

Research Briefing Notes

Intellectual Disability and Social Protection Policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region (Conflict-Affected Countries):

A Proof of Concept Based on Lebanon, Tunisia and Jordan

Summary and Research Background

This project aimed to shed light on the social protection policies available to people with intellectual disabilities in conflict-impacted countries in the MENA region, namely, Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia. This encompasses direct crises such as the recent Israel-Lebanon conflict, and it also includes the shockwaves experienced in neighbouring countries such as the influx of Syrian refugees coming into Jordan in the past decade. That, and the presence of other crises such as the Beirut blast, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic difficulties experienced in the region have -to varying degrees- disrupted social protection systems, disproportionately harming people with intellectual disabilities and their carers.

We sought to collect and examine the perspectives of policymakers and NGOs, and most importantly, to amplify the voices of people with intellectual disabilities themselves. Our thematic analysis revealed key themes such as 'lack of implementation of laws,' 'chaotic social protection systems,' 'structural violence resulting from prolonged crisis,' and the burden on families who are often left to take sole responsibility for care.

Key Findings

There are significant gaps in the implementation of disability laws and social protection legislation in the MENA region (Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia). Local policies and guidance are often outdated, confusing to understand, lack enforcement, and fail to engage people with intellectual disabilities.

Bureaucratic hurdles, limited awareness, and a dominant medical model of disability hinder access to care, education, and employment leaving families to take on the burden of care and face financial strain and social stigma. Political and economic instability, the Covid-19 pandemic and rising tensions have exacerbated these challenges. That said, domestic and international organizations play important roles in filling these gaps. Some of these efforts are being translated into current national social protection reforms such as the introduction of Social Grants in Lebanon that aim to provide cash transfer support to people with disabilities (see <https://www.unicef.org/lebanon/national-disability-allowance>).

Policy Recommendations

The study calls for legal and governance reforms to align national laws with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, including updating Lebanon's Law 220 to adopt rights-based language, enforcing Tunisia's employment quotas or better still, developing a more integrative employment approach that includes people with disabilities, including people with intellectual disabilities especially in the private sector, and extending Jordan's Disability Law to include refugees

with intellectual disabilities. It emphasizes the need for independent monitoring and oversight bodies with representation from people with intellectual disabilities and their caregivers to ensure policy implementation.

Additionally, the study recommends crisis preparedness measures, such as prioritizing access to humanitarian aid for people with intellectual disabilities and integrating intellectual disability-inclusive criteria into donor funding. Finally, regional collaboration through a MENA taskforce is proposed to share best practices and improve systemic support across the region.

Dissemination

Our research has been disseminated in publications and at various conferences including:

2025 40th Annual Pacific Rim International Conference on Disability: By Us and For Us: Legacy and Future of Our Movement

April 15-16, 2025, Hawai'i Convention Centre, Honolulu, Hawai'i in person and online

Paper: Forrester-Jones, R., Jawad, R., Mustafa, M. Health and social justice and equity for people with an intellectual disability in the Middle East and North Africa Region: reality or rhetoric?

2024 Strengthening Social Protection, Security and Welfare in The Middle East and North Africa Region Key Findings and Recommendations for Research and Practice

November 27, 2024, London, United Kingdom & Online Hosted by the University of Birmingham and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI)

Speaker: Rachel Forrester-Jones: Social inclusion for vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities.

World Congress of the International Association of the Scientific Study of Intellectual and Developmental Disability IASSIDD

August 5-8, Sheraton Hotel, Chicago.

Paper: Forrester-Jones, R., Jawad, R., Mustafa, M. (2024) Advancements in Intellectual and Developmental Disability policy and services in the MENA region.

2023 Middle East and North Africa Research Group (MENARG), Western University, Ontario, Canada

April 2023, Department of History, Western

Paper: Forrester-Jones, R. The economic, social and cultural rights of vulnerable people in the Middle East and North Africa.

MENASP 10th Anniversary Conference: Crisis and Continuity: Towards Resilient, Inclusive, and Environmentally Sustainable Social Policies in the MENA Region

July 11-12, 2023, Rabat, Morocco in person and online

Forrester-Jones, R. and Jawad, R. (2023) Disability in the MENA region: supporting the supporters.

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