

Social Protection in the Arab World: The Other Side of the Crisis in Society and the State

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This report is the second in a series published by the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND) related to monitoring the realities of economic and social rights in the Arab Region. The first report, published in 2013, addressed the right to education and the right to work. The current report will focus on the state of the right to social protection in the region.

This survey covers the main ideas, data, indicators, and alternatives introduced in the national reports on social protection, prepared by researchers in consultation and interaction with CSOs.

Methodology: The Map Before the Road

In preparing the national reports, researchers utilized a unified methodology, which they participated in its development along with representatives of several local CSOs. Following the adoption of the report's central question, how to define social protection, a consensus was reached on the main themes to avoid digression from the main subject. A list of questions was drafted for the researchers to facilitate their work, in addition to the preparation of papers, which identified the concepts and solutions to the problems, in addition to monitoring progress in the international regime related to social protection, its mechanisms, and conditions for its implementation on the ground. Two meetings were held in Beirut with the researchers and included global experts for a more in-depth vision and to reach all encompassing approach.

Social Protection Guarantees Political Stability

Before embarking on a review of the product of this collective effort, it should be emphasized that the social question is the main indicator of the capacity of ruling regimes to secure mini-

mum political stability. This is what democratic societies found out, as the social enables economic reform and reduce threats against democracy due to social disturbances and clashes that may arise in the context of an industrial society. The former statement emphasizes the social dimension, not only in the field of protecting the rights of citizens who are often victims of unfair economic policies, but also by highlighting the importance of social protection for political stability and amending the democratic system, to prevent its exposure to fracture and collapse.

Thus, as the space for economic growth gets wider, developing a philosophy and tools for social protection becomes imperative, in order to enable regimes to conduct self-maintenance.

While this has been an important question for liberal societies with established and participatory processes for making decisions and formulating policies, the social dimension is even more crucial for Arab societies attempting to escape the cycle of political despotism, which usually translated into social and cultural tyranny.

In this context, modern concepts of social protection stress on the need for the intervention of the so called social state, the state whose primary functions include the mitigation of the negative repercussions of the economic process and liberating the social from the traditional concept of charity work, transforming it into a fundamental right. This is in addition to removing the social from the cycle of voluntary individual choice, into the level of institutions governed by state commitments and protected by local and international law. So what is the outlook for the Arab world?

Ambiguity of the Concept

The national reports noted that the majority of Arab governments do not adopt a comprehen-

sive social protection concept and many do not distinguish between social protection and social security.

For example, the Bahrain national report spoke of "confusion between social protection and social security nets." In Algeria as well, the report noted a "lack of distinction between the activities of social security institutions in their limited sense and social protection activities by the state." Moreover, in Lebanon, social protection is promoted as a service and charity, not a right." In Mauritania, on the other hand, they are still debating the "concept and extent of social protection and identify[ing] the concerned actors." Although the term "social justice" is contained in several constitutions, it is lost or weakened when moving to the decision making level.

Hence, the Second Arab Watch Report incorporates an independent research paper, by international expert Dr. Azzam Mahjoub in collaboration with researcher Mohammed Munzer Belghith. It includes a review of the evolution of the concept into a precise definition of social protection and observations on the international debate on widening the perspective and revising the meaning to encompass various rights and aspects adopted in global references.

In the report, Dr. Mahjoub sheds light on internationally adopted indicators to measure social protection, based on the experiences of international institutions, and concluded in a database suitable for a comparative study on the progress made in implementing social protection policies. Comparative progress reports are important as a tool for accountability utilized CSOs to adjust tracks on the national level.

Constant Search for State Legitimacy

As the political is linked to the social, all the reports were based on the political starting points painting the features of the prevailing conditions and introduced the debate on social protection within the local general context.

Evidently, the state in the Arab world is still struggling with the question of legitimacy, which sometimes poses a threat to its existence and makes it subject to centers of power, not insti-

tutions, in general. It was taken hostage by the of the most influential, powerful, and in the best position to monopolize power and control policy making, whose wealth places them above the law and the values of social justice. This was demonstrated in the First Arab Watch Report on economic and social rights issued by ANND in 2012, which dissected the nature of the state in the Arab world and considered it to be closer to a neo-patrimonial state than to the state of law, citizenship, and institutions (Adib Nehme, "The People Want to Overthrow the Regime").

This second report focuses on the right to social protection, where citizens and families feel safe. In the same vein, it demonstrates that the bulk of the defect is associated with the nature of the state.

The Arab world is still far from the concept of the social state, based on a participatory vision in making use of national wealth and its surpluses. This state derives a significant part of its philosophy and legitimacy from the international human rights regime, which witnessed qualitative developments in the direction of establishing a comprehensive human rights approach in the past twenty years.

On the other hand, given the interconnection of the political with the social, the neo-patrimonial state is facing several complex problems in the Arab world. It seem to have exhausted its purpose and faces serious structural problems due to the succession of internal crises and by virtue of the rising trend of popular protests against arrogance and greed. This led to a series of structural disorders, resulting in increased repression, on the one hand, and its retreat, weakness, and disintegration on the other; at times, it pretended to withdraw from the battle, albeit tactically, to search for new tools to return to hegemony and protect the interests of the ruling class and its acolytes.

Three Major Clusters

According to the national reports, the social situation of the Arab world's population at this moment could be divided into three major clusters.

1. The first cluster includes countries

that achieved legislative and institutional progress in organizing social services, regulating them and regarding them as a citizens' right; adopted administrative and financial mechanisms; and organized beneficiary lists, demonstrating commitment to widening their base through semi-audited data for the different social segments, groups, and professions they target.

Tunisia is one example, where social protection began with the establishment of the independent state. Morocco, too, saw significant growth in its social system at an early stage. Algeria, on the other hand, established the National Social Security Fund in 1962. The cluster also includes Iraq, which used to enjoy a balanced and stable social system prior to the US intervention.

2. The second cluster includes countries that witnessed social mobilizations, which grew into broad uprisings considered to be revolutions. These countries are currently passing through difficult times due to the shaking of their political and administrative institutions, resulting in an economic downturn brought by the burdens of transition. The situation in these countries varies from bad to worse according to their degree of vulnerability, ability to secure internal cohesion, and provide minimum services to beneficiaries. The Tunisian situation is better than that of Egypt. But both countries' situation is still not as bad as Yemen or Libya, in particular.

The political climate had a direct impact on their social policies. Some countries, which had failed to manage their internal situation, have become disaster zones. Some of their citizens are in dire need of urgent relief policies, at the lowest tier of requirements. Their existence has come under threat and their people are not able to meet the requirements for their own security and nourishment, let alone protect the survival, education, health of their

children, after being silenced during the era of brutal dictatorships. What is happening in Yemen is a stark reminder for a state falling apart.

3. The third cluster is that of fragile states or those lacking the features of a state.

Palestine could be considered an exception due to the colonial occupation since partition in 1948, which made the Palestinians powerless to break out of the circle of constant search for the minimum requirements for survival. This key factor could explain the absence of a social security fund until now.

Other countries are at risk of becoming failed states due to several intricate factors, including wars and internal conflicts since the beginning of the century, which led to weakening their economic potential, even if it had been high, as is the case with Iraq. Several of these countries are almost unable to provide a significant portion of the security, health, and diet needs of their communities, making them extremely fragile, like Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Sudan.

For example, the report on Iraq mentions "the erosion of the middle class and its collapse after the year 2003; the country began to witness the phenomenon of forced displacement, orphanhood, widowhood, and corruption." The report on Yemen, which faces security and political threats and is at risk of disintegration, points out that "half the population is under 15 years old and 48 percent of them live in poverty; the diet of 43 percent is under threat." The Sudan report, on the other hand, indicates that "progress made in development was hampered by the conflict, which kept draining Sudan's material and human resources and weakened the country's ability to implement structural reforms, especially after the secession of the south, the spread of poverty, and the outbreak of the conflict in the Blue Nile, South Kordofan, and Darfur provinces."

Lebanon also represents a state under constant risk of political and social explosion, being “the victim of conflicts and civil wars, which led to fragile and clientelist social protection.” Lebanon is constantly asked to be ready to “face the crisis and secure those affected by the emergency and humanitarian intervention, particularly for war refugees and displaced persons.”

In these countries, it is not the state alone that faces disintegration and collapse. The existence of whole communities is under threat, following the breakdown of basic links to the state and its geographical, ethnic, and sectarian components.

Urgent Need for the Role of the State

Almost all of the aforementioned national reports agreed on the importance of the role of the state, despite the retreat in its social functions. The independence era gave birth to states, which adopted the concept of welfare and bore the responsibility of providing all the needs of their citizens. Some Arab states still carry the biggest brunt of managing the development process. For example, “the state in Bahrain plays a central role in the development process [...] and maintains a key position for the public sector.” The same goes for Algeria, where “the state dominates the social protection sector,” leading the researcher to stress that “the liberal direction of economic policies do not seem to have a great impact on the public social protection system.” With these exceptions, however, the Arab world is heading gradually and with a growing momentum towards retreat in the role the state, after abandoning previous obligation due to a series of political and economic crises.

This abandonment was a result of a number of factors, including the adoption of wrong economic policies that led to several crises, or due to misconduct, corruption, and looting. Hence, it is feared that this incurring shift in the nature of the state would further weaken society and sacrifice the interests of the poorer segments. This prompted the state to call for reclaiming part of its former status. In Iraq, for example, the state was forced to adopt a “poverty alleviation

strategy.” Even in Lebanon, with a soft state, “the concept of the welfare state is still in its embryonic stage, leading to virtually non-existent social protection for citizens.” Nonetheless, the Lebanese state attempts to intervene in the social sphere through several ministries, such as education, employment, health, social affairs, and defense. In Yemen, on the other hand, “the role of the state faces confusion and is swayed by political events, especially.”

Social Protection First: Before the Flood

The national reports confirmed that protectionist social policies have degenerated in most Arab countries, rich and poor. Looking for ways to save social funds from bankruptcy has become a priority in this stage, due to the magnitude of the threats they face. Most of the countries suffer from deep, structural crises, putting some at risk of partial or total collapse.

The situation varies from country to country; some feature a wide base of beneficiaries of social security, such as Algeria, where 85 percent of the population is covered, half of whom are not salaried. A similar situation exists in Tunisia, where the ratio of coverage stood at 81.34 percent in 2011. In Jordan, social security covers 66 percent of the employed.

On the other hand, only 7.2 percent of workers in the public and private sector in Lebanon are covered by social security and 21 basic services are not available to a large part of the population, as those registered with the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) are between 40 and 50 percent. These services have been adversely affected by “the deepening phenomena of clientelist, sectarian, and partisan practices” and by the fact that “social protection systems were not built on the principle of solidarity but to divide the citizens.” The same situation occurs in Mauritania, where “protection remains elitist and influenced by tribal hierarchy, as well as the exclusion of the disabled and former slaves.”

Even countries going through the so-called Arab Spring find themselves currently unable to steer in the right direction and fulfill the social and economic rights of their citizens, including safeguarding social funds from the whirlwind.

Despite the adherence of new political forces in some of those countries, whether in power or in the opposition, to the slogans of social justice, in Tunisia, “the fiscal deficit is considered of the main problems facing social security. The three security funds are going through a growing deficit. For example, the Social Security Fund suffers from a deficit in the range of 70 million Dinars (US\$36), while the health insurance fund faces a deficit estimated at 50 million Dinars (\$26). This confirms a situation of “lack of resources and the absence of a clear strategy for the state in this regard.”

Although Libya was not included in the report due to the difficult situation in the country, it is evident that the majority of state functions have collapsed. In Egypt, “the state’s social protection policies are unable to achieve social justice and protection from poverty. On the contrary, the adopted systems do not enable the poor to address threats arising from economic and social policies adopted by the state, pushing them closer to bankruptcy. This had a significant impact on the level of health services, in particular, leading to an increasingly ominous decline, especially for low incomes retirees, given the ratio of pensions they receive compared to rising prices, inflation rates, and decline in the purchasing power of citizens in most Arab countries.” The crisis of social protection, in general, and social security funds, in particular, are in essence a financial crisis, which promises to exacerbate and become more complicated in the absence of radical and imminent solutions.

Wide Gap Between Local and International Legislation

Several significant developments occurred at the international level related to laws supporting citizens’ rights to social protection. However, this type of legislation in the Arab world does not live up to the level of the international system, despite some semblance of improvement, which remains the reference against which to measure any progress. Moreover, these legislations have not been updated to be in line with the qualitative additions to the concept of protection, which expanded the scope of rights to be enjoyed by all humans, ensuring their dignity and that of their families.

For example, Bahrain signed the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights (ICESCR). In Iraq, such rights were included in the text of the Constitution, more than ten laws supporting social protection. Progress was made in Jordan in terms of the ratification of a number of international conventions, as well as improvement in domestic legislations. However, the Jordanian Constitution does not recognize the right to health and housing. Lebanon, on the other hand, has ratified more than fifty ILO documents.

Social protection is of paramount importance in the Constitution and laws in Mauritania. However, the practical side still suffers an apparent deficiency. Tunisia is yet to ratify ILO’s Convention 102 of 1952 on the minimum standards for social security, despite usual compliance with international standards, while Morocco, has initiated the ratification process. The Yemeni constitution and laws, on the other hand, stress that “the state shall ensure social protection for each citizen.” In practice, however, the budget allocated for this issue does not exceed 0.6 percent of the GDP.

This clearly demonstrates the existence of a sometimes-deep gap between national legislations and the international system of economic and social rights. The evolution of laws does not necessarily mean commitment to their implementation and adaptation into policies on the ground.

Structural Fragmentation Prevails

Administrative and institutional structures related to social security in general are scattered, fragmented, and suffer from discrepancy in privileges and services among various beneficiary segments, sometimes on a very wide scale. Researchers and CSOs had similar recommendations on this question in particular, calling for reforms of a structural nature. This necessitates the unification of social security funds and related legislation, along with the development of administrative aspects to eliminate bureaucracy, which constrains rights and exhausts beneficiaries. Thus, the service should be brought closer to the beneficiaries, improved and developed in line with needs and based on the requirements

of human rights approached, which do not distinguish between segments of the same society.

Parallel Economy Does Not Recognize Social Rights

Most of the Arab countries examined in this report share a growing parallel economy, at the expense of the formal and structured economy. This phenomenon poses risks on more than one level, especially as it is organically linked to the wider phenomenon of smuggling, which in turn directs painful blows to national industries and poses a serious dilemma for these states' tax systems.

It was also noted that the parallel economy, which expands day after day, currently employs a wide range of workers and employees; more than a million workers employed in the informal sector in Iraq, for example. In Jordan, however, the ratio reaches 44 percent of workers, most of whom do not enjoy any form of protection. Even in Tunisia, where the rate of social coverage is around 80 percent, "real coverage does not exceed fifty percent, due to people with limited income and also because of the informal economy, which burgeoned after the revolution. In Yemen, the so-called fragile sector involves 79 percent of the total workforce, with an unemployment rate estimated at 9.52 percent.

The inflated size of the parallel economy increased the vulnerability of millions of Arab citizens. They became deprived of all types of social services, due to their presence outside the scope of the enforced systems in this regard and the absence of funds offering them and their families a minimum of essential services. In the event of illness, disability, or work related accidents, the burden falls on their communities.

The Private Sector and Social Responsibility

Several reports concurred about the growing importance of the private sector in Arab societies. This sector, which currently manages the bulk of economic affairs, provides the largest share of jobs and is envisioned by all Arab states as primary engine for local economies and development, leading them towards progress and prosperity. However, major sections of the private

sector and many private companies are accused of evading major social responsibilities. As a result, a broad section of private sector employees remain outside the scope of social protection or vulnerable to fragility and instability.

The private sector's relationship with social accountability varies from one country to another. Algeria's report notes that difficulties in regulating the private sector gave rise to evasion of securing wage earners. The report considered this to be blow to the principle of solidarity, because of the sector's weak and volatile contributions to the social security process. The situation is different in Lebanon, where the private sector covers the highest proportion of social spending, while the state's contribution does not exceed 6 percent, and in Palestine, where the "social responsibility of the private sector could be noted." The report on Egypt, however, mentioned the phenomenon of "pressure from private business owners on workers through minimal security, along with tax evasion." However, it notes the participation of many businessmen in the implementation of development programs and services under the "Corporate Social Responsibility" campaign.

Accordingly, there is an urgent need to mold and adopt an inclusive social policy, which encourages the private sector to play its role in the creation of flexible social insurance systems, committed to the principles of human rights and social justice. While it is true that the private sector faces serious predicaments, they should be addressed in the context of a comprehensive vision that takes into account the rights of workers and employees and does not sacrifice environmental sustainability.

Safety Nets Are Not Substitutes for the State

Social safety nets are a fundamental pillar in many Arab societies under review. Bahrain is one example, where social policy is almost based on these networks, which are, nonetheless, regulated by the Ministry of Social Affairs. Those responsible for the process are thus appointed and not elected. Although these networks contribute to the alleviation of social difficulties experienced by large segments of society in Bahrain, they are suspected of consecrating

communal and sectarian division.

Likewise in Mauritania, where social safety nets play a prominent role and demands to institutionalize the *zakat* call for an increase in what is called the *maniha*, “to increase the official and community funding for social security.” In Yemen, there is great dependence on safety nets to “mitigate the adverse effects resulting from the removal of subsidies on basic goods, basic particularly wheat and flour.” In Sudan, *Diwan al-Zakat* was established as the main provider of assistance in multiple ways, such as cash and compensation for health security expenses, as well as the establishment of health and educational institutions.

There is a need to carry out field studies to determine the size and role of social safety nets in many Arab societies. It is also necessary to revitalize their role, develop their tools, and review their philosophy, objectives, and mechanisms, to transition from charity work based on handouts and charity to the level of active developmental function. There are success stories beginning to bear fruit. Still absent, however, is a rights-based approach to intensify the human rights aspect, based on the values of equality and social justice in the broad, systematic, and institutional concept. Safety nets are tributaries to achieve solidarity, but they do not replace the state, nor should they be a parallel sector working outside the development system.

Basic Subsidies and Risky Policies

Following economic liberalization, some Arab countries attempted to achieve social balance by resorting to direct intervention to support several goods needed by citizens, especially those with poor and middle-incomes. The need for such intervention had increased with the initiation of market economics or economic liberalization. Algeria expanded its social protection budget in order to mitigate the effects of economic reforms on vulnerable classes. In Iraq, 10 percent of the state budget was allocated to support the social protection program, especially regarding food and fuel prices, in addition to introducing the ration card system. In Jordan, liberalization of commodity prices led to a rise in inflation during 2013.

As for Mauritania, the government was forced to intervene in order to stabilize the prices of basic goods, in an attempt to protect stability. In Tunisia, successive governments had to increase the amount of assistance given to poor families to cope with growing poverty. The removal of subsidies in Yemen, however, occurred gradually and reached 100 percent. In any cases, most governments are between a rock and a hard place, being unable to sustain the subsidies, on one hand, and due to fears of an escalating social protest movement.

In-depth Review of IFIs

International Financial Institutions (IFIs), such as the World Bank, the IMF, and USAID are organizations with a direct impact on the internal situation of Arab societies, with a significant contribution to support governments and, in many cases, providing direct support to organizations and citizens. In Iraq, the government collaborated closely with the World Bank to support its poverty alleviation strategy between 2010 and 2014, particularly in the poorest governorates. These international institutions do not take the initiative to intervene in guiding economic policies. However, when they are resorted to during periods of crisis, they are able to modify policies according to liberal or neoliberal orientations and, in many cases, economic viability comes at the expense of social rights.

In Bahrain, the report explained that World Bank advise “was at the expense of the social dimension and aimed to curb the financial cost of subsidies.” Jordan, as well, resorted to economic austerity policies under the terms of the World Bank “within the Readiness Preparation Agreement, starting from year 2012, and have had a negative impact on social protection programs, especially on education, health, and employment.” In Mauritania, too, the gradual removal of subsidies on rice, wheat, sugar, and tea led several negative effects cited in the report. Another outcome was the decline of national industries, brought about by lifting subsidies according to World Bank advice. In Sudan, lifting fuel subsidies led to the outbreak of social mobilizations resulting in casualties during 2012; this was due to the implementation of World Bank recommen-

dations based on reducing the state's role in services and the working towards privatization. In Egypt, on the other hand, international institutions, including the World Bank, are beginning to intervene in the creation of health policies. However, this intervention is opposed by civil society organizations, which reject the bank's conditional loans.

The main problem in the policies of the World Bank and similar institutions is their propensity to sacrifice a part of the social aspect to secure the financial and economic stability of the state. Their advice and recommendations thus carries a high social cost, due to their austerity prescriptions on almost every occasion, through spending cuts and the elimination or reduction of particular services. Such policies lead to depriving tens or even hundreds of thousands of beneficiary citizens, with groups like women, children, people with special needs, the poor, and foreign workers being most likely to pay the high costs of implementing such recommendations.

The World Bank began adjusting its policies and paying attention to the importance of the social dimension in achieving development and protecting political stability, in light of the repercussions of the Arab revolutions. For example, the World Bank recognized the importance of the social dimension in the case of Tunisia, amending its recommendations to the extent of calling on Tunisians to "reconsider the adopted development model." To a certain extent, it became more inclined to work on the establishment of social protection instead of funding social projects and programs. This is considered an important step, but it requires more courage and the reassessment of the bank's vision of the development model, its indicators, and how they are measured.

In light of these common conclusions of the national reports conducted during ten months, several local and regional needs are apparent, including:

Need for an Alternative Development Model

The reports described a dialectical relationship between the disruption of social protection systems in the Arab world and the crisis in the pre-

vailing mode or model of development adopted since the early 1970s. This model focuses on measuring income ratios to assess the size of achieved economic growth and suffers from serious imbalances, making it a key factor in widening gap between people of the same society. It also leads to more centralization, increasing the distance between the coasts and the interior and generating exponential poverty. On the other hand, it weakens the values of work, solidarity, and collaboration between citizens, with corruption, quick profit, and false well being becoming the dominant values in weak societies and fragile economies. The crisis in the system of solidarity in the Arab world requires us to think deeply and seriously about dismantling the development model and search for alternatives or amendments, in accordance with the new development vision.

The State Cannot Escape its Responsibility

The reports concur on the fundamental idea that the threats facing social security systems in the Arab world entail a return to stressing the urgency and importance of the role of the developmental state, which retreated due to attempts at delinking the state and development. Although it lost the features of the small trader who interferes in all the angles of the sale, it remains necessary first, for the development of wealth, second, for its protection from looting, third, for its distribution among its producers, and fourth, to take care of the victims of absence of justice, those segments excluded from the production and distribution system and cast outside the formal and cooperative society.

No Separation between Development and Justice

Separating development and social justice is dangerous, as it will gradually break up the internal unity of the communities. Consciously or unconsciously, it tends to set up these communities to explode, as what happened with the series of revolutions, which toppled several of Arab leaders and, in the same context, led to weakening the foundations of the state in more than one country. Development, able to achieve stability and ensure national unity and civil peace, is that which works to ensure that everyone enjoys the

wealth they all cultivated, in order to strengthen ties among all the parties to the production process.

The report on Algeria indicated that the clientelist political system “does not allow the emergence of independent political and social power centers able to compete with it,” which leads to transforming social protection into a type of public charity, aiming strategically to deepen the dependency of society on the ruling powers. In the Lebanese context, “growth indicators showed some improvement, but social indicators documented a decline.” The report also noted that “the concept of public interest was lost in the new reconstruction ideology, in line with the neoliberal current.” Hence, “economic reform should be linked to a comprehensive social policy to complement sustainable economic choices.”

The report on Tunisia pointed directly to the key link between crises in social policy and the development model. The report indicated that “the liberal economic model considers social security as a barrier, neoliberal experts believe that social security is the cause of the economic crisis, since contributions produce an increase in the burden of wages.”

The national reports stressed that a review of the tax regimes in the Arab world could effectively contribute to the mitigation of declining levels of social protection, as social protection and tax system and organically linked. In Jordan, declining direct tax revenues and exaggerated indirect taxation led to the spread of tax evasion and the adoption of non-social economic policies.

These are just two examples showing a tendency in many Arab countries to focus on the question fiscal reform as a primary measure to save social funds from bankruptcy. In Mauritania, discussion is under way on the possibility of imposing a tax dedicated to supporting social protection, despite the fact that tax awareness is still very limited, as stated in the report. The example of Palestine confirms that legal tax evasion is responsible for almost half of the yearly budget deficit. In Egypt, there is evidence that the existing tax system “lacks fairness and transparency.” In Bahrain, the absence of income taxes on individuals and corporations turned the country

into a tax haven, however this created awareness of the possible impact this may have on the state’s involvement in economic and social rights. In Algeria, on the other hand, social security is partially financed through taxes. The same goes for Tunisia, where basic food products are subsidized from taxes on petroleum products and alcoholic beverages.

ANND examined the question of tax justice thorough case studies of six countries and recently completed a comparative study between the tax systems in those countries. The sample is currently being increased, based on the belief that the prevailing tax system in the Arab world amplifies the differences, instead of narrowing them; it weakens states, rather than giving them strength; and reduces solidarity opportunities, rather than cultivating embodiment of equality through citizenship.

Funding Funding Funding

The national reports demonstrated the impasse facing most social security funds, which are now forced to resort to partial solutions to cover flaws in the financial situation. This included raising the retirement age from 60 years to 62, increasing contribution rates, or reducing the size and quality of services. However, the impact of such measures is limited, despite their ability to relieve the financial bottleneck faced by the funds. They are also temporary and aim to delay the crisis or reduce its impact, without offering radical solutions. The reason is that the crisis facing the funds is nothing but a clear indicator of the crisis in the economic system as a whole. Thus, no serious reform will serve its purpose unless it is part of a comprehensive and in-depth review.

Women as Primary Victims

Women are considered part of the segments most vulnerable to imbalances in social protection systems. In Iraq, 86.7 percent of women are outside the work cycle; they make up only 25 percent of social security subscribers in Jordan and are most vulnerable to be without coverage. The report on Lebanon indicated that households run by women are part of the most vulnerable group and include 120 thousand persons, in addition to 75 thousand persons with special

needs. In Mauritania, poverty is still the key challenge to women's participation in the economic and social cycle and in Sudan, there are three times more poor women than there are poor men. In Morocco, only 30 percent of women benefit from compulsory health insurance, compared to 70 of men.

These samples indicate the need to conduct an urgent review of social policies to put an end to this imbalance between the two genders.

Alternatives

The alternatives proposed in the national reports vary from one country to another. However, they all agreed on the following set of suggestions, which stress the need to address social protection from a rights-based angle, considering it a basic human right and not a burden on governments. This should entail its enhancement, rather than reducing its size and quality or even thinking about gradually eliminating it.

- There is no excuse for any type of discrimination between citizens in social protection, whether on the basis of gender, religion, confession, ethnicity, region, or other.
- Social security funds should adopt the principles of integrity and good governance to eliminate bureaucracy and poor investment of resources.
- Political, ideological, and sectarian clientelist in this strategic area should be eliminated.
- There is a need to find effective measures to save social security funds from bankruptcy, rather than destroying the main social anchor for poor segments and the middle class.
- Society's role should be revitalized and not weakened; its efforts must not be drained and there should be no attempt at subjugation or limiting its freedoms. This is through respecting its independence, non-interference in its affairs, and engaging it in a constructive partnership. In this regard, unions should be key actors for dialogue on all aspects of social protection, instead of being marginalized,

controlled, or dominated.

- The principle of social dialogue must be adopted as an effective tool for settling political and other differences, building consensus among the major powers in society, and protecting civil peace.
- The performance of job markets on the local level should be improved, due to their direct impact on developing the income of funds and their revival.
- All international charters must be quickly ratified, especially those issued by the ILO.
- Social security funds financing systems must be reformed to protect them from bankruptcy and collapse.