

Project Briefing

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Key points

- Social protection is an important policy area in the Middle East and North Africa Region, although most related resources are currently spent on regressive subsidies
- Despite important progress in child well-being indicators across the region, income, gender and spatial inequities remain that keep children in a situation of poverty and vulnerability
- Well designed and evidence-based child-sensitive social protection can be instrumental in improving the equitable development of children in the region

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Children and social protection in the Middle East and North Africa

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This Project Briefing synthesises findings from a study mapping social protection in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region,¹ with a particular focus on policies and programmes that impact children and how these might be strengthened. The study was conducted by the Overseas Development Institute and commissioned by UNICEF's Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa (MENARO).

The conceptual framework for the mapping exercise draws on two strands of thinking:

- Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler's (2004) transformative framework, which classifies approaches to social protection as protective, preventative, promotive and transformative.
- The Joint Statement on Advancing Child-sensitive Social Protection (DFID et al., 2009), which defines child-sensitive social protection policies as those which address 'the inherent social disadvantages, risks and vulnerabilities children may be born into, as well as those acquired later in childhood'.

The mapping was based on a desk review of secondary data and literature across 19 countries in the region, complemented by regional- and country-level stakeholder telephone interviews in a selection of seven countries: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and Yemen. The choice of countries reflects availability of information and a desire to cover a range of contexts.

Poverty and vulnerability in MENA

There are a number of interrelated factors involved in poverty and vulnerability in the MENA region. Approximately 20% of the population is living below the \$2-a-day poverty line, with the average extreme poverty rate in lower-income countries 32.5% in 2005. In many countries (Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia), significant numbers live just above the poverty line and thus are vulnerable to falling into poverty. Other

aspects include food insecurity and vulnerability to rising food prices – the region is the world's most food import-dependent, importing 50% of regional food consumption (IFPRI, 2010); has the worst water scarcity in the world (UNDP, 2009); and is vulnerable to humanitarian crises stemming from conflict (Lebanon, Iraq, OPT, Sudan, Yemen). Meanwhile, demographic pressures and the resulting youth bulge are limiting young people's work opportunities: at 25%, the region has the highest youth unemployment rate in the world. Finally, the integration of numerous refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers varies substantially from country to country and often by particular refugee group. Many live in marginalised conditions and lack sufficient access to social services and support.

Vulnerabilities facing children

Some countries have seen improvements in child wellbeing in the past few years, particularly with regard to schooling and health, but significant problems remain. In Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Syria and Yemen, at least 20% of children suffer from moderate or severe underweight or stunting.² The under-five mortality rate remains significantly high in the poorest countries, while primary school enrolment rates in these countries remains low. There are also significant spatial and socioeconomic inequalities in educational access and achievement, with poor rural children particularly disadvantaged. There are notable gender disparities in some countries in the region, particularly at secondary schools.

Child labour affected 10% of children aged 5-14 in 2008.³ Early marriage still occurs in some countries: for example, 19% of women in Yemen and 23% in Iraq are married before the age of 18. Some girls still experience female genital cutting. The socio-cultural acceptance of these gendered practices in some countries contributes to furthering social vulnerabilities. Children displaced during emergencies and

conflict are exposed to violence, exploitation and abuse, although data are not sufficiently available to document this.

Social protection

As in most middle-income countries, across the region most social protection is domestically financed and state-provided. Donors play a significant role in lower-middle-income countries and those affected by conflict. In some countries, there is significant provision by civil society organisations – for example, in Lebanon, this sometimes complements and even substitutes for state provision. While most social protection interventions are not specifically child-focused, many children benefit indirectly from them through their households. This overview focuses on non-contributory social protection, which is targeted primarily at the poor and other vulnerable groups.

In lower-middle-income countries, targeted social assistance, food assistance, food and energy subsidies, and public works programmes are the most common. In middle-income countries, those outside the formal sector (approximately 60%) have access to different safety nets of varying effectiveness, ranging from generalised food and energy subsidies and asset transfer programmes to targeted cash transfer (CT) programmes. The richest Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries generally provide free universal medical care, education and work training programmes and some CTs to disadvantaged groups. Social protection benefits are available to citizens, but rarely to migrants or refugees, who are assisted mainly by charitable organisations.

Food and commodity (mainly energy) subsidies generally absorb the greatest share of social protection budgets. These programmes are politically popular because they are seen to relieve household pressures and are easier to implement than targeted programmes. However, recent research into these programmes⁴ has shown them to be regressive and not pro-poor. For example, Egypt's food subsidy experienced 83% leakage to the non-poor in 2008/09 (World Bank, 2010).

Child-sensitive social protection

Targeted CTs are found in most countries in the region and are implemented in a variety of ways: regular, sporadic, standalone or complementary to other programmes. Some CTs target low-income households or individuals, but most use categorical targeting of country-defined vulnerable populations, which means they are generally not means-tested. Many focus directly or indirectly on children.

Examples of CT programmes include Algeria's Allowance for School Children, which targets primary-aged children in poor households and reaches 3 million children, and Jordan's National Aid Fund, which

targets orphans, the elderly, persons with disabilities and families headed by divorced or abandoned women and which covers approximately 206,000 beneficiaries (although children are the most under-represented among these categories). Most CTs are currently unconditional, although some conditional CTs have recently been introduced, for example the Tayssir Programme in Morocco, which is conditional on children's primary school attendance.

Supporting children's access to education is the most common child-specific area of social protection, contributing to improvements in access and retention. For example, in Gulf countries, universal abolition of school fees has led to almost universal enrolment and completion. In other countries, measures include CTs; subsidised transport and residential housing for students from remote areas to enable access to schools (Morocco); fee waivers for children with disabilities (Algeria, Yemen); and free schooling for some refugee children, implemented primarily by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The latter highlights the fact that, in some contexts, humanitarian assistance makes an important contribution to social protection. There are also school feeding programmes and food rations in school, which provide incentives to access education while supporting nutrition (Algeria, Djibouti, OPT, Yemen).

Nevertheless, in the poorer countries of the region, and among particular disadvantaged groups (e.g. some refugees, nomadic children), there are still problems of school access. In addition, gender inequalities in education access persist in some countries (Yemen). There is a need for better targeted social protection to reach vulnerable groups still facing inequalities in education.

Programmes promoting the nutritional well-being of children under five and pregnant and lactating women are also common. These use a combination of food assistance, supplementation and fortification programmes, and nutritional education (Djibouti, Egypt, OPT, Yemen). Child malnutrition rates in some countries reflect a range of factors (related to poverty, unemployment, climate and food insecurity): better targeted social protection that reaches the most disadvantaged children could make an important contribution to improving their nutritional status.

Although many countries in the region have employment-based health insurance, this rarely covers poorer children, whose parents are typically outside the formal labour force. Most countries also provide health care that is officially free at the point of access, or where consultation charges are low, but services are often of low quality. While some countries are piloting schemes to increase access for the poor (Morocco), others (Egypt) have plans to increase cost recovery at the primary level, potentially undermining the poorest children's access.

There are many social protection programmes targeting groups of particularly vulnerable children:

- In Algeria, households with disabled children receive a cash grant to promote their care and access to school
- In Djibouti, a CT is part of a programme supporting orphans and vulnerable children (OVC)
- Egypt has programmes to reintegrate ex-child labourers into school
- In Egypt and Lebanon, there are shelters for abandoned children or street children
- In Yemen and Jordan, CT programmes target orphans as one of their vulnerable categories.

Evidence of the impact of these programmes is limited given the dearth of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms, and there is relatively little integration between child protection and social protection systems. Child rights legislation, considered a form of transformative social protection, has continued to develop in the region, although children in some countries remain under-protected in areas such as age of marriage, citizenship rights and violence.

Despite widespread youth unemployment, there are not enough large-scale and effective initiatives to enhance adolescents' and young people's skills to equip them for the job market or to offer them opportunities adapted to their varying skills. Young people's participation in more general productive social protection programmes such as cash for work and asset transfers, for example, is limited.

Key challenges to social protection and child-sensitive social protection

Some of the main challenges to expanding and strengthening child-sensitive social protection in the region include the following.

Political context

The recent wave of popular protests in the region has substantially changed the political context for

social protection programmes. Political transitions have created new vulnerabilities, particularly for households whose livelihoods have been disrupted. Where conflict or large-scale repression has broken out, important humanitarian needs have emerged, especially where supply lines have been damaged. Social protection can contribute to addressing some of these vulnerabilities, but design and implementation are critical here.

Increasing social protection provision has been a common response of governments attempting to head off popular pressures for reform or regime change. Table 1 outlines new social protection commitments announced in 2011, although there is still insufficient information available to ascertain to what extent these have been implemented – and the extent of these commitments raises questions about their affordability.

While some of these responses aim to tackle economic vulnerabilities, they have been announced as a form of political compromise to calm social unrest rather than based on evidence as to their effectiveness. This is particularly clear in the case of subsidies, which have been one of the most common responses so far. This may limit the potential to address the challenges currently facing the most vulnerable, including children.

Financial barriers

Average expenditure on social protection in MENA is estimated at 12.5% of total expenditure, or 4.6% of gross domestic product (GDP) (Prasad and Gerecke, 2010). Although this is more than in other middle-income regions, there are significant leakages. There are also system inefficiencies resulting from inadequate human resources and limited structural capacity in some contexts.

While most spending is currently consumed by regressive food and energy subsidies, some countries are moving towards more targeted inter-

Table 1: New social protection commitments in the MENA region in 2011

Social protection responses to protests	Examples
Increased spending on cash transfer programmes	Algeria, Jordan, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen
One-off cash payments , often linked to stopping participation in protests	Promised in Bahrain
Subsidies and tariffs Increase in food and/or energy subsidies Reduction of import tariffs on food Cancellation of plans for subsidy cuts/new food subsidies Increase in housing subsidies	Algeria, Jordan, Syria, Tunisia Algeria, Syria Egypt Bahrain, Kuwait Saudi Arabia
Measures to reduce youth unemployment Three-year interest-free loans and tax breaks for young entrepreneurs Fund to increase job opportunities for recent graduates	Algeria Yemen
Fee waivers for university students due to graduate this year	Yemen
General poverty reduction/employment promotion measures Wage increases for (some) public sector employees; social security tax concessions for businesses to encourage job creation Plans for minimum wage, unemployment insurance and labour-intensive growth strategy Personal income tax cuts Increased minimum wage	Algeria, Jordan, Oman, Syria Algeria Egypt Oman, Yemen

Source: Marcus et al. (2011).



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ventions, including conditional CTs. This shift, if politically feasible and adequately targeted, could increase the proportion of social protection resources that contribute to improving the lives of vulnerable children. It will be important to preserve the fiscal space governments currently allocate to existing programmes, as well as securing new sources of funding, which in oil-rich countries might include oil revenues.

Monitoring and evaluation

An important problem in the region is the dearth of rigorous information on the impact of social protection programmes: M&E is not a common practice and evaluations are seldom available. There has been a recent push to evaluate social protection interventions, mostly promoted by donors (e.g. the World Bank). This is starting to generate some useful data, although these are still not used systematically to inform design.

Fragmentation in provision

Social protection suffers from a proliferation of programmes and actors, with some targeting overlapping population groups. An important step in improving efficiency and coordination is the development of single national registers, to avoid duplication of benefits and to monitor progress of beneficiaries. Other steps include streamlining programme implementation and enabling scale-up or graduation from programmes according to regularly updated information about beneficiaries.

Targeting

Improving targeting could increase programmes' effectiveness, particularly in terms of reaching disadvantaged children. The move towards improved poverty targeting could reduce the leaking of cash and food transfers, but reforms that restrict eligibil-

ity for provisions currently considered entitlements are controversial – and may be politically infeasible in the current climate. Additionally, the shift will require substantial capacity-building in poverty analysis and identifying beneficiaries.

Recommendations for strengthening child-sensitive social protection in MENA

There are a number of possible entry points for strengthening linkages to social protection to address children's vulnerabilities in a more integrated way. First, it is important to think about child-sensitive social protection beyond programmes that target children, so as to be better able to take advantage of existing opportunities. Such opportunities might include linking CT beneficiaries to complementary supportive programmes and basic social services, and including preventative and responsive social welfare services where necessary.

Second, multilateral agencies can support governments to strengthen their capacity to design more tailored and effective programmes that reach the most vulnerable children. Further, given the persistence of gender and age disparities, more disaggregated data are needed to enable differentiated analysis of the impact of social protection and to contribute to more effective policy and programming.

Given the number of positive experiences in the region, greater information and knowledge-sharing across countries is essential, to build on existing promising practices. This would be greatly enhanced by more systematic M&E of social protection programmes to generate information about the adequacy of their design and their impact, particularly on children.

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Endnotes, references and project information

Endnotes:

- 1 Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Yemen.
- 2 www.unicef.org/infobycountry/northafrica.html
- 3 www.childinfo.org/labour.html
- 4 Generally supported by the World Bank.

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Project Information:

This project was commissioned by UNICEF to map social protection in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region with a particular focus on policies and programmes that impact children. The study was based on a desk review of secondary data and literature across 19 countries within the MENA region, complemented by regional- and country-level stakeholder interviews in seven countries (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territory and Yemen).