

Research Briefing Notes

The Governance and Institutional Capacity for Social Policy in Conflict-Affected Countries in the MENA Region

Summary

The research is a Proof of Concept taking place between 2022 and 2025 which examines the policy discourses and perspectives among state officials and international development organisations about the role of social policy in enhancing social cohesion and social security in Jordan and Lebanon. These two countries have contrasting political economies and are both undergoing major reforms in the design of social policy services under the auspices of international development institutions (the World Bank, UNICEF, ILO and FCDO). They are hosts to the largest Refugee populations in the region and are experiencing increasing sensitivity around poverty and social protection as triggers of social unrest in these countries.

Research Background

The research addresses broad questions related to the governance and institutional capacity for social policy in conflict-affected countries. The specific research questions are:

- To what extent do policymakers and service users perceive there is a connection between social policy and conflict (conflict prevention) and what experiences or evidence do they have for this?
- How do we move from a “law and order” notion of peace to one based on “social welfare” and “cooperation”?
- What are the implications for understanding the conceptual and practice relationships between the two areas of policy practice? And there are new perspectives for Western foreign policy?

The data and methods that the paper is based on are part of ongoing qualitative research in the two countries. Around 20 semi-structured interviews with senior officials and programme managers in the Ministries of Social Affairs, Social Development and Planning overseeing the design and implementation of cash transfer programmes in both countries. The analysis is ongoing and follows the thematic networks approach (Attride-Stirling, 2020).

Key Findings

Crisis response (UNDP in particular): international organisations offer technical and financial support for humanitarian interventions and most notably cash transfers. This approach characterises their main policy response to conflict. As such, it is more oriented towards shock-responsiveness, rather than the prevention of conflict. UNDP has a Tension monitoring system (TMS) in some

countries such as Lebanon, working closely with police and local communities to track risks of violence in Lebanon

Political stability (donor countries such as the UK): political stability is the theme of engagement for donor countries seeking to support key countries like Jordan in the region. It underpins the reforms to expand social insurance, inclusion of informal sector and refugee workers in national social security systems

World Bank and IMF: international financial institutions are focused on budget efficiencies and welfare targeting, subsidy reform and the development of unified social registries. This help is part of a push towards social protection reform that in some respects incorporates refugees and informal sector workers better but in others excludes poor populations and undermines other allied services such as social services to poor households.

Jordan and Lebanon governments: there is increasing sensitivity around poverty and social protection as triggers of social unrest in these countries. Regardless of this, some policy makers may offer a broad-brush view of their social protection policies that emphasise lack of resources or state capacity. There is recognition that social welfare promotes social cohesion and avoids social unrest. In Lebanon, senior officials in this country noted the need for government social protection strategies to promote shock and crisis response (rather than prevention). In Jordan, they recognised that various factors can affect social cohesion, for example, poverty and family breakdown are among the top factors monitored by the national security unit.

Key Implications for Policy Action

There is a weak evidence base of social policy interventions preventing conflict in MENA. This could also be due to the importance of ideological drivers of conflict. Rather than prevention, the political dynamics around social protection is primarily motivated by appeasement or responsiveness to shocks.

Stronger evidence exists in the literature and empirically on the basis of the research reported here about the politicisation of access to social welfare services. Welfare and work-related benefits may be politicised such as in the provision of short-term handouts during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic or the extension of welfare arms to established political parties. As such, policy needs to be better oriented towards citizen welfare in a just manner, rather than be a tool of law order and state legitimisation.

Policymakers have a weak conceptualisation in policy terms of how social policy interventions can enhance peaceful cooperation; for example, the timing and type of interventions is poorly understood. There are still bridges to build between humanitarian actions and national social protection systems.

A prevailing policy assumption remains that targeted cash transfers are the most effective tool to reach poor households and digitisation prevents corruption and enhances access.

Key Policy Targets

Programme managers at Ministries of Social Affairs and Social Development, and international development organisations.

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