

Non-contributory social protection through a child and equity lens in Syria¹

International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG)

Syria shares borders with Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Israel and Lebanon.

In 2016 the country had a population of 18.4 million, of whom almost half (8.2 million) were under 18 years old and 2 million were children under the age of 5. In 2010, Syria had a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.646, placing the country in the 'medium human development' category. Since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, however, living standards and the security situation have deteriorated steadily, with the HDI falling to 0.536 in 2015. Moreover, income levels have decreased drastically: 85.2 per cent of the population now live in poverty, and 69.3 per cent in extreme poverty, unable to secure the basic food and non-food items necessary for survival.

The war has caused more than 250,000 deaths (as of early 2017) and it is estimated that 1.2 million residents were injured, more than 6.3 million are internally displaced and more than 4.9 million were forced to flee the country. This has extended the humanitarian crisis to neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon. About 13.5 million people, including 5.8 million children, are in acute need of humanitarian aid. Many of them live in hard-to-reach or besieged areas, making the delivery of humanitarian assistance very challenging. Apart from physical and psychological suffering caused by widespread violence, children are affected by forced recruitment into armed groups, displacement, child marriage, child labour as well as lack of access to education and health services.

Prior to the war—between 2005 and 2010—Syria experienced rapid economic growth. Liberal reforms were conducted to shift from a State-dominated economy towards a social market economy. The 10th Five-Year Plan (2006–2010) called for a 'new social contract' and aimed to extend social insurance coverage and strengthen social safety nets. In addition to contributory schemes such as the Public-Sector Pension Fund (PSPF) and the General Establishment for Social Insurance (GESI), the government used to provide social assistance programmes through the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour as well as several subsidy schemes. As military expenditures and the public deficit increased, spending on subsidy schemes decreased significantly, and a reduction in subsidies contributed to a rise in the prices of goods by more than 20 per cent in 2015 alone.

In 2007 the government announced the National Social Aid Fund (NSAF), a cash transfer programme aimed at protecting low-income families with periodic aid and advancing human capital. To select beneficiaries, proxy means-testing was combined with some geographical and categorical targeting. The programme envisaged the gradual introduction of child-related conditionalities to ensure school attendance and regular health

check-ups and to improve literacy. The first payments were disbursed only in 2011, reaching 439,000 families. The programme was discontinued after the 2011 uprisings, and the entire social protection system in place was severely affected. Discussions are being conducted about adapting the NSAF to the post-crisis situation.

In addition, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and the Directorate of Social Affairs operated a government-funded cash transfer programme for people with disabilities. Monthly allowances of SYP3,000 per person were paid to households with members with cerebral palsy, including children.

Due to their additional health care expenses, families with children with disabilities rank among the poorest in the country. To improve their situation, UNICEF introduced a cash transfer programme to support families with children with complex disabilities in selected areas in 2016. In addition to monthly cash transfers, social workers from both public services and specialised NGOs provide support to beneficiaries through case management and referral mechanisms to other existing services. As of mid-2017, 4,500 children with complex disabilities in Aleppo and 1,550 in Lattakia have been targeted. USD2.5 million has been allocated to Aleppo.

The duration and intensity of the Syrian conflict has emphasised the urgency for social protection to reach the most vulnerable people in the country. Most State-run programmes have been discontinued, and a large proportion of the population is now dependent on humanitarian assistance for survival. Children are especially affected by the war, as they face many challenges to their most basic rights. In addition to increasing immediate aid, it is vital to work towards reactivating pre-crisis schemes, such as the NSAF, and enhance its child-sensitive features through soft conditionalities, for example. It is also crucial to integrate humanitarian cash transfer programmes for children with existing social services, as in the case of the UNICEF-funded cash transfer programme, to guarantee a smooth transition to public ownership once conditions allow.

Note:

1. This One Pager is taken from a comprehensive study developed in partnership between the IPC-IG and UNICEF MENARO. All data are thoroughly referenced in the full report:

Machado, A. C., C. Bilo, R. G. Osorio, and F.V. Soares. 2018. *Overview of Non-contributory Social Protection Programmes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region through a Child and Equity Lens*. Brasília and Amman: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth and UNICEF Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa: <<https://goo.gl/QfmKwK>>.