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Redrawing the Welfare Map
NEW DIRECTIONS IN SOCIAL POLICY IN THE MENA REGION

It is often assumed that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region lacks effective social welfare systems and is reform resistant. Yet, there is growing evidence of long-standing, complex systems of social protection provided by a variety of actors and, in the wake of the popular uprisings of 2011, significant reform efforts. This MENA country cluster study, part of the UNRISD project New Directions in Social Policy: Alternatives from and for the Global South, assesses the background, nature and impacts of these initiatives in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Oman and Tunisia.

Social Policy in MENA: Unveiling Hidden Complexity and Dynamism

The MENA region is commonly assumed to be different, difficult and without effective systems of social welfare. It is seen as different because the global trends of political and economic liberalization have had only limited impact on the region's dynamics. Culture and tradition intrinsic to the region are often raised as key factors obstructing transformation towards advanced industrial societies. Finally, it is seen as lacking effective social welfare systems because rulers have often opted for a populistic ad hoc approach to social policy. To legitimize their political power, they implemented generous subsidies and other programmes primarily financed through unsustainable natural resource rents and foreign aid rather than tax revenues. For these reasons, in both policy-making and academic

circles, the region has often been treated as an incurable outlier where stagnating authoritarianism precludes adequate social policy and effective reforms.

For a long time, experts have focused on these assumptions about social policy in the MENA region, and consequently have failed to recognize the diversity and complexity of the region's reactive, dynamic social systems. Despite this neglect, these systems have succeeded in meeting basic needs and realizing some social rights. Specifically, missing from the mainstream picture is the fact that broader social services have long fallen within the purview of religious institutions, while less institutionalized civil society organizations have focused on specific needs. As a result, many analyses sideline or completely neglect the role of such grassroots organizations and institutions in providing and shaping social services, focusing instead on the role of elites in prioritizing economic growth over welfare concerns. With little predictive value, this truncated view has corroborated post-colonial narratives that political contestation and participative decision making are somehow antithetical to the values and norms of Arab societies.

In reality, the creation of a social contract in the region is an ongoing and sometimes turbulent process. Recently, international donors and national governments are increasingly realizing the importance of social policy in mitigating social and political discontent and are focusing their programmes on improving existing policy instruments. Whereas the previous policy approach privileged growth-first strategies, recent innovations may constitute a new paradigm in which social policy plays a more prominent role with extended functions. These emerging dynamics over social policy frameworks are reshaping the social protection networks that have long existed in the region. A comprehensive analysis of the state of social policy systems in the region, with a focus on
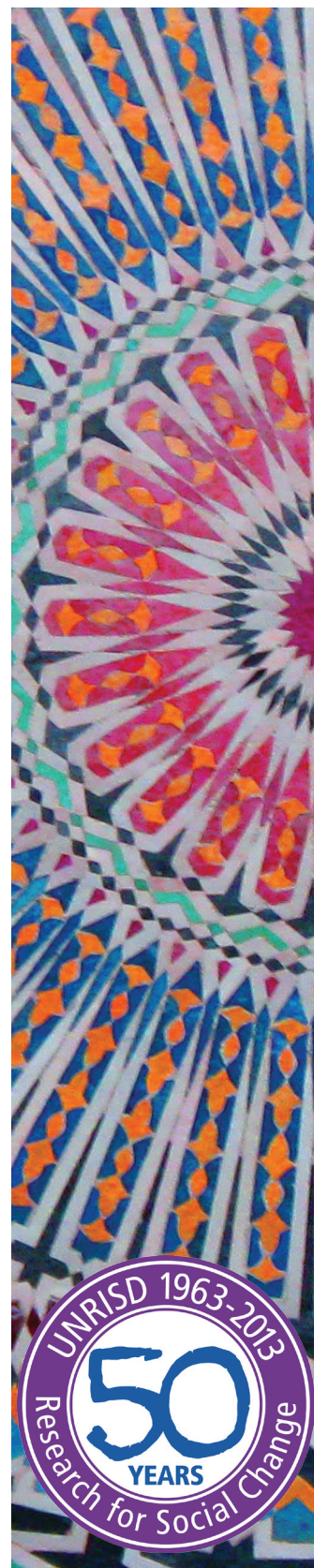
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New Directions in Social Policy

By examining the emergence, nature and effectiveness of recent developments in social policy in selected emerging economies and low-income countries, this three-year research project (2015–2017) aims to contribute evidence and analysis that will improve understanding of alternative policies for social development in the twenty-first century.

This research aims to shed light on the policy options and choices of emerging/developing countries; how economic, social, political and institutional arrangements can be designed to achieve better social outcomes given the challenges of the contemporary development context; how the values and norms of human rights, equity, sustainability and social justice can be operationalized through "new" social policies; and how experiences, knowledge and learning about innovative approaches can be shared among countries in the South.

UNRISD Research Team: The Research Coordinator for this project is Ilcheong Yi, and Kelly Stetter is the Research Analyst.

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political economy and institutional dynamics, is required to fill the gaps in the literature and to aid policy makers shaping effective social policy reforms based on broad dialogue and shared consensus.

Themes and Objectives

This study uses the welfare regime approach modified to capture MENA's context specificities in order to map out the institutional frameworks and assess the transformative potential of social policy in the region. It analyses the existing institutional arrangements and recent developments in four key social policy areas— employment and labour market policies, income substitution or cash transfer programmes, education, and health—in five different countries in the region: Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Oman and Tunisia. All of these countries have been actively reshaping and implementing national policies in at least one of the four areas identified. Rather than assessing individual social policy measures, the research analyses the social policy regime in each country, paying attention to its specific socio-economic and political context. The research mainly addresses the following questions.

- What forms do the newly emerging social policies take? What are the results obtained? Examining historical and contemporary determinants, the research asks if current policy changes are moving beyond targeted, safety-net strategies and towards a broader, rights-based approach, and if so, to what extent? Do changes in social policies go hand in hand with the changes in social policy discourse in the countries studied, including in the government's approach to social policy?

- What are the trade-offs and synergies between social, economic and environmental policies? How do these linkages between economic growth, ecological conservation, and equity and redistribution concerns affect social policies? In particular, how does the state's approach to alternative economic and environmental practices affect social policy?

- What are the main political economy factors that determine policy choice? How do shifting political coalitions and changing economic interests affect the conceptualization and forms of social policy? Do they affect the timing and sequencing of the establishment of social policy programmes?

- What are the key institutions shaping the financing and management of social policy? What factors drive social spending retrenchment or expansion? Which factors support the institutionalization of social policies within national policy-making contexts?

- Finally, how does policy transfer take place within and outside the MENA region? What are the mechanisms that contribute to this process?

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About Project Briefs

UNRISD Project Briefs pose questions, flag ideas and contribute knowledge that can improve the quality of development debates, policy and practice. They provide a concise summary of an UNRISD research project, situating it within wider social development debates; outlining its focus, objectives and methodology; and highlighting interim findings.

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