to be manifested through action during the entire journey of identifying national priorities, translating public commitments into action, advocating for change in public speeches, proposing reform, leading the entire cycle of policy development including its design, validation, implementation, monitoring and ending with evaluating policy results in the short run and impact in the long run. This should be done while keeping an eye on the international commitment that the country ratified and signed on to.

34. There are various positive indicators that manifest political will, such as creating an environment that encourages change and public dialogue. Dedicated public spending on a topic or sector under discussion is another way for rendering political will tangible as this reflects political intent. Another could be the provision of the means and space for capacity development to enable stakeholders to introduce reform and achieve the desired change.

2. Stakeholder engagement

35. Stakeholder engagement goes beyond inter-State cooperation; it involves a whole-of-society approach. Stakeholders should be approached broadly to include, as appropriate, civil society, trade unions, academia, the private sector, national human rights institutions and most importantly the voices of the people. Stakeholder engagement should not be limited to the national level, but also mirrored at the subnational level to include local actors and municipalities, among others.

36. Stakeholder engagement should also be meaningful and avoid cosmetic participation of a select group in certain incidents/events. Stakeholders have to be involved in the entire policy cycle, from design, identification of possible scenarios and assessing the pros and cons of each scenario to implementation, monitoring and evaluating the policy.

37. Mechanisms should be in place to allow for such national and subnational engagement. For example, national interministerial committees should be systematically put in place to prepare periodic national reports on international commitments, including those on the Madrid International Plan of Action of Aging (MIPAA), the Global Compact on Migration (GCM), the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), voluntary national reviews and voluntary local reviews. These interministerial committees should systematically ensure coordination and consultation with non-government stakeholders to ensure that they have a stake in the process.

D. Legal reform

1. Constitutional and legal reform

38. Constitutional and legal reform should resolve diagnostic national challenges while fulfilling countries’ commitments to international agreements and instruments. National reform should help identify key gaps and measures needed to comply with due diligence standards. Aligning legal reform with international obligations will eliminate contradictions across laws and ensure coherence.

39. Legal reform should go hand in hand with procedures to enforce its application. A case in point is countries signing off on some of the ILO conventions, such as those on equal remuneration, yet due to lack of enforcement and reform still ranking low on wage equality between men and women for similar work.
40. A practical way of undertaking constructive constitutional and legal reform is to perform regular equality assessments to identify the laws that contribute to leaving groups of the population behind. This assessment should flag laws that may be neutral on their face but have a disparate impact on certain groups. Comparing national constitutions and legislations with similar ones from other Arab countries is also essential to understand where the country stands on the regional map and learn from the best practices of countries with similar cultural, political and socioeconomic contexts.

2. Undertake a diagnostic analysis of policies and strategies

41. Policies and strategies should mirror the legal reform and ensure that they are in line with international standards and commitments. To maximize the benefits of national policies and strategies and to ensure that they reach all segments of society, Governments need to take into consideration the four pillars of social justice: rights, participation, equity and equality. Otherwise, policies will remain ineffective and will not contribute to narrowing the existing inequality gap between rural and urban populations, men and women, and rich and poor. To ensure that policies respond to the four foundations of social justice, there is a need to acquire the needed knowledge and know-how to ensure their integration in the processes of designing, implementing, financing and evaluating these policies. This also requires an institutional structure and mechanism that ensures policy coherence, consistency and coordination within the respective ministry and beyond.

E. Institutional infrastructure

1. Undertake an assessment of institutions and develop remedy plans

42. In situations of political transition, conflict and fragility, the capacities of institutions are often weak, and their resources are further reduced. In such circumstances, ready-made institutional evaluation methodologies are not very effective, and their results might be misleading as they do not take into consideration any situation of political instability, crisis or conflict. There is a need for institutional assessment tools that can help States undertake a self-assessment of institutional capacities based on national and sectoral priorities, in light of the great scarcity of resources. Results of this assessment will support policymakers in optimizing the human and national resources, providing the relevant capacity development programmes and ensuring better return on investment. This can eventually lead to reversing negative trends and gradually restoring people’s confidence in institutions and rebuilding their capacities and resources.

2. Assess the institution from a gender perspective

43. There is a need to assess institutions from a gender-equality perspective and examine their ability to promote the cause and mainstream the perspective in their work. This assessment should take place on various functional areas of the institution, namely accountability; results-based management; oversight; human and financial resources; capacity; and coherence, knowledge and information management.

44. Policymakers should ensure that institutions are gender sensitive and that their strategic work includes the core element of gender equality including: (a) building capacities on priority issues, especially for gender analysis and planning; (b) making sex-disaggregated data available across sectors; (c) establishing institutional accountability on gender-related mandates and requirements; (d) integrating gender-related concepts and priorities at all management levels; (e) allocating financial resources across organizational structures for the integration of gender-related concepts; (f) assigning human resources, especially to monitor and report on adherence to agreed commitments; and (g) systematic coordination and knowledge-sharing among all relevant stakeholders.

45. Undertaking a gender audit is an important entry point to enable the identification of political, technical and administrative gender gaps and set a baseline for performance, which can be utilized to monitor work on gender mainstreaming. It also serves as an entry point for discussions on wider substantive and operational
concerns, as it highlights certain issues that are beyond gender, such as: organizational culture, existing structures for sharing and learning and available monitoring mechanisms.

F. Assess the fiscal feasibility and implications of social policies

Examine national expenditures

46. Public social expenditure is a key tool for implementing integrated social policies. Its effectiveness depends on how informed public expenditure choices are. Informed social expenditure could be a gateway to ensure social justice and inclusive development, reduce poverty and inequality and improve human development. It is also a means to invest in human capital and innovation, promote gender equality and foster sustainable growth. Member States must map public social expenditure to inform budgeting and social policy reform. This will enable policymakers to establish comprehensive mechanisms for monitoring public expenditure and link them to macroeconomic policy coherence.

V. Conclusion

47. To achieve policy integration, Arab States need to consider the above steps which would allow for all segments of society to reap the benefits of reform. This will require a set of policy tools to enable policymakers to make evidence-based decisions. Document E/ESCWA/C.2/2021/8 provides a menu of tools that ESCWA has developed to assist member States in each of these steps in a timely manner.

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