

Strengthening
Social Protection for
Pandemic Responses
**Building Social
Protection Capacities**

**Role of Social Protection
Information Systems
in Expansion of Cash
Transfer Programmes
during Covid-19 Pandemic:
Experience from Selected
Arab Countries**





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Background paper

Role of Social Protection Information Systems in Expansion of Cash Transfer Programmes during Covid-19 Pandemic: Experience from Selected Arab Countries



United Nations
Beirut

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United Nations publication issued by ESCWA, United Nations House, Riad El Solh Square,

P.O. Box: 11-8575, Beirut, Lebanon.

Website: www.unescwa.org.



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01

Key Messages



01

By facilitating identification of the most affected groups and channelling assistance to them, well-developed information systems enable governments rapidly to scale up assistance programmes during such emergencies as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

02

To minimise targeting errors, data on socioeconomic conditions of households stored in information systems should be regularly updated to account for fluctuations.

03

To improve efficiency, effectiveness and transparency of social protection delivery, the need arises for refining coverage and managing various social protection programmes in a systematic and coordinated manner, as well as for a high degree of data integration or interoperability across the various components, programmes and actors.

04

Social protection information systems can be linked to administrative databases, like those related to taxes and land or vehicle ownership, and to civil registries beyond the realm of social protection to enable data exchanges, thereby facilitating identification of the poor and vulnerable and verification and update of information on their socioeconomic conditions, in order to improve understanding of their immediate needs and tailor social protection services to these needs. Such data exchanges among databases would be enabled by foundational or functional IDs and common data standards.

05

The Covid-19 crisis revealed a serious gap in social protection coverage: informal workers who were not poor before the crisis but lost their income due to illness or to restrictions imposed by governments were often not covered by any form of social protection. Moreover, in numerous instances, governments lacked solid information about households belonging to this group. To alleviate the impact of the pandemic on them and improve their resilience to shocks, informal workers should have immediate access to non-contributory social protection, while longer-run efforts are made to formalise their status and cover them by contributory social protection.

02

Introduction



Based on a desk review of open-source information, and with particular emphasis on utilisation of social protection information systems, including social and beneficiary registries, the present background paper provides an overview of how selected Arab countries delivered social assistance response to the Covid-19 pandemic, either by scaling up existing assistance programmes or rolling out emergency assistance schemes.

Since early 2020, just like the rest of the world, the Arab region has been battered by the Covid-19 pandemic. To curb the spread of the virus, governments around the globe introduced full or partial lockdowns: nonessential business activities were put on hold; workers were requested to telecommute, where possible; and movement of people and public gatherings were restricted. These measures resulted in soaring unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity, putting under threat the livelihoods of millions of people, with vulnerable population groups—informal and migrant workers, refugees, women and the elderly—continuing to bear the brunt of the crisis overwhelmingly.

To mitigate the effects of the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown measures, governments are rolling out or scaling up stimulus measures, the scope of which varies significantly across countries and may include interventions pertaining to social assistance, social insurance, loan and tax benefits, labour market, health related support, financial policy support, and support to business and economy,⁰¹ with social assistance—including cash transfers; social pensions; in-kind assistance; school meals; public works; and suspension, subsidisation or postponement of utility and rent bills, loan and tax payments—one of the most commonly used response measures.⁰²

In delivering social assistance in response to the pandemic, governments are facing the challenge of quickly identifying population groups most likely to be affected by the crisis. Furthermore, to distribute assistance rapidly, governments mostly rely on adapting the existing delivery channels—i.e., pre-crisis social assistance programmes, information systems and payment mechanisms—to cope with increased demand, emergence of new vulnerable groups and the imperative of social distancing.

Social protection information systems are defined as systems “enabling the flow and management of information within the social assistance sector, and sometimes beyond to incorporate social insurance and other social sectors”.⁰³ Such systems include social registries and integrated beneficiary registries; the former are databases containing socioeconomic data on potential social assistance beneficiaries, whereas the latter store information on present beneficiaries of more than one social assistance programme.⁰⁴

01

For more information on global stimulus measures adopted in response to the Covid-19 crisis, see ESCWA’s Covid-19 Stimulus Tracker: <https://tracker.unescwa.org/>

02

For more information, see Social Protection Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis in the MENA/Arab States Region: <https://socialprotection.org/discover/publications/social-protection-responses-covid-19-crisis-mena-arab-states-region>.

03

Barca, 2018. Depending on the design of a specific programme or a management information system (MIS), a MIS can facilitate exchange and use of information to support different phases of programme delivery, including registration of applications, targeting, verification of compliance with conditionalities of a conditional cash transfer, management of grievances, payments to beneficiaries, and graduation (See also Chirchir and Barca, 2020; Chirchir and Kidd, 2011).

04

ESCWA, 2021 (forthcoming). This background paper builds partially on the forthcoming ESCWA technical paper on Targeted Social Protection in Arab Countries Before and During the Covid-19 Crisis.

During crises, like the current one, social and beneficiary registries are used to expand social assistance programmes quickly, either vertically or horizontally or both. Vertical expansion involves raising the levels of benefits of existing programmes or providing different or additional kinds of benefits to existing beneficiaries, in contrast with horizontal expansion, which involves increasing the number of beneficiaries either by enlarging already existing programmes or by rolling out new ones. Indeed, beneficiary registries can be used to provide additional benefits or services to current recipients of social assistance, while social registries can be employed to expand the number of beneficiaries without undertaking lengthy and costly processes of registration and field visits to verify socioeconomic conditions of applicants. In addition, both registries can be interconnected with other administrative databases beyond the sphere of social protection to identify and/or verify eligibility of applicants. For example, social assistance programmes using direct means testing can rely on data exchanges with the income tax registry, the social insurance, and/or other databases.

03

Country Cases

Since the beginning of the pandemic, several countries in the Arab region have scaled up cash transfer programmes, either vertically or horizontally,⁰⁵ mostly by relying on existing delivery channels, including social and beneficiary registries. In the following the experience of these countries is presented briefly.

05

In many cases, it is difficult to classify a response measure as purely horizontal or purely vertical, since a combination of both is frequently used. Similarly, some emergency response programmes were announced as new, whereas, in practice, they were largely based on existing programmes and, thus, could be seen as expansions.

Vertical expansion

Several countries have raised the levels of benefits of existing programmes or provided different or additional kinds of benefits to existing beneficiaries:

Tunisia

In Tunisia, the National Programme of Assistance to Needy Families (Programme Nationale d'Aide aux Familles Necessiteuses, PNAFN) is a cash transfer programme that in 2020 targeted 260,000 of the poorest households,⁰⁶ while the Free Medical Assistance 2 (Assistance Medical Gratuite 2, AMG 2) is a non-contributory programme that provides subsidised health coverage to households deemed vulnerable but not poor. In addition to their regular monthly transfers of 180 dinars (about 63 USD), households covered by PNAFN have received three top-up benefits: two of 60 dinars (about 21 USD) and one of 50 dinars (about 18 USD),⁰⁷ while households covered by AMG 2, who normally do not get cash transfers, have received two exceptional payments of 200 dinars (about 71 USD) each. In addition, on 12 October, it was decided that another tranche of exceptional support would be provided to both categories of households.⁰⁸

Jordan

In Jordan, the government launched a temporary cash transfer programme targeted at poor and vulnerable households affected by the pandemic, which had two components, one of vertical expansion and another of horizontal expansion (addressed here later). The vertical expansion component provided

six-month top-up benefits to all National Aid Fund (NAF) beneficiary households receiving cash transfers below a ceiling of 50 dinars (about 71 USD) for a single-member household, 70 dinars (about 99 USD) for a two-person household, and 136 dinars (about 192 USD) for a household of three or more persons. A total of 38,000 households received these benefits.⁰⁹

Lebanon

In Lebanon, the value of each food voucher provided through the National Poverty Targeting Program (NPTP) has been augmented from LL43,000 to LL70,000,¹⁰ capped at 6 vouchers per household.¹¹

Iraq

In Iraq, food baskets valued at 15 USD were provided to 708,360 poor households registered in the database of the main cash transfer programme managed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.¹²

Morocco

In Morocco, the Ministry of Economy, Finance and Administration Reform provided three exceptional cash transfers to 2.8 million households using the database of the Medical Aid Plan (Régime

⁰⁶ Tunisia, Ministry of Social Affairs, 2020.

⁰⁷ Unless otherwise stated, all conversions to USD are based on average annual official 2020 exchange rates.

⁰⁸ Chaabane, 2020.

⁰⁹ UNICEF and Jordan Strategy Forum, 2020, p. 27.

¹⁰ Due to presence of several exchange rates (e.g., official exchange rate, black market exchange rate, exchange rate used by the Syndicate of Money Changers in Lebanon, exchange rates used to withdraw money from dollar bank accounts or cash cheques), no indicative value in USD will be provided for amounts in Lebanese pounds.

¹¹ Antonios, 2020.

¹² Gentilini et al, 2020. The number of beneficiaries is as of April 13, 2020.

d'Assistance Médicale, Ramed),¹³ which is a programme providing health insurance for free to poor households and for a relatively modest contribution to vulnerable households.¹⁴ The exceptional cash transfers were targeted at Ramed beneficiaries operating informally who no longer have any revenues due to the mandatory confinement. The level of the transfers was set to 800 dirhams (about 84 USD) for households consisting of two or less persons, 1,000 dirhams (about 105 USD) for households consisting of 3–4 persons, and 1,200 dirhams (about 126 USD) for households consisting of more than four persons.^{15, 16}

Bahrain

In Bahrain, to support poor households and persons with disabilities, the value of benefits distributed in April 2020 was doubled to the 17,000 households receiving social benefits and to the 12,000 persons with disabilities registered in the database of the Ministry of Labour and Social Development and receiving disability pension.¹⁷

¹³ Chaoui, 2020.

¹⁴ Law No. 65-00 of 3 October 2002, section III; Observatoire National du Développement Humain, 2017, p. 24.

¹⁵ Morocco, Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2020a. World Bank, 2020d.

¹⁶ For the purpose of exceptional cash transfers, "Ramed beneficiaries" were defined as those whose beneficiary cards were valid as of 31 December 2019. However, surveys undertaken in the past indicated that a large number of Ramed households did not renew their cards, discouraged by a cumbersome application procedure and by the fact that Ramed often fails to ensure adequate healthcare. Such households may have been excluded from the batch of payment.

¹⁷ Bahrain News Agency, 2020.

Horizontal expansion

Increasing the number of individuals or households benefitting from existing programmes has taken place in several countries. However, these increases were in some cases, as in Egypt, Jordan and Mauritania, for example, already scheduled to take place, fully or in part, before the crisis, and were not purely in reaction to it:

Egypt

In Egypt, the flagship cash transfer programme entitled Takaful and Karama was expanded. The first component of the programme, Takaful, is conditional and covers poor households with children, while the second component, Karama, is unconditional and covers poor elderly persons and persons with disabilities. By November 2020, a total of 3,413,006 beneficiaries received transfers from the programme (2,173,274 households benefitted from the Takaful and 1,239,732 persons from Karama), which constitutes a significant increase since 15 March 2020, when 2,980,148 beneficiaries were covered. The most significant expansion occurred during the spring of 2020, with the number of beneficiaries reaching 3,116,883 on 15 May 2020.¹⁸ New beneficiaries were selected from the social registry of the programme; thus, no household visits had to be carried out during the crisis.

Jordan

In Jordan, the horizontal expansion component of the temporary cash transfers programme aimed to deliver these transfers for 6 months to 200,000 vulnerable households, other than those

covered by NAF,¹⁹ selected from the database of the Takaful programme, which is an umbrella programme launched in 2019 to provide cash transfers, health insurance, and electricity and transportation subsidies to poor and vulnerable households. Previously, Takaful had also been used to distribute Bread Subsidy Compensation, which expanded the number of households registered in its database to almost 1 million.²⁰ A similar programme, Takaful 3, will be launched in early 2021.

Palestine

In Palestine, the Management Information System (MIS) of the Palestinian National Cash Transfer Programme (PNCTP), which distributes quarterly cash transfers to poor and vulnerable households, is being used to identify those affected by the pandemic.²¹ The network of this MIS encompasses 16 district offices in the West Bank and Gaza, with information regularly updated by district-level social workers who collect and enter data on beneficiary households, as well as through information provided by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. Thus, the poverty-targeting database of the MIS facilitates identification of beneficiaries and their locations. The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) used socioeco-

¹⁸ Unless otherwise stated, Takaful and Karama beneficiary data have been obtained from the Ministry of Social Solidarity website (www.moss.gov.eg/). It is noteworthy that expansion of Takaful and Karama has been ongoing for some time and proceeded at a rapid pace just before the crisis broke out: just between 15 February and 15 March, 391,389 new households were added to the programme. The subsequent expansion should not, therefore, be seen necessarily as a measure specifically taken to counter the crisis, but rather, at least in part, as the continuation of a longer-term trend.

¹⁹ Moheydeen, 2020.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ World Bank, 2020b.

conomic data on households not receiving programme benefits stored in MIS to prioritise the distribution of additional funds, made available primarily by the private sector. Additionally, the Ministry launched a questionnaire and registration drive and enabled partners, including international NGO and relief organisations, to access the MIS to add information on new households that became vulnerable due to the crisis. Around 10,000 affected households who were not previously receiving assistance from the MoSD (especially those with persons with disabilities, elderly and children) received—as of May 2020—a payment of NIS 500 (about 145 USD), while thousands of others received food parcels.²²

Lebanon

In Lebanon, the National Poverty Targeting Program (NPTP) is being expanded to support extremely impoverished households affected by the economic crisis and the pandemic. The number of households receiving food vouchers through the NPTP increased from 15,000 to 55,000.²³ Tentatively, the Lebanese Government plans to expand the NPTP further to provide cash transfers to 147,000 extremely poor households.²⁴ New beneficiaries are supposed to be selected from the database of the NPTP, as well as from the database of IMPACT, which is the first e-government platform in Lebanon and was launched jointly by the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers

and the Central Inspection Office to “collect households applications interested in receiving social assistance”.²⁵ The IMPACT database, which already contains around 467,000 applications, is in the early phases of development; yet, it can become the basis for a Lebanese National Social Registry, notwithstanding some criticism of data quality and exclusion errors.²⁶ To select new beneficiaries, the Lebanese Government is planning to apply a proxy means test (PMT) to all applicants in the IMPACT database and to those households in the NPTP database that do not get cash benefits.

Mauritania

In Mauritania, the social registry, which was established in 2016 and, as of 2020, covers around 160,000 poor households, was used to distribute social assistance.²⁷ Between April and June 2020, cash transfers, as well as food baskets, were distributed to more than 200,000 households, including beneficiaries of the social transfer programme, Tekavoul. Another batch of cash transfers, reaching 210,000 households, was to be issued in early 2021. Beneficiaries of the exceptional assistance were mostly chosen from the social registry. However, in areas where the registry had not yet been implemented, they were instead identified through lists of poor households compiled from a variety of different sources, including the Ministry of Social Affairs, Childhood and Family; local authorities; and NGOs.²⁸

²² Al-Wattan Voice, 2020.

²³ Antonios, 2020.

²⁴ Ghorpade, 2020b.

²⁵ Ghorpade, 2020a.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Decree No. 006/2020 of 20 May 2020.

²⁸ Correspondence with Taazour representative, October 2020.

Assistance Targeted at Specific Vulnerable Population Groups

Several governments in the region devised new temporary emergency cash transfer schemes to provide assistance to population groups affected by the Covid-19 crisis. On several occasions, they launched dedicated, frequently online, systems to collect applications for these schemes, which were often targeted at specific vulnerable population groups, e.g., households of informal workers not covered by social insurance or social assistance, whose income is slightly above or hovers around the poverty line. The relative size of such groups can vary from country to country depending on the maturity of the social protection system:

Egypt

In Egypt, following a presidential decree, the Ministry of Manpower launched an emergency scheme for informal workers, i.e., people with irregular work,²⁹ affected by the crisis. Beneficiaries, who had to be registered in the database of the Ministry, were provided with three exceptional cash transfers, each of 500 EGP (about 32 USD). 4 million applications were received during registration,³⁰ of whom 1.6 million were granted assistance,³¹ suggesting that a fairly small proportion of informal workforce benefitted.³² Furthermore, it has been reported that women were effectively discriminated against, as applicants were required to indicate their profession, but could only choose between “male type work categories (carpenter, welder, etc.) with no category allowed for work typically done by women (domestic helper, caretaker, cleaner, etc.)”.³³ In October 2020, cash transfers were extended for 3 more months. 6 million applications were submitted for the fourth, fifth and sixth payments and 2.2 million received assistance.

Morocco

In Morocco, the government channelled extraordinary cash transfers to 2.65 million households of workers in the informal sector not covered by Ramed. These transfers were at the same level as those provided to active Ramed beneficiaries (discussed above). The objective was to compensate people for lost revenues, rather than poverty alleviation.³⁴ A web portal was established through which potential beneficiaries applied during the period 10–16 April 2020.³⁵ In total, 5.45 million of Ramed and non-Ramed-beneficiary households received transfers through the first and second rounds. The third round followed in July 2020, in which transfers were distributed to the previously identified beneficiaries.

Iraq

In Iraq, on 11 April, a temporary programme, Minha, was set up to support vulnerable population groups

²⁹

Announcement on the Ministry of Manpower webpage on 12 April 2020. Reportedly, “only those with ‘irregular work’ on their ID’s qualify for the handouts to informal workers; those with ‘no work’ do not”. Rizk, 2020.

³⁰

Sabrin, 2021.

³¹

Announcement on the Ministry of Manpower Facebook page on 15 October 2020. It may be noted that lower beneficiary numbers were initially reported. For instance, the Ministry of Manpower stated in April that around 0.5 million of the 1.9 million applications had been rejected (Announcement on the Ministry of Manpower Facebook page on 12 April 2020).

³²

The ILO estimates that informality in Egypt reaches 63 per cent (International Labour Organization, 2018, p. 85). See also Rizk, 2020.

³³

Rizk, 2020.

affected by the lockdowns and curfews.³⁶ The programme covered citizens registered in the ration card system, who are not government employees and/or not receiving state pensions, social insurance pensions or any other type of income from the state. Eligible households were encouraged to apply online during the period 11–16 April and around 2.8 million applications were received.³⁷ Eligibility was verified using the databases of the Ministry of Planning and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, which contain information on recipients of salaries or allowances from by the state.³⁸ The programme distributed 2 monthly benefits of 30,000 IQD (about 25 USD) each per household member.³⁹

Tunisia

In Tunisia, poor or low-income households not featuring on the PNAFN beneficiary lists were encouraged to apply to local authorities for assistance. Of the almost 1.2 million applications submitted, around a fourth, just above 300,000, were approved and payments began early May 2020.⁴⁰ Beneficiary households were also invited to register in the new Amen social registry to be able to benefit from this programme in the longer term.

Lebanon

In Lebanon, the government introduced an emergency cash transfer scheme, the National Social Solidarity Program (NSSP), which was announced by the Minister of Social Affairs on 8 April.⁴¹ Cash transfers amounting to LL 400,000 each were distributed to around 200,000 households: victims of land mines, public transport drivers, households with children attending public school, and households covered by the PNTP other than

those benefiting from food vouchers.⁴² Beneficiaries were selected through a combination of indirect poverty targeting and categorical targeting: while households covered by the NPTP were selected from the NPTP registry, lists of households belonging to the additional targeted categories were furnished by other institutions, such as the Lebanese Mine Action Center (a unit of the Lebanese Army), the Ministry of Public Works and Transport, and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education.⁴³ At a later stage, additional beneficiaries were selected from the IMPACT database: households with at least 3 minor children, those with persons aged over 75, female-headed households, households with a chronically ill person or a person with disability and large households with one breadwinner.⁴⁴ As of October, three rounds of NSSP payments had reportedly been effected.⁴⁵ On November 10, when announcing reintroduction of lockdown measures, the Lebanese Prime Minister gave an assurance that the NSSP would be maintained until the end of the year and possibly even longer.⁴⁶ An additional round of cash transfers began in January 2021 following extension of lockdown measures.⁴⁷

Palestine

In Palestine, the Ministry of Labour distributed in May 2020 exceptional cash transfers worth 700 shekels (about 203 USD) to 40,500 households of workers affected by the crisis, out of a total 276,000 households who applied. Priority was given to those living in areas particularly affected by the pandemic; to workers under 65 years, since those aged 65 and above are eligible for assistance from the Ministry of Social Development; to married couples with children; and to workers in Jerusalem and in refugee camps. Eligibility was controlled in collaboration with other ministries

³⁴ Chaoui, 2020.

³⁵ Morocco, Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2020b.

³⁶ Government of Iraq, 2020.

³⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization, World Bank Group and World Food Programme, 2020.

³⁸ Alahad News, 2020.

³⁹ Diyaruna, 2020.

⁴⁰ Announcement on the Ministry of Social Affairs webpage on 4 May 2020. It is not known exactly how eligibility was determined.

⁴¹ Lebanon, Ministry of Social Affairs, 2020.

⁴² Jalkh, 2020; El-Hage, 2020; United Nations, 2020b, p. 81.

⁴³ Newsom, 2020; Jalkh, 2020.

⁴⁴ L'Orient le Jour (2020b).

⁴⁵ World Bank, 2020c, pp. 6. Notably, different sources provide different information on how many rounds of distribution there have been and the number of households benefitting from each. According to United Nations, 2020c [IAC], the first round targeted 187,500 households, of whom 160,679 had been provided NSSP assistance as of 12 June. However, according to United Nations, 2020b, p. 81, the first round of assistance reached merely 140,000 households.

⁴⁶ According to the Prime Minister, as many as 240,000 households would now benefit from the NSSP—see l'Orient le Jour, 2020.

and local authorities. For example, the provisional list of beneficiaries was sent to the Ministry of Finance and Planning to exclude applicants who were receiving a salary or income from it to the Ministry of Social Development to exclude applicants already receiving assistance from it, and to the Ministry of National Economy to exclude anyone who had a registered enterprise or was a partner in a company or enterprise. Similar verification was carried out using the databases of the Ministry of Transport and

Communications, the Ministry of Local Government, the Ministry of Labour, and the Ministry of the Interior.⁴⁸

In late 2020-early 2021, 2 other batches of exceptional cash transfers at the same level and with similar targeting criteria were provided to around 25,000 households in total, with beneficiaries selected from the lists of applicants to the first batch who did not get a transfer, as well as from the database of the Ministry of Social Development.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ L'Orient le Jour (2020b).

⁴⁸ Raya, 2020.

⁴⁹ Announcements on the Ministry of Social Development Facebook page.

04

Use of Social Protection Information Systems to Deliver Assistance during Covid: General Considerations



Social protection information systems enabled Arab governments to scale-up cash transfer programmes rapidly during the pandemic. Beneficiary registries were used to provide benefit top-ups and additional services to current beneficiaries of social assistance. Social registries, in turn, were employed to pick up new beneficiaries. Since socioeconomic data of potential beneficiaries were already in these registries, programmes could directly proceed to selection of beneficiaries eligible for assistance, thus obviating the need for time-consuming and lengthy processes of data collection and application by potentially eligible households and individuals. Linking social and beneficiary registries to other government databases, such as social insurance and land and car ownership databases, facilitated express eligibility crosschecks, allowing exclusion of households unqualified for social assistance, as happened in Tunisia, Iraq, and Palestine, among others, although it is unclear to what extent crosschecks were automated in each case.

However, notwithstanding the multiple benefits of information systems, several risks and drawbacks need to be addressed for them to be more effective and efficient tools for delivering assistance and providing emergency response.

The most obvious drawback is that the initial setup of a social registry, including collection and verification of information, is a costly endeavour involving both purchasing equipment and data-collection efforts. However, in the longer term, the registries can reduce administrative costs of social assistance provision.

Additionally, there is the considerable risk that social registries may aggravate targeting errors. A household that is not included in a registry will be excluded from all social assistance programmes that rely on that registry for selecting beneficiaries. Moreover, if the data in the registry are inaccurate, be it due to flaws in the original data collection process⁵⁰ or due to the situations of some households subsequently changing, there is the risk that households may be erroneously excluded or included. Thus, data in registries must be regularly updated to account for fluctuations. However, a thorough database update is usually a lengthy and costly process, that was additionally complicated during the pandemic by the imperative of social distancing, the need to provide assistance in the shortest possible time and the explosion of demand stretching resources of social protection programmes.

Prior to the crisis, several management information systems in the region had been designed to deliver social assistance to the poorest populations. However, the pandemic led to emergence of new vulnerable groups not covered by social and beneficiary registries, such as informal workers who lost income. Hence, governments had to resort to emergency solutions, such as opening temporary application systems for informal workers, which generated multiple exclusion errors. Thus, clearly, a more universal approach to the design of information systems and better integration of data across the social protection system and with administrative databases could significantly improve effectiveness, efficiency, and speed of emergency response. Indeed, information in administrative databases could serve to identify potential beneficiaries of social assistance by applying vulnerability markers or to verify some socioeconomic characteristics of households without the need for household visits.

50

In Egypt, the design of the data collection questionnaire for the emergency scheme for informal workers affected by the Covid-crisis, which included only work categories traditionally performed by males, has led to discrimination against women.

Data exchange between social and beneficiary registries on one hand and other administrative databases on the other requires that the entities involved identify citizens and households in the same manner. A foundational ID system, in which citizens have national ID numbers, would facilitate that. However, a potential problem is that a citizen who does not have an ID number may be excluded from all social assistance programmes. Conversely, the use of ID numbers in social registries could incentivise individuals and households to obtain IDs, which may have positive effects beyond the realm of social assistance.⁵¹ The alternative to a foundational ID is a functional ID, which involves means of identification particular to the specific programme or registry. However, such an option has the disadvantage of considerably limiting opportunities for interoperability among databases and may entail a risk of duplication.⁵²

Yet, data integration is mainly a policy issue requiring political and institutional arrangements rather than technical ‘fixes’, for government institutions may be reluctant to share their data with each other. Indeed, resolution of this issue requires adequate governance solutions; for instance, an independent agency put in charge of one or several registries.⁵³ Moreover, storing and sharing personal data may also imperil the privacy, integrity and security of citizens and households, which requires adequate data protection legislation.

Finally, to ensure that information systems are accessible to users, prevalence across the country of a satisfactory internet infrastructure, high rates of internet penetration and ownership of access devices, and information technology skills is a prerequisite.

⁵¹ Chirchir and Barca, 2020, p. 31.

⁵² Barca, 2017, p. 50.

⁵³ For an extended discussion of governance of social protection systems, see ESCWA, 2019.

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The present publication is produced under the project on Strengthening Social Protection for Pandemic Responses, jointly implemented by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UNCTAD and the United Nations regional commissions, and funded by the United Nations Development Account. The project aims to build national capacity to design and implement social protection policies, with a gender perspective, for a rapid recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic; and to increase resilience to the negative impact of future exogenous shocks, especially among the most vulnerable populations. The project comprises the following three workstreams: building social protection capacities; advancing care economy; and guiding poverty reduction.

