Building shock-responsive national social protection systems in MENA

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Social protection is typically recognised as an important policy instrument for addressing idiosyncratic shocks, but recently several studies have sought to investigate how social protection systems can also be resilient and respond to covariate shocks. Informed by this growing body of evidence, the main objective of this study is to identify opportunities and challenges for enhancing shock-responsiveness in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, by analysing the cases of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, State of Palestine, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

The analysis is based on a literature review complemented by results from a survey designed and administered by UNICEF Headquarters to the respective Country Offices in the first quarter of 2018. Follow-up remote interviews were also held with Country Offices in June and July 2018. Given its limited scope, while this study might provide insights into the trends of national programming choices that are relevant for shock-responsiveness, it does not in any way suggest that the programmes analysed should be used in shock response, nor does it replace a thorough feasibility assessment, should this be considered an option.

Main findings

- The social protection systems reviewed have different levels of institutionalisation. At one end of the spectrum, some countries still do not have a social protection strategy; at the other end, there are systems embedded in legislation. Well-established systems are more likely to be more responsive to shocks, and having clear policies is key in this sense.

- The literature on shock-responsive social protection highlights that emergency-preparedness measures can include: having emergency operational manuals and training staff on them; having contingency funds; establishing contingency agreements with service providers; and the use of early-warning systems. However, the review of the cases in this study found that such measures are still uncommon.

- The lack of comprehensive national social registries in the region is a key challenge to enhancing system responsiveness, and registry coverage varies significantly across the cases. Still, some countries have made significant strides in creating programme databases that include information on a significant proportion of the population and/or on both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, which is important to enable scalability. Furthermore, Egypt, Jordan and the State of Palestine are also taking steps to build social registries, which are important tools for extending coverage beyond the target group of a specific programme.

- Fiscal space is a key consideration in making systems more shock-responsive, as inadequate funding hinders system scalability. The programmes reviewed in this study have generally been expanding their coverage and expenditure over time, but they still need to expand further to reach all poor and vulnerable households. Moreover, explicit contingency funds that could be rapidly mobilised for shock response were not identified.

- The major refugee crisis and the large number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region have underscored the coordination challenges between the humanitarian and social protection actors. Overall, challenges have arisen in terms of harmonising the provision of services across different interventions—a distinct concern for refugee-hosting countries. Iraq is the only country analysed where the right to national social protection initiatives is granted to non-nationals. However, this access is limited in practice.

- Monitoring and evaluation of regular programmes is not very robust in most cases, leading to a gap in evidence-based policymaking. These procedures could also benefit from stronger management and information systems.

- Implementation capacity is typically challenged by the precarious situation of programme staff, who in some cases are paid late or do not receive proper compensation for work-related expenses. These challenges can be particularly heightened at times of crisis.

Recommendations

- **Investments in preparedness and coordination are needed to enhance system resilience and responsiveness**: For countries that still have not devised a broad social protection strategy, establishing clear social protection policies should be the first priority. Moreover, factoring in scalability in policies during times of crisis can enhance their responsiveness. Furthermore, improving coordination between social protection, disaster management and humanitarian actors and strengthening emergency preparedness measures can boost system resilience and responsiveness.

- **From programme databases to integrated social registries**: The coverage of systems and registries should be expanded to all poor, near-poor and vulnerable people and beyond, and regular data assessments should be carried out during times of stability, to understand the extent to which social protection databases are current, complete and relevant.

- **Ensuring the scalability of payment systems**: Mapping potential alternative payment providers and having contingency agreements with them is key, as is investing in technology to facilitate payment processes.

- **Towards sustainable public funding of rights-based and responsive systems**: Governments should ensure public funding for the provision of regular social protection, and that these funds are ring-fenced—particularly during times of austerity. Contingency funding could also be secured by governments and/or donors, Zakat Funds or insurance mechanisms. Moreover, it is crucial to review the fiscal disbursement flows of social protection and to address bottlenecks, particularly where they impact the timeliness of payments to beneficiaries and programme staff.

- **Developing monitoring and evaluation systems for evidence-based programming**: During times of stability, it is necessary to invest in the development of robust monitoring and evaluation systems that deliver necessary data for evidence-based programming. These can also include resilience-related indicators at the beneficiary and system levels.

- **Investing in implementation capacity to ensure system resilience and responsiveness**: It is crucial to ensure that social workers and programme staff are valued, incentivised and able to carry out their services under both regular and extraordinary circumstances. A responsive system needs staff that are properly trained in emergency preparedness and response, as well as in the use of different mechanisms that enable it (e.g. the management information system, alternative payment providers), and in communicating programmatic decisions in potential responses to shocks.

Reference:
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