

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

Report on the Electronic Discussion “Towards a New Welfare
Mix for the Arab Region?” Outline of the Social
Policy Report V
Held, 8-22 April 2013

BACKGROUND

ESCWA is currently focusing its work on the prevailing welfare mix, which is the role of different actors, such as the state, market and civil society in the provision of basic social services and social protection. Related research and discussions will be summarized in the upcoming Integrated Social Policy Report V “Towards a New Welfare Mix for the Arab Region?”, which is expected to be published in August 2013. Initial background studies have been discussed with experts from governments and other relevant experts at the Arab Forum “Towards a New Welfare Mix?”, which took place on 19 and 20 December 2012 in Beirut.

Following up on the discussions at the Arab Forum, the Social Development Division of ESCWA organized an electronic discussion with the theme “Towards a new welfare mix for the Arab Region?” , which took place from 8 to 22 April 2013 and was moderated by ESCWA.

The main objectives of the electronic discussion were: (a) to continue the dialogue and exchange of experiences among member countries, academia and development practitioners on the prevailing welfare mix in the Arab Region, and (b) to solicit feedback and inputs from member states, academia and development practitioners on the outline of the upcoming Integrated Social Policy Report V.

To facilitate the discussion, ESCWA established an electronic discussion platform, which can be accessed at: <http://css.escwa.org.lb/sdd/forum/category-view.asp>.

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The discussion platform was structured along the chapters of the envisaged Social Policy Report, with the outline of each chapter posted on top of each sub-forum. General and more specific questions related to each chapter outline were posted in the sub-forums to encourage the discussion. The outline and questions were formulated in English only, but participants were allowed to post their comments in English and Arabic.

The chapter titles and the related questions were:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Welfare policies over time

- Your general evaluation of the outline of the chapter: Is this what you would expect to read in this chapter? What is missing?
- Are the most important institutions for social protection and social services in Arab countries captured in the following chapters? What is missing?
- What would you describe as a common understanding of welfare in the Arab region, if there is any?
- Is welfare seen more as a private obligation (zakat, sadaqa) or more as a public concern (public services). What does this mean for the willingness to pay taxes to the state?
- Is the understanding of welfare in the Arab region following a more comprehensive view of social policy (social protection and services for all) or a rather narrow approach (charity for the poor)?
- Can you suggest literature on the question of how far the existing mix of providers corresponds to the preferences of citizens?

Chapter 3: The public sector in the Arab World: Scope and limitations of state provision of social protection and services

- Your general evaluation of the outline of the chapter: Is this a fair outline of the situation? Is this what you would expect and be interested in to read in this chapter? Can you make suggestion, what else could be discussed in this chapter?
- We did not find studies on citizens' perception of the quality of public services. Can you suggest any?
- Are gaps in service provision only a result of limited state capacity or are political choices involved? For example, which countries take a more liberal, market-oriented approach to the provision of social services?
- Can you suggest any other gaps in public sector services?
- Can you provide examples from the ESCWA region, where the public sector provides social services in good quality with good coverage?

Chapter 4: The corporate private sector: Commercial provision of social services and corporate philanthropy

- Your general evaluation of the outline of the chapter: Does this outline capture the main issues at stake with private sector provision? Does it provide what you would expect to read in this chapter?
- Are the benefits and risks of private sector provision well captured? What else would you highlight?

- Are the examples of private sector provision and their benefits and risks well chosen? Would you suggest highlighting different examples?
- Can you provide examples when successful government regulation of the private sector contributed to mitigating the risks of private sector provision of social services?

Chapter 5: Civil Society, religious institutions (zakat, waqf, other religious institutions), other faith based organizations, private foundations

- Your general evaluation of the outline of the chapter: Does the outline capture what you would expect to read in the chapter? What is missing? Are the main questions related to the services by non-state civil groups well captured in this chapter? What would you like to add? Is there a typical and important group of actors missing?
- Validity of the statements: Which of the statements in the outline above would you like to dispute and why? Please kindly elaborate.
- To which extent is the proliferation of civil society activity in the provision of social services a reflection of the gaps in public service provision?
- Can you give and describe examples where the government specifically allocated a role to civil society in the provision of social services?
- What would you consider as the main benefits and risks of social service provision by civil society?
- Do you think that civil society better suited to reach the poorest population strata than other actors? If so, please explain why and how.

Chapter 6: A new welfare mix for the Arab region?

- Given your knowledge of the situation, what other or additional conclusions would you like to add?
- Would you dispute any of the statements?
- What would you consider the main issues countries would have to consider when considering a different kind of welfare mix?

In addition to posting the chapter outlines and questions in the electronic discussion forum, the document was also sent as a pdf-document to all invitees. The same pdf-document was also available for download from the electronic discussion platform at <http://css.escwa.org.lb/sdd/forum/forums/thread-view.asp?tid=61&posts=1&start=1>. The overall outline received 14 downloads.

Invitees and participants of the discussion

ESCWA invited about 60 experts to participate in the discussion through formal invitation emails. The list of invitees included all participants of the Arab Forum, as well as other researchers with expertise in the relevant field and staff from other Regional Commissions dealing with social protection. The initial invitation emails were followed up with two reminder emails. In addition, an invitation letter was sent to all focal points to ESCWA of member countries. In response to the letter, three countries, namely Palestine,

Morocco, and Syria (in chronological order) responded with phone calls informing on their interest in participating in the discussion.

Apart from ESCWA staff, 11 invitees registered at the electronic discussion platform. Out of those 11 registered participants, 5 actively participated in the discussion by responding to the questions or giving general comments and suggestions. Among those registered were government officials from Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine, Civil Society Organizations from Lebanon, as well as independent researchers from the ESCWA region and outside the ESCWA region. Experts from the Governments of Egypt and Palestine were among the most active participants in the discussion. Out of those participants who actively sent comments, one posted comments in Arabic, while the others posted in English.

One invitee sent her regret by email that she was currently not able to participate at the discussion due to time constraints, but promised to send comments at a later stage. Another invitee commended ESCWA on the nice presentation of the electronic platform as well as the content of the envisaged report by email, but also apologized from participating at the electronic discussion due to time constraints.

Issues that were highlighted and suggested in the discussion were the following:

Several participants noted that the envisaged report discussed an area which was very important for the region.

Welfare policies over time

The theme that was most viewed and received the most comments was chapter 1 “Welfare policies over time” and most of the comments received were related to this chapter.

Participants agreed that the chapter should explain the need for social protection and its potential to enhance economic growth in more depth, especially as the current global trend was to reduce expenditure for social protection. It could also be explained how social protection could contribute to enhancing entrepreneurship and overcoming tribalism or sectarianism. Participants also pointed out that the concepts of social justice and redistribution of wealth should be discussed in more depth in that chapter.

Participants also expressed the view that the concept of welfare varies from country to country, but generally, the concept of welfare as “charity for the poor”, still seems to dominate. However, more comprehensive approaches were evolving and might need more time to develop. Participants also noted that for many citizens, welfare should go beyond meeting basic needs and should also include questions of rights and citizenship.

Participants also discussed that in Arab countries of today, welfare provision is generally seen as the obligation of the state. But although many citizens expected from the state to provide social services, many people did not link those expectations to their personal duty to pay taxes. Thus, public sector employees are those who pay the bulk of taxes, because they cannot evade the payment of taxes. It was also pointed out that the obligations of the state should not only be to provide social services, but also to encourage the private sector to display social responsibility.

It was also noted that the role of International Organizations in shaping welfare policies, such as specifically UNRWA in the case of Palestine, should be highlighted. In addition, the role of semi-governmental

institutions such as the Social Fund for Development, which played an important role in Egypt, could be highlighted in the report.

The public sector in Arab countries

Participants suggested that the chapter should take economic disparities across countries in the ESCWA region into consideration, because these are a key determinant of the level of social services. The chapter should also discuss the quality of public sector services and coverage of the public sector to remote and marginalized areas.

Participants also noted that in some countries, particularly in Palestine and Yemen, public service provision was largely dependent on donor funding. In addition, corruption had a negative impact on public service provision and the distribution of cash transfers. It was also noted that public services were concentrated in urban areas and had difficulties reaching marginalized groups and remote rural areas.

The Corporate Private Sector

It was pointed out that the chapter outline gave a very good overview, but it should also discuss how Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) could contribute to the provision of social services and in turn which public policies could encourage CSR. This is especially important against the background of current fiscal constraints of many countries. It was also suggested to discuss how foreign investors could contribute to providing social protection in Arab countries.

Designing a welfare mix for the Arab region

It was suggested that this chapter could also discuss empowerment strategies and how beneficiary groups could be actively included in the design of a welfare mix in order to facilitate the paradigm shift away from the traditional charity approach to an approach where all actors act in a complementary way.

Lessons learnt

While some helpful comments and suggestions were received that could enrich the Social Policy Report, active participation rate compared to the number of invitees was low. As only a small number of invitees responded why they could not participate, it is difficult to analyze reasons for low participation. However could range from technical barriers including low bandwidth or unfamiliarity with such a platform, the need to put comments in writing, that comments would be publicly visible, or generally that incentives to participate in such a discussion are low.

There may be a need to reconsider whether the modality of an electronic platform is the appropriate modality for discussing the draft outline of a planned report for the following reasons: (1) the possibility that such an

electronic platform forms a technical barrier for some participants, especially for those living in areas with low bandwidth, (2) the time required to establish such an electronic platform may not be justified if compared to the number of comments received.

Another possibility to conduct an electronic discussion could be to send out the outline in a word-document and participants respond through emails and/or by making their comments directly in the document.