
Framework and Guiding Questions

Ministerial Forum 2021

*The future of Social Protection in the Arab Region: building
a vision for a post-COVID-19 reality*

Key topics

The COVID-19 crisis has not only reaffirmed the relevance of comprehensive and inclusive social protection in the Arab States but also allowed for policy innovation and advances in the social protection field. The countries in the region have made great efforts during the pandemic to ensure the continued implementation of social protection programmes and their rapid expansion to cover new beneficiaries, as well as introducing emergency transfer programmes to provide assistance to those in need. However, even before the pandemic, the region had seen noteworthy policy developments in the social protection sector, including the introduction of new schemes, the kickstarting of tax and subsidy reforms to ensure equity and financing, the establishment of coordination committees, and the introduction of integrated registries.

The developments in the social protection sector over the past years and the recent experience with the COVID-19 health crisis have revealed four themes that are key to the post-pandemic vision for social protection in the Arab world: (i) **coverage**; (ii) **shock-responsiveness**; (iii) **financing**; and (iv) **governance**. National ownership is key for all of them, while acknowledging the assistance role of the international community in some countries in the region. These themes are also covered in several international and regional frameworks and commitments (see boxes below).

First, COVID-19's disproportionate effects on the informal economy but also on those outside the labour force due to pre-existing inequalities, such as women, refugees and people on the move, and persons with disabilities, as well as other vulnerable groups such as older persons and children, have underscored the need to increase the **coverage** of social protection programmes, ensuring that everyone's right to social protection is fulfilled. In many countries in the Arab region, there was already very little coverage for those groups prior to the pandemic. Therefore, it is imperative that national approaches to building universal social protection systems for leaving no-one behind are shared and commitments are established.

Box 1. Key frameworks and commitments regarding social protection coverage

1. International human rights frameworks, such as the **UDHR** (Art.22, 23 and 25), **ICESCR** (Art. 9), **CRC** (Art. 26), **CEDAW** (Art. 11), **ICERD** (Art. 5e) and **CRPD** (Art.28) call for the right to social protection.
2. The **Arab Charter on Human Rights** also includes the right of all to an adequate standard of living, ensuring well-being and a decent life, including adequate food, clothing, housing, and services (Art.38).
3. **SDG 1.3** calls to “implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable”.
4. The **ILO [Convention 102](#)** establishes worldwide-agreed minimum standards for nine branches of social security: medical care, sickness benefits, unemployment benefits, old-age benefits, employment injury benefits, family benefits, maternity benefits, invalidity benefits, and survivors’ benefits
5. The **ILO [Social Protection Floors Recommendation](#)** (202) asks members to establish nationally defined social protection floors, applying the principle of universality of protection, based on social solidarity by provision of four core guarantees: 1) access to essential health care and basic income security for 2) children, 3) older persons and 4) working-age individuals who are unable to earn sufficient income.
6. The **ILO [Global call to Action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis](#)** reemphasises the need to achieve universal access to comprehensive, adequate and sustainable social protection, including nationally-defined social protection floors.
7. The **[Arab Labour Organisation Recommendation No. 9 on Social Protection for Workers in the Informal Sector](#)** calls on governments to provide social protection measures especially child allowances, invalidity insurance and pensions to informal workers.
8. The **UNHCR [Global Compact for Refugees \(GCR\)](#)** and **[Global Refugee Forum \(GRF\)](#)** seek to improve socioeconomic outcomes for refugees and host countries, including expanding and strengthening social protection systems.
9. The **UN [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#)** aims to enhance pathways for regular migration, which is important to provide not only access to the labour market in countries of destination, but also to contributory social security and broader social protection services.

Second, the swiftness of the COVID-19 pandemic and its enormous impacts on all aspects of society and sectors of the economy has demonstrated the crucial importance of **shock-responsiveness**—i.e. the capacity to respond rapidly to shocks—for social protection systems. While some countries in the Arab region have led the way in providing rapid assistance to large shares of the population, the pandemic has also highlighted many key gaps in systems’ preparedness to shocks. This encompasses including forcibly displaced populations in shock-responsive actions and widening the scope of mechanisms for mass displacement events.

While improved beneficiary identification, registration, delivery channels, and contingency financing will be key to better responses in future crises, a system’s shock-responsiveness is inextricably linked to the existence of strong regular social protection systems, which must

address risks comprehensively based on entitlements, have access to adequate and predictable resources, and be enshrined in legislation. In the Arab region in particular, the role of humanitarian actors in providing assistance during crises is key, which calls for a plan to further enhance the humanitarian-development-peace nexus in the region.

Box 2. Key frameworks and commitments regarding the shock-responsiveness of social protection

1. The [Grand Bargain](#) commitment made by the humanitarian and development communities at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 calls to increase the use and coordination of cash-based programming and collaborative approaches, especially before a crisis (preparedness) and during its early stages, rather than reactively.
2. The [UN Common Cash Statement](#), launched in December 2018, recognises cash assistance as a crucial instrument to assist affected populations in a principled and dignified manner, aiming to improve complementarities, synergies and accountability among UN agencies and governments in supporting vulnerable populations, building on existing national social protection systems where feasible and relevant.
3. The [IOM Progressive Resolution of Displacement Situations Framework](#) acknowledges that displacement vulnerabilities are resolved in a progressive manner, and therefore focuses on strengthening coping capacities (such as circular migration, pre-emptive movement, remittances, informal labour, and community-based safety nets), increasing access to basic assistance and improved livelihood opportunities.
4. The [Global Compact on Refugees \(GCR\)](#) seeks to improve socioeconomic outcomes for refugees and their hosts, including through the provision of timely, predictable, adequate, and sustainable international support to build resilience in the face of climate change and other economic, social and environmental shocks, and expand and strengthen social protection systems.
5. In the [Global Refugee Forum \(GRF\)](#), states and other actors made over 100 pledges for inclusive national policy solutions to support 'out of camp' policies, strengthened asylum systems, refugees' access to work and financial services, and the inclusion of refugees in national and local development plans, and national education and health systems.
6. The [Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan \(3RP\)](#) is a strategic coordination, planning, advocacy, fundraising, and programming platform for humanitarian and development partners to respond to the Syria crisis, including providing humanitarian assistance to refugees and strengthening the capacities of national actors.

Thirdly, there is a clear need to strike an appropriate balance between coverage, adequacy and sustainability in **financing**, to ensure fairness and solidarity in the financing mix both within and across generations. This calls for more extensive use of tax and contribution-based financing mechanisms to expand the impact of social protection, even if this requires reprioritising public investments. Innovative financing sources, such as *Zakat*, expansionary monetary policies (where feasible) as well as long-term, pooled financing agreements with international actors, will be important in some countries to ensure the future of social protection financing in the region. Moreover, while social spending is high in some countries, there is

room to improve efficiency and effectiveness, which will require strengthening public financial management.

Box 3. Key frameworks and commitments in regarding social protection financing

1. ILO [Convention 102](#) and [Social Protection Floors Recommendation](#) (202) stress that social protection systems should be financed on the basis of solidarity, collective financing and risk pooling, with participation of governments, workers and employers.
2. The [Addis Ababa Action Agenda](#) includes a commitment to provide fiscally sustainable and nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, with a focus on those furthest below the poverty line and the vulnerable, persons with disabilities, indigenous persons, children, youth, and elderly people.
3. In its [Conclusions at the last International Labour Conference](#), the **Committee** for recurrent discussions on social security calls to ensure adequate and sustainable financing through a combination of contributory and non-contributory means, making use of progressive and effective taxation systems, as well as effective allocation of resources, and to explore options for mobilising international financing and engage in discussions of concrete proposals for a new international financing mechanism, such as a Global Social Protection Fund.

Finally, the integration and overall **governance** of social protection responses is key to a well-functioning social protection landscape in a post-COVID-19 reality. This requires strong legal and policy frameworks, complementarity of systems and programmes, reduction of duplications, coordination between governmental, non-governmental and humanitarian actors, and the development of capacity and infrastructure for effective administration and service delivery across different sectors. Accurate data disaggregated by age, gender and location, as well as strong monitoring and evaluation and accountability mechanisms will also be key here. Moreover, future expectations on how local level governments, civil society and international actors can be engaged in an accountable, participatory and nationally-owned policy development process are crucial discussion points, and the COVID-19 experience has provided many lessons.

Box 4. Key frameworks and commitments regarding governance

1. The ILO [Social Protection Floors Recommendation \(202\)](#) calls upon members to anchor basic social security guarantees in legal frameworks, to coordinate with other policies beyond social protection, and to formulate and implement extension strategies, based on national consultations through effective social dialogue and social participation.
2. The [Arab Labour Organisation Recommendation No. 9 on Social Protection for Workers in the Informal Sector](#) calls on governments to support the gradual formalisation of informal workers through the promulgation of appropriate legislation and working mechanisms.

Guiding questions

The forum will be centred around the post-COVID-19 vision for social protection through four thematic questions, one for each of the aforementioned themes, as well as a set of sub-questions for each theme. The goal is not to answer all questions extensively. Instead, the questions should be seen as providing inputs for each theme.

Main guiding question: What is your country's social protection vision for after the COVID-19 pandemic?	
<p>1. Coverage— Delivering the right to social protection for all through inclusive social protection systems, leaving no-one behind</p>	<p>How to ensure that everyone in need is covered by social protection?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In what ways does your country need to expand its social protection coverage after COVID-19, especially to those often left behind (such as women, informal workers, agricultural workers, non-nationals/people on the move, children, elderly people, and persons with disabilities)? - Please mention one or two key actions exemplifying how your country will/can improve the complementarity between contributory and non-contributory social protection systems to achieve universal coverage. <p>Please mention one or two key areas your country needs to work on to make its social protection system more inclusive and fair, including for women, children, elderly people, people with disabilities, and people on the move (i.e. assessments, tools, technology, skills, stronger PFM systems etc.).</p>
<p>2. Shock responsiveness— Enhancing the resilience of social protection systems for future shocks</p>	<p>How to ensure social protection systems are more resilient and better prepared to respond to the next crisis?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What kind of shocks and risks will your country's social protection system need to address going forward? <p>What key policy and programmatic areas/actions should be prioritised for your social protection systems</p>

	<p>to become more resilient (ensure existing programmes can continue) and responsive to shocks (in terms of scaling-up to address increased needs)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If applicable, please mention one or two possible pathways in your country for the transition from humanitarian interventions into national social protection systems. - What is the potential for including refugees, other forcibly displaced groups and people on the move in shock-responsive mechanisms and what key areas of support by the international community would be required?
<p>3. Financing—for comprehensive, adequate, and sustainable social protection systems post COVID-19</p>	<p>How to balance the need for increased investment in social protection with ensuring fiscal space and financial sustainability in the future?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How will your country’s financing mix for social protection look like in the future to ensure equity and solidarity in financing as well as fiscal sustainability (e.g. tax-financed, government expenditure reallocation, contribution for workers and businesses, etc.)? - What space for innovation in financing for social protection do you see in your country? What role should/could be played by sources such as <i>Zakat</i> and/or international finance? - How will social protection reforms in your country be integrated into/complemented by other reforms (PFM, subsidy, tax, etc.)? Do you anticipate any related synergies?
<p>4. Governance—Integrated and coordinated social protection approaches for greater impact</p>	<p>How can the governance, administration and coordination of the social protection sector improve in a post-pandemic world?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Please mention one or two key actions through which social protection in your country could/would be better coordinated and better integrated with other public services/ministries (e.g. economy, planning, employment, health and education, infrastructure, rural development and the environment). How can legal, institutional, and administrative frameworks be strengthened in this regard? - What will be the role of other actors, such as local level governments, civil society and/or international actors, in the provision of social protection in your country?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Please mention one or two actions through which social protection would/could be made more participatory, including for groups such as women and remote and rural populations. How can accountability/transparency be improved in your country?
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