Non-contributory social protection through a child and equity lens in Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the largest Arab State in the Persian Gulf region. Along with other Member States of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Saudi Arabia's rapid economic growth contributed to significant social advancements. The country achieved most of the Millennium Development Goals and a very high Human Development Index of 0.847—the second highest in the region after Qatar. Despite considerable progress, regional and gender disparities are important social concerns that have yet to be addressed. Saudi Arabia’s total population stands at 32.2 million, of whom 9.6 million (29.8 per cent) are under 18 and 2.9 million (9.2 per cent) are under the age of 5, according to estimates for 2016. In 2016, migrant workers and their families, as well as Syrian and Yemeni refugee communities, accounted for a third of the country’s population (11.7 million people).

The recent drop in revenues from oil sales in the aftermath of the global financial crisis pushed Saudi Arabia towards a series of reforms. Saudi Vision 2030 introduced a set of plans to increase economic opportunities and improve social protection, aiming to alleviate the impact of energy subsidy reforms. However, limited data availability on poverty in Saudi Arabia is still a major barrier to developing schemes that respond to the needs of the population: the country has no official poverty line, which is crucial for the monitoring and evaluation of the pro-poor policies outlined in Saudi Vision 2030. Female migrant domestic workers and other immigrants are most likely to be among the most vulnerable groups in Saudi Arabia’s society, yet they are rarely considered in government interventions.

Saudi Arabia has a well-established social security system comprising two national insurance funds available to public- and private-sector employees. School education and health care are provided free of charge, although recent assessments showed that non-Saudi children or children without a residence permit have been facing challenges when it comes to access to free health care or education at public schools. For women, especially adolescents and young adults, challenges persist: low employment rates render access to social security more difficult, and youth unemployment rates are significantly higher among women (at 58 per cent) than among men (22 per cent). As the government aims to accelerate the phasing-out of energy and water subsidies, public authorities have identified the need to provide a more comprehensive social support system for Saudi low-income households.

In 2016 the Ministries of Labour and of Social Affairs were merged, and the newly established entity is the leading actor when it comes to social assistance. In 2016, migrant workers and their families, as well as Syrian and Yemeni refugee communities, accounted for a third of the country’s population (11.7 million people).

As outlined above, Saudi Vision 2030 proposes measures that, if implemented effectively, can improve the well-being of the most vulnerable members of society, including children. However, existing social protection and anti-poverty mechanisms face important challenges, such as limited data availability and in-depth knowledge about poverty rates, limiting the targeting efficiency of programmes. Lastly, fragmentation of different government initiatives, limited monitoring and evaluation instruments and restricted service provision for non-nationals are prominent issues that need to be addressed.

Note: