

## **ESCWA's Work Programmes toward The Third United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (2018-2027) on Accelerating Global Actions for a World without Poverty**

Over the past two decades, the Arab region has seen uneven development interrupted by economic crises, civic uprisings, outbursts and resurgence of cross-border conflicts, and most recently a health pandemic. Economic fortunes diverged across different parts of the region, with different implications for the countries' poorest. Estimates of poverty rates have showed no consistent trends across countries. Poverty headcount ratios measured by the \$1.9 per day poverty line have risen since 2015 for the region as a whole. Trends in national poverty lines have generally followed the same trend due to conflicts in Syria, Yemen and rising poverty in Egypt, the region's largest country. Multidimensional poverty has also been shown to be relatively high, affecting four in ten individuals, when measured using a regional multidimensional poverty index.<sup>1</sup>

Against this background, ESCWA has worked on maintaining the momentum generated by the adoption of a decision by the Arab Development Summit (Beirut, 2019) that places poverty reduction as a top regional development policy priority and takes halving multidimensional poverty by 2030 as a main target. This has become particularly critical recently in light of the emergent health pandemic. COVID19 has presented a major challenge for the pursuit of a world without poverty but its negative impact is particularly severe in some Arab states given the fact that a majority of the workers in the countries where the poor are concentrated are informally employed.

The following key activities outline the progress made in implementing the plan of action in the fight against poverty in accordance with the main areas of policy focus:

### **1. Structural Transformation, Productive Employment and Decent Work in the Context of a Changing Global Scenario**

ESCWA in partnership with the ILO is monitoring progress on decent employment and labor market challenges stemming from growth process and structural transformation. A joint proposal is underway to support member countries in estimating and addressing the impact of COVID. In addition ESCWA is leading a regional project to assess and advise countries on the impact of the changing global economy and more specifically the fourth industrial revolution on productive employment and decent work opportunities by creating a digital platform to monitor the job creation and job losses in most affected sectors with the aid of big-data platforms.

Knowing the great potential of technology to help delivering the sustainable development goals (SDGs), ESCWA aims at accelerating the implementation of SDG 1 to eradicate poverty through 1) helping emerging market countries benefiting from information and communications technologies and bridging the digital gap; 2) enhancing science, technology and innovation

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<sup>1</sup> ESCWA (2017) Arab Multidimensional Poverty Report.



programs; and 3) promoting access to and the development and transfer of productive technologies and know-how. This is achieved through promoting inclusive policies and purposeful template regulations, capacity-building and advisory capacity to direct the acceleration of technological development purposefully to ensure dignified living for all.

There is a need to prepare all population segments for the shift taking place to increase opportunities since future jobs are requiring a mix of digital, STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths), and emotional intelligence skills. Pressing needs are 1) skilling and reskilling, 2) shifts from credentials to demonstrated skills, and 3) shifts from literacy indicators to skills indicators. However, the fundamental solutions to employment and decent work challenges lie in the area of adjusting macroeconomic policies to promote investment and growth outside traditional rentier and oil-led economic activities and sectors.

## **2. Expanding Social Protection Systems to Underpin Inclusive Poverty-Reducing Development**

ESCWA is assisting Arab national governments to reform their social protection by expanding and improving coverage of the population in the framework of two inter-governmental working groups on social protection and disability in a two-year span.

The main impact is the establishment of large-scale social assistance programs that provide poverty-targeted cash transfers to marginalized and vulnerable population including persons with disabilities, and social registries serving as an important delivery infrastructure of assistance to vulnerable households.

The main social policy challenge is that relying on existing programs and targeting only the most vulnerable under social insurance funds programs leaves large shares of informal sector workers unprotected and at a greater risk, even though they will be hard hit by the COVID crisis. Hence, there is a need to swiftly expand existing social protection networks to cover these groups that would be most affected. However, as highlighted by the ESCWA Fiscal Survey<sup>2</sup> the scale up presents an economic policy challenge for many countries with limited fiscal space.

## **3. The Future of Food and Sustainable Agriculture and Addressing Climate Change**

Food security lies at the heart of sustainable development. ESCWA, in close cooperation with the League of Arab States, UN Environment Programme and other regional and international organizations, provides technical assistance to Member States on food and environment issues and promotes green economy policies and tools across the region.

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<sup>2</sup> ESCWA (2020).



In addition, ESCWA facilitates regional consultations on global food and environment issues and priorities and promotes the implementation of the outcomes of major United Nations conferences on sustainable development, notably the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In an effort to protect the poor from the COVID19 impacts, ESCWA advocates a regional emergency response for Arab Governments to mobilize resources and expertise through establishing a regional social solidarity fund targeting poor countries to provide relief during food shortages and health emergencies and implementing the ministerial declaration of the World Trade Organization and the ‘Code of Conduct’ on public stockpiling/holding.

#### **4. Reducing Inequalities**

Inequality in the Arab region is subject to a knowledge deficit due to data paucity and inconsistencies. Realizing the importance of addressing this knowledge gap, ESCWA and the Economic Research Forum partnered along with five different universities gathering more than 30 experts over two years of work to rethink the stylized facts of inequality in Arab countries focusing on non-income dimensions (health, education and living conditions) for the first time. Results showed that the Arab region has made considerable human capital gains over the past two decades. However, significant inter-country inequalities underlie the average region-wide achievements and some structural inequalities remain deeply entrenched. In addition, inter regional inequalities increased in some aspects. ESCWA also undertook several training and capacity building activities focused on inequality and social justice including the development of an Institutional Gaps Assessment Methodology and a Social Justice Barometer for measuring social justice in the policies of Arab countries, as part of work on the Development Account project on social justice. Moreover, ESCWA has commenced a project on monitoring gender justice aimed at reducing gender injustices through assessment of legislations and policies and developing an interactive tool to present the results.<sup>3</sup>

These activities helped to stimulate public policy discussions around inequality issues in the Arab region.

#### **5. Addressing the Non-Income Forms of Poverty and Fighting Poverty in Fragile and Humanitarian Contexts**

ESCWA is currently supporting eight countries in the region in developing their national multidimensional poverty indices which are a key input into the poverty reduction strategies. Furthermore, as part of the UN Development Account program on Statistics for the SDGs (2016-2020), technical assistance was provided on poverty measurement and the use of big data for

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<sup>3</sup> ESCWA (2018) Gender Justice and the Law, UN ESCWA Report.  
<http://genderjustice.unescwa.org/main.aspx>



measuring welfare. Ongoing work also includes small area estimation of poverty and the use of high frequency surveys.

At the regional level, ESCWA initiatives on poverty and inequality were tailored towards: supporting the League of Arab States, informing decision makers in Member States with findings of in-depth analysis on the prevalence and characteristics of multidimensional poverty, capacity building of Member States in developing policy tools to address multidimensional poverty, offering tailored technical support to Member States, and advocating with and engaging a broader set of stakeholders.

The main achievement to build on is the Strategic Framework for the Arab Poverty Reduction Strategy endorsed by the Arab Summit, concluded in Beirut during 19-20 January 2019. The main challenge is the expected rise in poverty from the current COVID crisis that will add more stress on all countries, especially least developed countries. However, estimating the impact of poverty at this stage can be speculative in the absence of up to date surveys.

