UNITED NATIONS

E

ESCWA

Community Development Authority

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Arab Forum on Social Policy
Beirut, 28-29 October 2009

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN SOCIAL PROTECTION

By
Ziad Abdel Samad
Arab NGO Network for Development

09-0440

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

- *Universal Declaration of Human Rights in article 25*

"Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection."

- *Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Article 23.3*

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to highlight the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in implementing social protection programs. It explains the new concept of social policies as to be the combination of social security and social protection. Then it discusses the notion of social security as a component of human security. It goes through the various types of CSO engagement in the region; which vary from service providers to agents for development, then from agents for policy change including advocacy to watchdogs monitoring public policies. The paper also explains the various forms of civil society engagement in social protection listing the opportunities and challenges. The paper ends with few recommendations and questions for further discussion.

I- INTRODUCTION

A. CIVIL SOCIETY UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL PROTECTION

Social protection is one of the main components of comprehensive integrated social policy. Social policies must be rights based and leading to social development. They have to recognize the right of each and every citizen to social security, without discrimination and differentiation. Accordingly social security must target society as a whole.

Social protection can be defined as a set of programs aimed at empowering the poor by securing them with required skills and voices to achieve their "freedom from want and from fear and to provide them with their rights to live in dignity"[1]. Social protection addresses high risk and vulnerable groups and aims at protecting them from outcomes of economic processes, mainstreaming equity, promoting social well-being and social cohesion. Social protection includes services to the unemployed, access to education and health as well as safety nets, among others[2].

This relatively broad definition of social protection includes longer-term mechanisms designed to combat chronic poverty, as well as short-term interventions to reduce the impact of shocks. As such, social protection schemes are increasingly viewed as an investment in human capital that has the potential to promote growth and improve long-term poverty reduction rather than a set of expensive interventions and safety nets that create dependency.

Concretely and more explicitly, social protection programs include the expansion of pension and insurance coverage by providing unemployed with various insurance options and social security programs. It also addresses urgent community needs including food security and access to basic supplies and services. Social protection programs should also give special attention to women, particularly unpaid labor, by enhancing the informal economy. Last but not least, they aim at protecting children from all kinds of challenges including health and education but mainly child labor, prostitution and human trafficking.

By definition, vulnerable groups are those who are at high risk from shocks to their income-earning capacity due to natural and man-made disasters, crime and violence, unemployment, old age, exclusion and discrimination, gender inequality, etc[3]. Therefore, protecting the poor and vulnerable groups should include their legal protection which in turn should take into account reforming legislations. This also should address the legal empowerment of poor and vulnerable as a priority.

Efficient social protection should be based on a clear vision and a comprehensive agenda that takes into consideration the long term objectives rather than only addressing the immediate needs.

B. SOCIAL PROTECTION IN THE ARAB REGION

It is worth noting that human development indicators show that the Arab region is among the worst in the world in terms of broad human development achievement. This is reflected in the high rate of poverty, high percentage of illiterate people including women, youth and children, gender discrimination, lack of freedom and lack of transparency and good governance. Moreover, the multidimensional global crisis is affecting the region and threatening it by increasing the number of poor and unemployed, and resulting in greater disparities, fewer investments, and lower remittances[4].

However, due to the shift from the "welfare state" to a reduced role of the public sector in most of the Arab countries, in conformity with the structural adjustment policies and the implementation of free trade

---

[1] From the millennium declaration 2000;

[2] Integrated social policy report II, ESCWA 2007

[3] http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/WBI/WBIPROGRAMS/SPLP/0,,menuPK:461694~pagePK:64156143~piPK:6415
4155~theSitePK:461654,00.html

[4] Facing challenges of Poverty, Unemployment, and Inequalities in the Arab region: Do policy choices of Arab governments still hold after the global economic crisis, Kinda Mohamadieh of the Arab NGO Network for Development and Oliver Pearce of Christian Aid. June 2009

4

agreements, in addition to the structural constraints of the public administration, the public sector is not able anymore to respond to all the needs and challenges.

In fact, the reality shows that social protection strategies are incomplete in the face of major social risks. The main characteristics of the implemented programs are the unequal treatment of individuals, the limited coverage of the concerned population, the low level of real benefits and finally the relatively costly and inefficient administration (see Box below).

As a result, and in all the above mentioned challenges that social protection programs are facing, and due to the growing need for interventions and the limited capacity of the state, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and other stakeholders are invited to complement the role of the states and to contribute to the formulation and implementation of the most relevant social policies.

In the following sections, the paper will discuss the role of CSOs in the Arab region, trying to specify the

---

By analyzing and comparing social protection schemes in four Arab countries, Salim Nasr* derived the main characteristics of the social insurance systems in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Jordan. These include:

- Incomplete protection against major social risks.

- Unequal treatment of individuals: "The segmentation reflects the ranking of each category in the power structure."

- Limited coverage of the concerned population: These gaps arise because many private employers do not feel obliged to actually pay contributions or provide benefits. Also, the states' administrative and judicial capacities are often too weak or sometimes too corrupt to enforce accountability and ensure universal coverage within the laws.

- Low level of real benefits: For most workers of the region, pensions promise 70% to 80% of final work salaries, but actual benefits are significantly lower. This is because of the lack of formal indexation mechanisms, national inflation rates and governmental discretionary adjustments.

- Relatively costly and inefficient administration due to the high administration and transaction costs in the region, shortages of needed financial, technical and administrative skills in the institutions, weak monitoring, divided supervision of programmes across ministries and public institutions, and better identification and coverage of eligible recipients in urban areas than in rural ones.

- No financial sustainability. Sustainability is an emerging issue for social insurance systems in the region, and the financial viability of the public funds is a growing concern. In addition, the demographics of the concerned countries are shifting, and systems will come under more financial strain as people have fewer children and live longer, pension benefits grow, more elders need medical care, and there are fewer workers to support them.

*Nasr, S. (2001). "Issues of Social Protection in the Arab Region. A four-country overview". Cooperation South, No. 2. Available from: http://tcdc1.undp.org/CoopSouth/2001_2/31-48.pdf

---

different types of CSO engagement, opportunities and obstacles that they are facing. The paper ends with recommendations and questions for further discussion.

II. TYPE OF CSO ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION

Although the national policies for social protection in the Arab region necessitate partnerships among the state and civil society as the main actors, and these partnerships are important in facing social challenges, the long–standing democracy deficit in the region limits the ability of civil society to be a truly effective social actor.

Arab States increasingly perceive CSOs as potential risks and are thus reluctant to seek partnerships with them. In turn, CSOs are more cautious about associating with governments to preserve their autonomy and to avoid undermining their own legitimacy among their constituencies and other vital partners. The adoption of the strategy with its explicit acknowledgement that civil society can contribute to its implementation, offers an opportunity to find ways to ease these tensions.

However, the role of CSOs varies and depends on the type and structure of each. It is worth noting that CSOs by definition "*are structures that don't belong to the state or to the market. CSOs tend to monitor the states' and the markets' powers aiming at protecting the society from their tendencies to control*[5]. In the developing world, particularly in the Arab region, traditional structures, i.e. family, clan and religious organizations, constitute the third dimension together with the state and the market. Yet, they play a fundamental role in providing services and contributing to the social welfare and the well being of the society.

CSOs can have different roles and functions in social protection; the most prevalent one in the region being "*Service Provider*". It is worth noting that charity is predominant and is the defining characteristic of many Arab social service groups and donors. Moreover, due to the predominance of conflicts and wars, CSOs are mostly involved in emergency, relief, conflict resolution and post war reconciliation programs. They hence frequently deal with the consequences of the conflicts.

CSOs are also "*Agents for Development*", especially with the new trend to adopt capacity development programs and the empowerment of the poor and vulnerable groups. These CSOs implement training, vocational training, and education, and tend to provide local communities with the required tools and means to engage in the strategic planning and implementation of social development programs. This category of CSOs is also active in programs for social integration, as they struggle against all forms of discrimination and social exclusion.

The third type of CSO contains those who are involved in "*Advocacy campaigns and monitoring public policies and the business sector.*" This is the third generation of civil society groups who can also be called "*Agents for policy change*". This type of CSO aims at facing socio-economic challenges, including the implications of neo-liberal policies and trade agreements for developing countries, poverty and gender problems and several other systematic problems. The need for policy change in the Arab region is increasing, making the role played by CSOs on this issue increase and expand as well.

It is worth noting that the nature and the role of CSOs depend a lot on their organizational and structural aspects. It is also highly dependent on their values and vision. Thus it is important to elaborate civil society values and visions and to define their adequate organizational structure. Having said that, it should be also noted that the political, legal, economic, social and cultural environments are important factors affecting the role and the nature of CSOs. In this regard, it is essential to define the relation between CSOs and the state. This relation goes far beyond the legal framework. In fact, it very much depends on the level of centralization of power, the attitude vis-a-vis non-state actors and the level of social development. This relationship requires the adoption of clear and institutionalized consultation mechanisms where CSOs' participation in the planning and implementation of social protection policies is continuous and constructive.

Building partnerships and coordination among various actors is essential and helps in overcoming obstacles and difficulties. Coordination should engage at all levels, local, regional and global. The local level of coordination can deal with both service delivery and advocacy campaigns while regional level seek the

---
[5] Civil Society in the Arab Region: Its Necessary Role and the Obstacles to Fulfilment; Ziad Abdel Samad June 2006

promotion of the regional integration and monitor regional institutions. Finally, the global level is important for the exchange of experiences and can be a valuable opportunity to bring regional dimensions to the global context and to fit global issues in the regional and local contexts.

III- CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT IN SOCIAL PROTECTION

The three types of civil society organizations have equally important, albeit different roles to play in implementing social protection. Their different approaches and types of interventions help cover the varied and multifaceted challenges.

The limited capacity of the state in delivering services, especially after the implementation of the structural adjustment programs and the privatization of most of the social services, implies building effective partnerships and seeking an active role for civil society. CSOs as service providers have the flexibility and ability for wide outreach to in-need communities, and poor and vulnerable groups. This includes the social sector, such as health and education, and the economic sector, such as job creation and the prevention of exploitation of the most vulnerable labor force including the informal sector.

The Charitable Institution for the Care of Orphans- KSA (المؤسسة الخيرية لرعاية الأيتام) was established by order of the Council of Ministers in Saudi Arabia. It aims to help orphans and the needy children and extends its services to reach the entire Kingdom's regions and cities. This institution aims at helping the affluent individuals within the Saudi society in ensuring that their contributions are dedicated to the orphans and the fulfillment of their needs. One of the institution's main objectives is to develop a methodology to ensure that these orphans acquire the appropriate level of emotional satisfaction, social and psychological security, the ability to take responsibilities by themselves and to contribute to the building of their community. It also provides cash assistance and social and psychological care to the needy. Likewise, it lends a hand to widowed and divorced women and supplies them with the necessary assistance to care for their children. This charity is determined to provide programs which enhance an orphan's personality and to make sure that its orphans complete their general education or higher education.

Besides providing services, CSOs have an important role in empowering targeted communities and groups. Such empowerment can happen by implementing capacity building and awareness raising programs. These programs contribute to the adoption of comprehensive and sustainable programs and projects. Empowerment aims at developing the capacity but also has as an objective of elaborating the shared vision and strategic planning.

The Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC) paved its entrance into the international scene in the early 1980's with a drive to serve Palestinian farmers and help boost the Palestinian agricultural sector. This non-profit and non-governmental organization has involved itself in areas of rural development, economic protection and women's empowerment. PARC's ultimate goals are to achieve the sustainable and integrated development of Palestinian rural areas, to ameliorate the livelihoods of Palestinian farmers, to establish greater gender balance and awareness and to build an effective and democratic Palestinian civil society. In concurrence with its goals, PARC provides advice, technical assistance, awareness activities, extension services, and special consultancies for individuals, groups, and institutions involved in similar fields. Moreover, PARC's reliance on the active grassroots participation of its beneficiaries, the development of its experts' capabilities and the improvement of its employees' skills, helps in achieving its mission and goals. Some of its capacity-building initiatives include: enhancing rural women's social and economic roles in society; training and raising the skills of new graduates in agricultural engineering to work with rural communities on issues of sustainable development; and promoting and marketing agricultural products through by supporting and training farmers.

Furthermore, CSOs always have to address decision makers in order to secure the adoption of "public" social protection policies and to underline the state's commitment. The formulation of comprehensive national policies is undoubtedly the responsibility of the state, but while formulating these policies, the state ought to carry out wide CSO consultation and participation. CSOs are dedicated advocates and lobbyists seeking to include social protection in the agenda of the government and other stakeholders, and to advocate for the legal protection of vulnerable and marginalized groups. It is worth adding that institutionalized and periodic consultations are essential. Institutions like the Economic and Social Councils are excellent venues for the exchange among the various stakeholders. The creation of national multi-sectoral, sectoral and specialized commissions can also help in promoting coordination, permanent exchange of views and experiences, and dialogue.

CSOs also have to create effective watchdogs, in order to be able to monitor public policies and their implementation. They must monitor the factors that might affect living conditions, including public economic and social policies, and the efficiency, transparency and accountability of public administration. Public budget monitoring might be an important tool that CSOs can use for the effective evaluation of the states' respect to the commitments and dedication to social development.

It is worth noting that in all their roles, CSO represent the interests of the general public who is in fact their principle constituency. Hence, CSOs and social capital are not ends in and of by themselves, but their primary role is connecting, understanding and reflecting the needs and priorities of local, national and regional communities. This is why the transparency and accountability of the organizational and structural aspects of CSOs are prerequisites and the clarity of their values and vision is fundamental.

Amidst the Lebanese elections' irregular environment of voter intimidation and corruption and in an attempt to compensate for the lack of an existing federal election monitoring agency, the **Lebanese Association of Democratic Elections** (LADE) was formed by a group of academics, jurists, journalists, researchers, NGO representatives and students in 1996. LADE is committed to keep a watchful eye on the Lebanese elections, to ensure its fair application, to register all violations committed by candidates and to make a new and improved electoral law a reality. LADE's first activities entailed seminars and lectures to raise awareness on electoral issues and it was capable of attracting 300 volunteers in time for the 1996 parliament elections. It has also been successful in conducting a rigorous campaign in favor of carrying out municipal elections in 1998 after 35 years of putting them on hold. LADE led a national campaign for Electoral Reform since 2006 and succeeded to introduce significant reform principles and procedures to the parliamentary electoral law in 2008. Lade is currently leading a campaign to reform the municipal law.

IV- CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACING CSO IN THE ARAB REGION

A. THE CHALLENGES

Civil society in the Arab region is facing challenges of multiple dimensions[6]. Some of these challenges are internal; they are related to their capacities and available resources. But other challenges are external and they are often related to the general political conditions, the absence of democracy and the limited space for free association.

An important external factor related to the prevalence of conflicts and wars in many countries. This reality has shifted the interests of CSOs from investing in development to dealing with the results of the conflicts and responding to the immediate needs and challenges. However, some examples of countries in conflict or

---

[6] For more details about the challenges and opportunities that Arab CSO are facing refer to : The Arab NGO Network for Development, *A Case Study on Interaction between Emerging Regional Networking and Global Civil Society* Ziad Abdel Samad and Kinda Mohamadieh, 2007

under occupation show that CSOs become very active and are able to secure primary services enabling the society to overcome the absence of public institutions and the lack services. (Like in Lebanon during the civil war 1975-1990 and in the Palestinian case)

The lack of democracy and limited freedom of associations is another dimension of the obstacles. It is worth noting in this regard that in most of the Arab countries, CSOs are highly restricted and work under difficult circumstances. Moreover, the highly centralized power keeps very limited spaces available for CSOs and thus imposes more restrictions on their freedom. Nonetheless, the low level of development makes it harder for civil society to be effective and efficient; this is due to the limitation of available resources on the one hand, and the lack of the necessary tools, communications and infrastructure on the other.

Furthermore, the classical understanding of security[7], which is reflected in the restrictive laws issued by the ruling regimes, is a main factor why governments don't have friendly relations with and positive impression about the civil society. Most of the Arab countries implement marshal laws "to prevent any security problem".

It is important to mention that integrated social policies are lacking in most of the countries. The governments stress the economic growth as the first target to achieve, and mistakenly assume that economic growth will have its positive social impact in general. This is leading to the lack of a comprehensive vision for social development.

Moreover, the notion of human rights as a leading concept for social policies is lacking. As a result, social services are not perceived by the governments as an integral part of human rights and thus the notion of social justice is lacking too.

All the above mentioned challenges make it harder for CSOs to be active and to be able to respond to the pressing needs as agents for social change.

The internal reasons for the weakness of CSOs are often structural and organizational on the one hand, and visionary on the other. The weaknesses of CSOs in the region are most likely related to the two following factors: the first one is related to the traditional dominance of the welfare state that used to secure most of the social services, including health, education, housing and jobs. The second factor is the restrictive measures that the state used to impose on the society. These two factors weakened CSOs and prevented them from their very basic right to exist. Frequently the active organizations were those considered close to the government or the faith based ones mainly working in charity. However, during the last decades, and as a result of the implementation of the structural adjustment and reform policies, the role of the state as a social actor has been diminished. As a result, the CSOs have risen to face the challenges and to fill the gap left by the retrenchment of the state services, often without sufficient previous experience or adequate resources.

B. THE OPPORTUNITIES

The negative living and social conditions in the Arab States region, reflected in different reports on human development, require governments to give more attention to the social sectors. During the past decade, a series of international conferences have redefined development and highlighted the need to address social development. Moreover, the millennium declaration adopted by the 192 head of states gathered under the umbrella of the UN, pushed the agenda for social development to be one of the global and national priorities. More recently, despite the negative social impacts of the global, financial and economic crisis, it can be perceived as an opportunity to enhance social solidarity, promote partnerships and strengthen coordination among various stakeholders. The gravity of the crisis has confirmed the serious need to implement precautionary measures to face the potential challenges of the crisis[8].

---

[7] The fifth Arab human development report published by the UNDP in August 2009 explains explicitly the difference between the broader understanding of human security and the classic understanding of security.
[8] Facing challenges of Poverty, Unemployment, and Inequalities in the Arab region: Do policy choices of Arab governments still hold after the global economic crisis; Kinda Mohamadieh of the Arab NGO Network for Development and Oliver Pearce of Christian Aid. June 2009

As a result, of all the above mentioned challenges, and due to the lack of their capacities, Arab governments are pressured to build partnerships with other actors in society, particularly with CSOs.

During the last decades, the region witnessed dramatic developments affecting its security, political, economic and social stability. As a result, many global and regional initiatives were launched including the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and the Broader Middle East Initiative for the Partnership for the Future, in addition to the League of Arab States' initiative in 2004 and many others. These initiatives aimed at responding to the immediate Human Development challenges, preventing additional tension and avoiding the rise of fundamentalism. CSOs are today asked to play a major role in the implementation of social protection policies and programs, but it is obvious that they are not able to face social and economic challenges alone without a broader, effective framework that includes other stakeholders, with a particular responsibility for the state. This raises the need for coordination among the different CSOs active in social development in order to increase their efficiency, to avoid duplication and to optimize the use of resources. Yet, coordination should go beyond CSOs to include other actors such as public and private institutions.

V- CONCLUSION: QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Governments in the ESCWA region have been exploring options for expanding and reforming existing social protection schemes and instating social transfers to improve human development. The global financial and economic crisis has added to the urgency of this endeavor.

However, CSOs engaged in raising awareness and capacity development through advocacy campaigns should root the discussion on social protection in a rights based approach. They have to include in their vision clear statements about social protection and to formulate it more effectively in their agenda. This discussion should be undertaken through participatory channels and mechanisms at the national level, in which various stakeholders should be included in developing these policies and later in monitoring the achievements/targets accomplished.

There should be a discussion of this issue at the regional level, especially as Arab countries are moving towards more cooperation. And whereby it seems labor mobility is increasing in the Arab region, there is thus a need to discuss social protection with special reference to labor rights at the regional level.

Social policies should take into consideration the main challenges and objectives identified by the Arab Human Development Reports; this should include gender equity as a main gap. Education and knowledge are other identified dimensions of the problem that necessitate immediate and comprehensive proposals for intervention. Last but not least, the AHDR identified the lack of freedom as one of the main obstacles in the Arab region. In fact, the lack of freedom raises the important question about the necessity to introduce political reforms that aim to improve governance, enhance participation and increase freedom. These are essential factors for better planning and implementation of adequate strategies for social development, including social protection, social security and safety nets.

Finally, the global debate on human rights in general and the commitments and goals in particular with the focus on social protection should be addressed by the CSOs in the region. They should engage at the global level, as global fora can provide legitimate channels for active participation in the national level.