

Integrating social protection with child protection services towards better outcomes for children in the Middle East and North Africa

Karen Pereira, International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG)

Children in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are particularly vulnerable due to several factors, including conflict in some countries and high poverty levels. About 29.3 children in the region (one in four) experience acute poverty, lacking basic rights in two or more of the following dimensions: decent housing, healthcare, safe water, sanitation, nutrition, basic education and information (LAS, UN ESCWA, UNICEF, and OPHI 2017).

A holistic approach is required to break the pattern of compounding and cumulative vulnerabilities facing children and their families. Social protection schemes that are integrated with child protection services could help address different dimensions of child poverty and deprivation, reducing vulnerability across the life cycle. The Social Service Workforce (SSW) plays a critical role within social protection systems. They can be responsible for directly supplying services, administrating government agencies, and developing policy, research and advocacy. The SSW helps ensure that effective prevention and support services reach those most in need, and is a key actor in integrating social and child protection schemes.

A systematic and integrated social policy, particularly through the SSW, can improve the results and efficiency of both social and child protection by enhancing cross-sectoral coordination, increasing the ability to respond to complex needs, and improving human resources efficiency. Integrating these services can improve socioeconomic and well-being outcomes for children. Literature has shown the positive impacts of Cash Plus programmes on various outcomes, such as nutrition, education and production. Additionally, this integration allows to better address various factors that contribute towards causing or perpetuating harm to children, in addition to increasing the coverage of child protection schemes, since social protection schemes usually have broader coverage and more resources. Furthermore, a holistic look at the SSW—rather than a separate group of workers in each distinct sector—contributes to a better distribution of resources and planning of the workforce.

Against this background, the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) and the UNICEF MENA Regional Office developed a study (Pereira and Araujo 2022), analysing five case studies that demonstrate how integrated social and child protection systems enhance efficiency, especially of the SSW.

First, to improve the integration of these systems, it is crucial to promote establishing shared goals and joint planning between social and child protection ministries/cabinets and agencies, as well as between different government levels (national and local) responsible for implementing social services. Communication between responsible actors enables the exchange of information, improving the understanding of the needs of children and household needs. For example, the integration between two-line ministries in Tunisia allowed to provide broader coverage for child protection schemes, despite limited resources.

Another way of integrating social protection and child protection is by developing a combined database, with information about social protection programme participation as well as education, healthcare, and employment status of beneficiaries to identify and monitor households in need, although particular protocols are needed to manage sensitive information. Information on social protection and child protection aspects can also be used to prioritize the children most likely at risk in the context of constrained capacity of social and child protection services.

Another important measure is developing case management guidelines featuring clear procedures on how to link social protection and child protection and refer cases to relevant agencies or service providers. This requires providing improved child protection training to the SSW. Additionally, designing programmes with integrated services—through, for example, Cash Plus programmes with child protection components—can enhance outcomes, especially for children.

Furthermore, developing a unified social assistance system, integrating social protection and child protection in the same planning and monitoring framework, should be a key goal of social protection systems, following the Brazilian experience. This will help improve efficiency and better address the complex needs of children and households.

References:

LAS, UN ESCWA, UNICEF, and OPHI. 2017. "Arab Multidimensional Poverty Report". Beirut: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. <<https://archive.unescwa.org/publications/multidimensional-arab-poverty-report>>. Accessed 3 November 2022.

Pereira, K. C., and F. Araujo. 2022. "Integrating social protection with child protection services for better outcomes for children in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)". *Research Report*, No. 84. Brasília and Amman: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth and UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office.