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SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE POLICIES OF ARAB STATES
THE NEW DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

I. BACKGROUND

1. Social justice is enshrined in the constitutions of member States of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and ranks high in their priorities. This is reflected in efforts to implement overarching human rights and socioeconomic and sustainable development goals. Nevertheless, several social justice challenges remain, including the discrimination and exclusion of vulnerable groups; poverty and income inequality; gender inequality; corruption; conflict; and occupation, which constitute social justice obstacles, specifically with regards to education, health, employment, social protection, knowledge, information and natural resources.
2. Those challenges and other structural problems associated with non-participatory politics sparked off social movements across the Arab region demanding justice, freedom and dignity. Public discontent and a sense of social exclusion have been fuelled by skewed allocations of resources, lack of transparency, unfair competition for jobs and the concentration of national assets in the hands of a few, with the majority of citizens insufficiently benefiting from economic growth.
3. The Arab region is facing pressing demands for transformative change towards new development models that uphold the values of social justice, equitable development, democracy, freedom and human dignity. Arab countries need to respond to these complex pressures by rethinking their social contracts, economic growth strategies, governance systems and legislative and regulatory frameworks in more inclusive ways, while safeguarding the principles of equality, equity, rights and participation upon which social justice rests.
4. Social justice is not a novel concept in the region, but a long-standing belief firmly anchored in Arab-Islamic contexts whose pillars revolve around three basic elements: absolute freedom of conscience; complete equality of all humans; and social interdependence among members of society.
5. ESCWA has developed the following preliminary comprehensive definition of social justice: equal rights, access to resources and opportunities for all men and women, with emphasis on the empowerment of disadvantaged groups, to participate in decisions that govern their lives.

II. KEY ISSUES

6. Challenges to social justice exist on various socioeconomic, environmental and cultural levels. Panel I will address the following issues: absence of consensus on the definition of social justice; discrimination and exclusion; and social protection services and social, political and economic participation as tools to achieve social justice.

A. ABSENCE OF CONSENSUS

7. Social justice is a complex, abstract and normative concept. Consensus on a unified definition and operational translation of social justice is sorely absent. For some, social justice means the fair redistribution of goods and services; for others, it entails human rights and equality. Adding to the confusion is the existence of several schools of thought with different perspectives on the issue of transitional justice.
8. While the operationalization of social justice will vary according to the specificities of each country, reaching consensus on how to mainstream social justice into development plans is key to ensuring that such plans contribute to building an equal-opportunity society and improve socioeconomic well-being. Recent changes in the Arab region seriously challenged prevailing social contracts. Most Governments responded with quick-fix reforms, expansion of welfare programmes and generous handouts in an effort to quell the crises and meet growing demands for equality, equity, participation and respect for human life.

B. DISCRIMINATION AND EXCLUSION

9. Traditionally, marginalized groups in the Arab region include persons with disabilities, young people, older persons, migrant workers and refugees. Women are also disproportionately disadvantaged.

1. *Persons with disabilities*

10. Persons with disabilities represent one of the world's largest and most vulnerable social groups. Approximately one billion individuals (15 per cent of the world population) are thought to be living with disabilities. In contrast, Arab countries report a relatively low disability prevalence (0.4-4.9 per cent), indicating significant disparities and challenges in the collection and analysis of disability data in the region.

2. *Young people*

11. Although young people (15-24 years old) represent around 20 per cent of citizens in Arab societies, this age group faces specific disadvantages that limit access to resources and opportunities, especially among young women and those residing in the least developed parts of the region. As a regional average, 23.2 per cent of young people are unemployed, compared to an adult unemployment rate of 14.4 per cent. Of particular concern is the situation of educated young people who are forced to accept work opportunities for which they are overqualified to make a living. This has resulted in an increase in the number of unemployed educated young people in the region and has consequently weakened the capacity of Arab countries to foster equitable development.

3. *Older persons*

12. Older persons (aged 65 and above) constitute only 4.1 per cent of the total Arab population. Nevertheless, demographic trends show that older persons are increasing both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of the total population, with the pace of the increase expected to pick up after 2025, from 5.5 per cent to 7.3 per cent in 2035; 9.8 per cent in 2045; and 11.7 per cent in 2050. Ageing in the Arab region is happening at a faster pace and sometimes in a context of low levels of development, adding urgency to the situation.

4. *Migrant workers*

13. Estimates from 2013 indicate that there are over 30 million international migrants in the Arab region, totalling 8.4 per cent of the population, up from 6.7 per cent in 1990. The six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council alone host over 22 million of these migrants, who make up almost 46 per cent of their populations, thus constituting demographic majorities in countries such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Jordan and Lebanon also host large populations of migrant workers, while North Africa hosts significant numbers of irregular migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa.

5. *Refugees*

14. In 2013, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees counted almost 2.3 million refugees in Arab countries from a global refugee population of around 10.5 million. Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen hosted the bulk of the refugee population; with Egypt, Iraq, the Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic each hosting refugee populations greater than 100,000. The majority of these refugees are from Iraq, Somalia, the Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic. Roughly 5 million Palestinian refugees also reside in the region along with 8.6 million internally-displaced persons, mainly concentrated in Iraq, the Sudan, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

C. SOCIAL PROTECTION SERVICES

15. Social protection schemes can check the growth of inequality while assisting people in securing their economic and social rights. Available tools include the redistribution of wealth and positive measures to empower people. In the Arab countries, the delivery of social protection services has been fragmented and project-oriented, assuming that improved services to the poor are best provided locally with the support of charities and other civil society organizations, while insufficiently addressing the root causes of inequality and poverty.

16. Despite promising initiatives to expand coverage and reform social security programmes, a number of deficits remain. Contributory social insurance schemes mainly cover public sector employees, military personnel and formal private sector workers; they are focused primarily on providing security for old age, illness and disability. Throughout the region, the majority of workers in informal sectors and temporary, agricultural and migrant workers tend not to benefit from such schemes. Few countries provide unemployment and child benefits. At the same time, non-contributory programmes or social safety nets, such as conditional and non-conditional cash transfers, have not sufficiently reduced poverty and inequality.

17. The Arab region continues to rely heavily on food and fuel subsidies. Despite contributing to poverty alleviation, subsidies are costly and encourage dependency. While half of all global energy subsidies are applied in the Arab region, fuel subsidies have insufficiently benefitted those who need them most. In Egypt and Jordan, over half of fuel subsidy benefits are captured by the richest quintile of the population.

18. Similarly, other social protection programmes, such as active labour market policies, employment services and public work programmes, have fallen short due to inadequate targeting and implementation.

D. PARTICIPATION

19. Participation in the context of social justice means involving people in decisions that govern their lives. While participation is a right, it is also a process without which equality and equity cannot be fully secured. Participation goes beyond the procedural aspect of influencing decisions; it can be considered as the duty of all citizens, not only to engage in deciding on the kind of public services needed in their areas, but also in the management of natural resources and wider participation in political and cultural life. The rationale for public participation is twofold: achieving better distributive outcomes; and strengthening democracy. With regard to the latter, participation is linked to power and is believed to shift existing power relationships as the traditionally weak and marginalized move into stronger positions.

20. Participation is inextricably linked to citizens' ability to influence policymaking and ensure that their demands are met through a variety of mediums, including elections and decentralized decision-making. Social movements and popular uprisings over the last four years have demonstrated the importance of participation. Demands included revising prevailing social contracts; formulating a socially just development paradigm that includes institutionalized participation; and improving equality, equity and rights. Civil society associations continue to be unmatched in their ability to represent citizens' aspirations and demands, and are key engines of participation. Their role as an interlocutor is therefore central.

21. The issue of consensus over social justice in the Arab region cannot be resolved without vast and substantive participation by citizens in shaping ideas and policy. Social justice cannot be reduced to a policy decision or treated as a transitory project. Hence, rekindling existing channels of participation and devising new ones to build far reaching consensus on social justice should be principal priorities.

22. Promoting participatory development is a challenging task, requiring the advancement of civic culture and of multiple mechanisms of cooperation between local actors, Governments, the private sector, civil society and external stakeholders, such as international donor organizations. International experience shows

that participatory tools and methods, such as participatory enumerations applied successfully in several African and Asian countries, can lead to favourable results.

23. Strengthening participation for social justice requires the development of institutional coordination bodies and dialogue mechanisms involving all key actors in the planning and decision-making process, thereby promoting institutional cooperation, and information and experience sharing.

III. OBJECTIVES

24. Panel 1 will provide a platform for dialogue and exchanging lessons learned among Arab leaders and prominent regional and international thinkers on social justice, so as to develop concrete proposals and policy options that can be incorporated into national and regional development plans.

IV. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

25. The following are the suggested discussion questions:

(a) How to devise policies based on rights, equality and equity? to tackle social injustices? How to combat different forms of injustice affecting different segments of society?

(b) What are the lessons learned from recent experiences regarding the integration of social justice into development plans? How to build consensus on social justice in the Arab region? On the basis of recent country experiences, how to mainstream social justice in development planning?

(c) What efforts are needed to promote the full and equal participation of persons with disabilities in social, economic and political life? What are the measures needed to eliminate physical, communication and attitudinal barriers that persons with disabilities face in accessing decent work opportunities and services, such as health care and education? What are the ways to enhance the availability and reliability of disability data, develop indicators for measuring policy impact, and strengthen monitoring and evaluation mechanisms?

(d) How can member States ensure universal access to social protection, including for migrant workers, in line with international instruments, such as the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrants Workers and Members of their Families? What legal reforms could undertaken to abolish discriminatory laws and institute a paradigm shift that promotes the inclusion of migrants from a social justice perspective? Should such measures guarantee civil rights, including the right to organize and collective bargaining; access to health services, education and skill upgrading?

(e) Why is the ratification of the Convention on Refugees the first step towards ensuring the rights of refugees? How to ensure that national civil registration and vital statistics systems are inclusive of refugees and forcefully displaced populations?

(f) How can social protection schemes take into account the needs of young people and focus on assisting them in this transitional stage of their lives? How can Governments help young people, particularly young women, make informed choices and provide services to help them overcome disadvantages?

(g) What kind of social pensions could help support older persons, especially women who have never contributed to pension schemes? How could health-care systems be adapted to provide affordable specialized care for older persons?

(h) What institutional set-ups could effectively involve all citizens in development, social and economic policy decisions? How to train civil servants and administrators on community participation tools, techniques and methods for establishing communication channels with citizens? How could collaborative

links be forged with groups that can assist in promoting social justice, including private sector corporations, civil society organizations and community-based organizations? How to establish participatory mechanisms that ensure that the voices of all people, especially vulnerable and marginalized groups, are heard? Is it possible to enact new regulations and institutional mechanisms that allow people to engage in policy debates and participate directly or indirectly in deciding on basic service delivery and priority projects for public funding, at both the national and local levels?

(i) How do countries in the Arab region address gender inequalities? How to ensure that constitutional and legal reforms recognize women's rights? What types of policies and legislative measures could accelerate the complete elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in Arab countries?

V. PARTICIPANTS

26. The panel session will comprise high-level representatives from member States, senior policymakers, prominent academic thinkers and representatives from the private sector, the United Nations system and civil society.

VI. LANGUAGES

27. The discussion will be conducted in Arabic and English, with simultaneous interpretation.

VII. CONTACTS

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