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# Concept Paper for Online Workshop

**“Policy Response to the
Socio-Economic Impact of the Covid-19 Epidemic:
Social Protection”**

**22 April 2020
10.00 – 12.15
ESCWA & ILO**

**12. BACKGROUND**

On 11 March 2020, WHO announced that Covid-19 outbreak can be characterized as a pandemic.[[1]](#footnote-1) To curb the spread of the virus, countries around the world took unprecedented measures, including lockdowns and curfews, closure of educational establishments and public institutions, as well as [full or partial suspension of non-essential business activities and](https://leinonen.eu/lv-en/news/temporary-suspension-of-business-activities) free movement of people. The pandemic and follow-up actions taken by governments to prevent the spread of the disease are having grave repercussions for the economic growth, labour markets, unemployment, poverty and food insecurity in virtually all the countries around the world. But it is the poor and vulnerable who are expected to bear the overwhelming burden of the Covid-19 crisis owning to their limited access to adequate health care and income security programmes, as well as chronic underinvestment in their human capital and living conditions. Informal workers, migrant workers and vulnerable workers in non-standard forms of employment are amongst the categories at highest risk. Most of them can’t afford the luxury of self-isolation, social distancing or buying a 2-weeks stock of food and medication, let alone remote work and online learning.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Although the epicenters of the pandemic are currently in the United States and Europe, majority of Arab countries are heavily affected by the virus. In the region, impacts of the pandemic are expected to be devastating given prevalent poverty and informality, conflicts and displacement, shrinking oil revenues as well as other factors. Many Arabs lack access to social protection programmes: an estimated 68.6 per cent of employed population aged 15+ in the Arab region work informally[[3]](#footnote-3) and on average only 46 per cent of the population are legally covered by pension schemes[[4]](#footnote-4). Healthcare systems in several countries of the region – namely, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen – have been significantly undermined by the recent conflicts[[5]](#footnote-5). A significant share of population lives in overcrowded accommodation and lacks access to proper sanitation: as many as 74 million people in the region “lack access to a basic handwashing facility”[[6]](#footnote-6) and, thus, can’t practice virus prevention through regular handwashing. To make things worse, several Arab countries are engulfed in continuous political and economic conflicts and crises and many countries of the region host large numbers of refugees and migrants that are particularly vulnerable to virus transmission and poverty.

As a consequence, ECSWA projects that Covid-19 crisis can result in an additional 8.3 million people falling into poverty[[7]](#footnote-7) in the Arab region. Overall, the Arab States region[[8]](#footnote-8) is expected to face the largest proportional reduction in hours of work globally: ILO projections indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic will wipe out 8.1 per cent of working hours in the second quarter of 2020, which is equivalent to 5 million full-time workers (assuming a 48-hour working week), compared to 6.7 per cent of hours of work lost at the global level. This will directly translate into lower levels of income and increased poverty. The employment impact of this crisis is, however, far from uniform, with significant differentials expected from one sector to another. To mitigate negative impacts of the crisis on population and businesses, governments around the globe are rolling out generous welfare programmes and stimulus packages, and Arab States are no exception. To ensure minimum income security of the population and their access to basic healthcare, governments are expanding the existing social protection programmes and devising new ones. The scope and depth of social protection response varies significantly across the region and may include one-off and recurrent cash transfers and unemployment benefits, in-kind support (usually in the form of food distribution), temporary suspension or subsidization of utility and rent bills, paid sick leaves and access to health care, bans or limits on redundancies, ensuring continuity of salary payments, postponing loan and tax payments, exempting some basic goods from taxes and duties to keep prices low, as well as measures targeted at specific vulnerable groups (migrants, homeless, casual workers, etc.).

Egypt is expanding on a limited scale its flagship conditional and unconditional cash transfer programme Takaful and Karama and introducing a one-off unemployment payment of 500 LE to informal workers registered in the database of the Ministry of Manpower[[9]](#footnote-9). In Morocco, private sector employees whose jobs are affected by the pandemic will benefit from monthly benefit of 2,000 DH from the National Social Security Fund[[10]](#footnote-10). Jordan started emergency distribution of food parcels to households of daily wage workers suspended amidst of the Covid-19 crisis and those over 70 years who are unable to financially support their families[[11]](#footnote-11). Measures aimed at temporary suspension of, discounts on or coverage by the government of utility bills are introduced in a number of countries, including Bahrain, Mauritania, Qatar and UAE. This way, ESCWA member States can benefit from learning each other’s experiences and discussing challenges of social protection response, the inclusion of all and leaving no behind to the unfolding crisis.

Social dialogue – collaboration and negotiation between government and social partners – is essential, both at enterprise level and at sector/national level to ensure that adopted measures are going to be fair, acceptable and effective. International Labour Standards (created by tripartite consensus) provide a strong foundation for the policy responses needed for sustained and equitable recovery. They encapsulate the idea of a human-centered approach to economics and development, and the need balance the objectives of stimulating demand, supporting businesses and protecting workers and vulnerable families.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The workshop will facilitate experience exchange and peer-learning and, thus, enhance the capacities of ESCWA member countries to efficiently design, implement and monitor social protection interventions aimed at mitigation of the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and reaching to those in need with no discrimination. During the 2-hour workshop, participants will learn about the projected impacts of the Covid-19 pandemics on economic growth, labour markets and unemployment, poverty and food insecurity in the Arab region. They will look at the various target groups and discuss broader policy responses and specific social protection measures adopted in selected countries around the world and in the Arab region as a response to Covid-19 and its implications. Then, member States will outline and discuss social protection measures rolled out in their esteemed countries to combat the crisis.

**3. Expected Accomplishments and Objective of the Workshop**

This workshop will gather high-level policy-makers working on social protection in ESCWA member States and representatives of employers’ and employees’ organizations. The key objective of the event is to facilitate experience exchange and peer-learning among member States and, thus, enhance the capacities of Arab countries to efficiently design, implement and monitor social protection interventions aimed at mitigation of the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic.

For instance, participants will:

(i) exchange and discuss information on the recent social protection measures adopted by Arab States as a response to the pandemic including methods of identifying target groups;

(ii) increase their capacity and knowledge in the field of design, implementation and monitoring of social protection interventions aimed at mitigation of the negative impacts of the pandemic;

(iii) strengthen South-South cooperation between Arab States in the sphere of emergency social protection response to the unfolding crises.

**4. Outputs of the Workshop**

The workshop will facilitate experience exchange and cooperation among policy-makers working on social protection in Arab countries. Participants will engage in discussions and analysis of social protection response to the Covid-19 pandemic in the Arab region.

**5. Draft Agenda**

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| 10:00 – 10:15 | Opening and welcoming remarks by ESCWA and ILOIntroduction of the participants |
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| 10:15 – 10:45 | **Presentations:** **1.Regional Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic:** *this presentation will discuss the projected impacts of Covid-19 on economic growth, labour markets, unemployment, poverty and food insecurity in the Arab region.* ***Moderator and presenter: ESCWA*****2. Results of the Mapping of Policy Responses to Covid-19 Crisis around the Globe and in the Arab region.** *The presentation will outline policy measures adopted by selected countries around the world and in the Arab region to mitigate impacts of the pandemic, with specific focus on social protection policies and interventions.****Moderator and presenter*:** ESCWA |
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| 10:45 – 12:00 | **Open microphone:** *country representatives will be invited to briefly present their policy response to Covid-19 crisis by answering the following questions:* 1. What social protection policies have your country implemented to mitigate the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic? How do you identify the target groups for your measures? How do you ensure that women as well as men are benefiting equally from these schemes?
2. What were the major challenges in designing and implementing social protection policy response to the Covid-19 pandemic?

**Moderated Discussion****Moderator:** Ruba Jaradat, ILO |
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| 12:00 – 12:15 | **Closing remarks and conclusion**What kind of assistance do Arab States need at this point from international organizations?**Moderator:** TBD |

1. #  *WHO (2020). WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020 (available at* [*https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020*](https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020)*)*

 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. #  *Joles, Betsy (2020). Cash-Strapped Lebanon Isn’t Ready for the Coronavirus. The Foreign Policy (available at* [*https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/28/lebanon-coronavirus-economic-crisis-protests/*](https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/28/lebanon-coronavirus-economic-crisis-protests/)*); Aspinwall, Nick (2020). Coronavirus Lockdown Strikes Fear among Manila's Poor. Al Jazeera (available at* [*https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/coronavirus-lockdown-strikes-fear-manila-poor-200313133102404.html*](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/coronavirus-lockdown-strikes-fear-manila-poor-200313133102404.html)*); Vesoulis, Abby (2020). Coronavirus May Disproportionately Hurt the Poor—And That's Bad for Everyone. The Time Magazine (available at* [*https://time.com/5800930/how-coronavirus-will-hurt-the-poor/*](https://time.com/5800930/how-coronavirus-will-hurt-the-poor/)*);* [*Jones*](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/owen-jones)*, Owen (2020), We're About to Learn a Terrible Lesson from Coronavirus: Inequality Kills. The Guardian (available at* [*https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/14/coronavirus-outbreak-inequality-austerity-pandemic*](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/14/coronavirus-outbreak-inequality-austerity-pandemic)*)*

 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. #  *Women and men in the informal economy: a statistical picture (third edition) / International Labour Office – Geneva: ILO, 2018, p. 13.*

 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. #  *ILO Social Security Facts and Figures (available at* [*https://www.ilo.org/beirut/areasofwork/social-security/lang--en/index.htm*](https://www.ilo.org/beirut/areasofwork/social-security/lang--en/index.htm)*)*

 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. #  *Pietromarchi, Virginia (2020). Coronavirus in Middle East: What you need to know. Al Jazeera (available at* [*https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/coronavirus-middle-east-200225124248535.html*](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/coronavirus-middle-east-200225124248535.html)*)*

 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. #  *ESCWA (2020). ESCWA: 74 million in the Arab region at risk of COVID-19 due to lack of access to a handwashing facility (available at* [*https://www.unescwa.org/news/escwa-74-million-arab-region-risk-covid-19-due-lack-access-handwashing-facility*](https://www.unescwa.org/news/escwa-74-million-arab-region-risk-covid-19-due-lack-access-handwashing-facility)*)*

 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *ESCWA (2020). Mitigating the Impact of Covid-19: Poverty and food insecurity in the Arab region (Available at* [*https://www.unescwa.org/news/new-escwa-brief-83-million-people-will-fall-poverty-arab-region-due-covid-19*](https://www.unescwa.org/news/new-escwa-brief-83-million-people-will-fall-poverty-arab-region-due-covid-19)*)* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *The projected reduction in hours of work is calculated for ILO-defined Arab States region that includes 12 West Asian Arab States, namely: Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. #  *Egypt Today (2020). Al-Mashat discusses with Egypt's development partners advancing mutual cooperation in face of COVID-19 (available at* [*https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/83347/%D9%90Al-Mashat-discusses-with-Egypt-s-development-partners-advancing-mutual*](https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/83347/%D9%90Al-Mashat-discusses-with-Egypt-s-development-partners-advancing-mutual)*)*

 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [*MÉDIAS24*](https://medias24.com/index.php) *(2020). Indemnité CNSS: plus de 700.000 salariés déclarés au 1er avril (available at* [*https://medias24.com/indemnite-cnss-plus-de-700-000-salaries-declares-au-1er-avril-9072.html*](https://medias24.com/indemnite-cnss-plus-de-700-000-salaries-declares-au-1er-avril-9072.html)*)* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. #  *The Jordan Times (2020). High-income earners’ requests for in-kind support draw social media backlash (available at* [*https://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/high-income-earners%E2%80%99-requests-kind-support-draw-social-media-backlash*](https://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/high-income-earners%E2%80%99-requests-kind-support-draw-social-media-backlash)*)*

 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *For further information on how International Labour Standards provide a much-needed foundation for policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis, please see: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\_norm/---normes/documents/publication/wcms\_739937.pdf* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)