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New Directions in Social Policy in the MENA Region

*Country Cluster Study of Egypt, Jordan, Morocco,
Oman and Tunisia*

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Alternatives from and for the Global South

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Acronyms

ECE	Early Childhood Education
ERSAP	Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GoO	Government of Oman
IATF	Inter-Agency Task Force
ICCS	Islamic Center Charity Society
JRP	Jordan Response Plan
MENA	Middle East and North African
MoCI	Ministry of Commerce and Industry
MoM	Ministry of Manpower
MOPIC	Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation
MoSD	Ministry of Social Development
NAF	National Aid Fund
NEPCO	National Electric Power Company
NRP	National Resilience Plan

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Abstract

The key aim of this report is to understand the dynamics and mechanics of social policy institutions and discourses in the MENA region. The report focuses on five countries: Oman, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan, chosen because they represent a diverse range of political economic characteristics and also because they have witnessed social policy reforms as a response to the Arab uprisings. The country case studies provide a systematic review of social policy developments that represent wider experiences in the region. The research focused on four key policy areas of social protection / welfare / public policy, namely: employment and the labour market; income substitution or cash transfer programmes; education; and health. The main areas of enquiry in the report are:

- the nature of social policies and programmes
- links between social, economic and environmental policies
- the politics and political economy of policy choice
- the implementation and institutionalization of social policies

The report shows that countries in MENA have a combination of residual and corporatist governance models in relation to social policy. There are two over-arching tendencies both of which fall short of universal coverage or adequate benefit levels: (1) employment based social security which means that formally employed private sector workers and public sector workers are the most likely to receive protection, primarily in terms of end of service indemnity pay, health and education but with some countries not having old age pension schemes; (2) social safety nets and in-kind assistance, often provided by community or family based social networks, to vulnerable groups such as orphans or elderly people. This has been

the system in practice for several decades now since independence in the 1940s and shows no sign of dramatic reform. With some minor exceptions of countries with long socialist or Trade Union traditions such as Egypt and Tunisia, most countries are now adopting a strong neo-liberal stance whereby the private sector is the main engine of social and economic prosperity, though often it is the political establishment that are the main owners of capital such as in telecommunications and industry. The current donor-sponsored reform of food and fuel subsidies which is taking place in the countries examined in this report is occurring as part of these trends.

This report highlights a lot of diversity in the region especially between the oil rich countries and the other lower and middle-income countries. This diversity extends across the range of social policies provided and the sources of financing. For instance, as a high-income country, Oman has invested heavily in social safety net policies and interventions for its country nationals. It now faces the challenge of reducing their financial and economic dependency on incomes derived from oil revenues to stimulate social enterprise and levels of youth employment. In contrast, in low to middle income countries, such as Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco income inequalities and lack of jobs pose a continuing challenge. These countries would benefit in the short to medium terms from administrative reform of their social assistance and social insurance systems in order for social protection services to better reach vulnerable groups. Lack of basic social protection services are significant here, with Jordan also experiencing the burden of a growing refugee population.

The key conclusions highlighted in the report are:

1. MENA countries have made small step changes in relation to social policy since the Arab uprisings. The main government priorities continue to be focused on economic growth, in the face of persistent social inequalities and economic deprivation. The situation is exacerbated by the poor administration of services. The concept of social protection is mainly understood in a narrow sense of social safety nets of cash transfers.
2. There are some major national poverty targeting programmes such as Karama and Tayssir in Egypt and Morocco that reach large populations but the way in which the eligibility criteria and the assessment of poor households is carried out remains open to improvement. To this end, political stability continues to be perceived as the key determinant of social policy development in MENA.
3. Although MENA governments recognise the need to improve the quality and extend the coverage of social policies comprising of both social security and social safety nets, these remain fragmented. One of the key challenges for all the MENA cluster countries is to establish a coherent public policy for social protection that can be financed adequately from state funds in a sustainable manner.

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