المنتدى العربي من أجل المساواة
حـــوار وحلـــول

AFE 2025
4th Arab Forum for Equality
Dialogue and solutions
4e Forum arabe pour les égalités
Dialogue et solutions

24–25 June 2025 - Algiers, Algeria
24-25 حزيران/يونيو 2025 - الجزائر، الجزائر

E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2025/AFE/Concept note

Concept Note

Background information

In recent years, the Arab region has witnessed multiple and overlapping crises. Conflict as well as economic, environmental, humanitarian and political crises have constrained economic growth, inhibited social development, exacerbated existing inequalities, and created new inequalities. Many of these crises reinforce one another and are both a cause and consequence of inequality; they exacerbate and create inequalities by disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable, and they also trigger crises by driving social dissatisfaction or unsustainable development. This requires a new policy paradigm – one that reflects the urgency and depth of the challenges and ensures that policymakers are not trapped in an endless process of short-term policymaking, unable to deliver on sustainable long-term development.

Economic, climate and other challenges do not equally impact different population groups, including women, persons with disabilities, older persons and young persons. Those unequal consequences deepen the divide within and among countries and exacerbate existing inequalities.

Social protection, which encompasses social insurance, social assistance and labour market programmes, plays a crucial role in supporting low-income households during challenging times and preventing middle-income households from sliding into poverty. It is essential not only for providing protection during an individual's lifespan but also for addressing community-wide shocks. Social protection contributes to economic development and redistribution, and over the medium to long term, reduces inequality and fosters social cohesion.

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However, inequalities in social protection coverage and financing exacerbate existing challenges. Depending on their design and implementation, social protection programmes can reinforce inequality and the exclusion of certain groups of people.

In this context, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and its partners, including the Ministry of National Solidarity, Family and Women's Affairs in Algeria, Sawiris Foundation for Social Development, Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies at New York University, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, the Institute for Middle East Studies at George Washington University, and Social Protection for Women in the MENA Region (Hiya-MENA) will hold the Fourth Arab Forum for Equality (AFE). The Forum will focus on the theme of inequality and social protection, bringing together political leaders, ministers, the private sector, experts, and civil society organizations from the Arab region and globally.

The Forum aims to continue the discussions generated during the First Arab Forum for Equality, held in Lebanon under the theme "Building the future…a job for everyone", the Second Arab Forum for Equality, held in Jordan under the theme "One voice…equality in food security", and the Third Forum for Equality, held in Egypt under the theme "Addressing inequalities in times of multiple crises".

Objectives

The Fourth Arab Forum for Equality (AFE) will highlight the capacity of social protection systems to address key inequalities, and showcase how countries from the Arab region and beyond have managed to strengthen their national social protection systems to reduce the inequality gap. The Forum will also present international experiences and best practices, including experiences from Asian and Latin American countries, in introducing a comprehensive and universal coverage of social protection programmes.

The Forum will particularly aim to:

- Continue the dialogue between policymakers in the region and other regions worldwide, experts, and civil society organizations on how to reduce inequality.
- Promote a notion of universal social protection not just as an effective approach to address life-cycle risks and poverty at the level of households but as a tool to effectively manage (income) inequality.
- Identify the links between inequality and multiple crises.
- Showcase the best practices of countries that were able to reduce inequalities through effective and comprehensive social protection systems and programmes or have put universal social protection policies in place.
- Share innovative and practical policy solutions to reduce inequality, with a focus on social protection.

Provisional agenda

➔ Welcoming remarks

The welcoming remarks will be delivered by Mohamed Ennadir Larbaoui, Prime Minister of Algeria, and Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary of ESCWA and Under Secretary General of the United Nations, to launch the fourth AFE.

➔ Expressive lyrical piece

An expressive lyrical piece will be delivered by Shams Association for art therapy.

➔ Inequality ted talk

The talk will offer a thought-provoking perspective on equality in our lives. Drawing on personal experiences and regional realities, it will highlight key challenges in advancing equality, aiming to deepen engagement among participants.

Session 1: How did 2024 shape inequality?

This session will provide a deeper understanding of the structural and emerging drivers of inequality. The discussion will highlight key global and regional economic fluctuations, and related social and policy shifts during the last year, examining their implications across societies in high-, middle- and low-income countries, with a focus on vulnerable groups. It will also highlight how long-term trends – like jobless growth – impact the economic and social wellbeing of the region's population and foster inequality, undermining social cohesion and promoting social unrest.

Session 2: Social protection for the informal sector

This session will focus on the critical issue of extending social protection to workers in the informal sector, who constitute a significant portion of the labour force in the Arab region. It will explore the challenges and trade-offs of designing a basket of policy options that match the needs of each group within the informal sector. The session will also identify practical policy solutions to bridge the coverage gap and enhance the resilience and equality of informal sector workers.

Session 3: Social protection in times of wars, occupation and conflict

This session will delve deeper into the role of social protection in contexts of conflict, war and occupation, building on the discussions from the previous sessions. It will examine the unique challenges faced by countries experiencing prolonged instability, including dysfunctional institutions, limited resources and heightened vulnerabilities among their populations, specifically highlighting the impact on women. The session will shed light on mechanisms to transition from humanitarian support to statutory social protection. It will also shed light on resilience-building measures that have proven effective in such settings.

Session 4: Social protection as a pathway for inequality reduction

This session will focus on social protection as a critical pathway for reducing inequality globally and in the Arab region. It will explore how well-designed social protection systems can address inequality, e.g. by redistributing income, reducing poverty, and promoting inclusive development and social cohesion. The discussion will feature insights into successful national, regional, and international policies and initiatives, emphasizing the role of (targeted) universalism as an effective approach for income redistribution.

Session 5: What the experts say

This session will feature an open discussion between participants and global and regional equality and social protection experts. It will offer contrasting viewpoints and international experiences, generating a rich discussion on the different approaches to social protection with a view to tackling and reducing inequality in social protection programme delivery.

➔ Personal interview

This will be a short live interview with the Algerian Minister of National Solidarity, Family and Women's Affairs, showcasing the country's successful experiences in extending social protection coverage and highlighting future initiatives to further enhance the effectiveness of social protection systems in a middle-income country.

➔ Inequality ted talk

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Session 6: Can economic development benefit everyone?

Building on insights from previous sessions on the lack of decent job creation and increasing informality, this session will delve into the relationship between economic growth and its ability to benefit all segments of the population equally. The discussion will focus on whether economic development and growth models are effectively generating sufficient decent jobs to lift households out of poverty, provide protection against life-cycle risks and reduce reliance on social assistance systems. The session will demonstrate how alliances between ministers of social affairs, planning and economy can effectively align economic development with social progress.

Session 7: Financing inclusive social protection

This session will address the critical issue of inclusive, progressive financing of social protection, exploring diverse and innovative funding sources to ensure their long-term viability and social justness. It will highlight the experience of countries in mobilizing domestic resources for public expenditure and leveraging international support. The session will also highlight innovative approaches adopted by countries facing constrained fiscal space, showcasing strategies to enhance system efficiency and expand outreach within existing resource limitations, while at the same time aiming to leave no one behind.

Session 8: Budget consolidation vs. universal social protection: Who benefits?

This session will feature a discussion between experts from international financial institutions and civil society addressing social protection reform trends in the Arab region since the 2010s, which have frequently favoured narrowly targeted social assistance approaches over more costly – but at times more equal – universal social protection provisions.

Session 9: Innovative solutions for social protection

This session will explore innovative solutions for enhancing equality in social protection system delivery, with a focus on harnessing technology and innovative policy designs to expand their reach and effectiveness. It will examine the transformative potential of digital identification and enrolment platforms, and other technological advancements in streamlining access and reducing administrative barriers, thereby improving delivery mechanisms and stimulating coverage extension.

Session 10: Global partnerships for more effective social protection

This session will focus on global partnerships that complement domestic and bilateral social protection financing and support. Ideally, the session will showcase successful examples of collaboration between governments, the private sector, unions, and development partners in addressing key bottlenecks in the provision of essential social protection for people living in poverty. It will also discuss global partnerships as a path for knowledge sharing, cooperation, and efficient mobilization and disbursement of resources.