

Non-contributory social protection through a child and equity lens in Tunisia¹

International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG)

Tunisia is a lower-middle-income country in Northern Africa bordering Libya, Algeria and the Mediterranean Sea. In 2016 the total population of Tunisia was 11.4 million people, of whom 28 per cent were younger than 18 years and 9 per cent were under the age of 5. With a Human Development Index of 0.725, which is above the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region's average of 0.704, Tunisia ranks 97th out of 188 countries. The country is characterised by a wide disparity between the coastal and the interior regions, reflected in significantly higher rates of poverty and food insecurity in the interior regions, rural zones and the east.

After the 2011 revolution, Tunisia started a process of state reconstruction and still faces major security and economic challenges. Conflicts in Libya and Syria have further jeopardised the country's stability. Social tension is also fuelled by income inequality.

The incidence of poverty is high among Tunisia's children, and other deprivations in child development or access to basic services prevail: child poverty rates of 21.7 per cent (in 2015) are significantly higher than the national average of 15.2 per cent. Moreover, 52.4 per cent of all children suffer from at least one deprivation. School enrolment for children at the age of 6 is almost universal (99.4 per cent). There are no significant gender gaps in primary enrolment. However, the risk of dropping out of secondary education is nearly twice as high for boys as for girls.

The Tunisian social protection system is one of the most comprehensive in the region. It comprises contributory and non-contributory benefits and active labour market policies. Social security has been a national priority in Tunisia. The government has supported discussions about social justice and a new social contract among workers, employers and the government. This agreement included the right to a minimum income for the most vulnerable people as well as a review of the contributory social security system, to make it more financially sustainable without compromising the benefits.

Tunisia's non-contributory system is under the purview of the Ministry of Social Affairs, but important social assistance programmes are implemented in cooperation with the Ministries of Education and Health. In total, there are five main non-contributory programmes, excluding the universal food and energy subsidies. They vary widely in their child-sensitive features and how targeting, benefit structure and conditionalities take the needs of families with children into account.

Tunisia's main cash transfer programme is the *Programme National d'Aide aux Familles Nécessiteuses* (PNAFN). Created in 1986 as a monthly unconditional cash transfer programme, it targets people who are unable to work due to old age, disability or chronic disease, and those who cannot be supported by their families. The programme also entails the allocation of free health care cards—*Assistance Médicale Gratuite* (AMG I). The PNAFN has increased the number of its beneficiaries by 70 per cent since the 2011 revolution, reaching approximately 230,000 families in 2015.

The Programme d'Allocations Scolaires, an additional monthly cash transfer for PNAFN households with school-age children, was introduced in 2007 and aims to support children's access to education. By the end of 2013 almost 80,000 received the school allowance.

The PNAFN's budget corresponds to 0.4 per cent of GDP—rather small compared to public expenditures on universal food and energy subsidies. Energy price subsidies accounted for 2.8 per cent of GDP in 2016; along with food subsidies, they have been in place since the 1970s. However, they have been criticised for being costly and inefficient poverty reduction instruments, disproportionately benefiting richer segments of society. Therefore, the World Bank has suggested replacing subsidies with targeted social assistance programmes.

The Ministry of Education implements the Back-to-School Education Benefit (BTS), a cash transfer programme that supports poor students at the beginning of the school year. In 2014-2015, approximately 373,000 pupils and university students benefited from this transfer.

The non-contributory social protection programme with the widest coverage in Tunisia is the *Assistance Médicale Gratuite* (AMG), which has granted reduced fees (AMG II) or total exemption of fees (AMG I) for the use of health services at public health centres since 1998. As of 2015 the AMG I covered all households benefiting from the PNAFN. The AMG II covered 620,000 Tunisian households in 2016. The targeting of the AMG II is based on a means test. The AMG II card provides access to reduced fees at public health centres for a fixed annual fee (stamp).

The National School Meals Programme was launched in 1997 and provides healthy food to improve the nutritional status of children, stabilise school attendance and prevent drop-out, particularly in rural areas. Moreover, the programme fosters links with local smallholder farmers' groups, and supports nutrition and environmental education. In 2016, 240,000 children were covered.

As in many MENA countries, one of the main issues of Tunisia's social protection system is its extensive universal food and energy subsidies, which disproportionately favour non-poor households. Other social protection programmes, however, are designed specifically for poor families with children. So far, the impact of these programmes on children's well-being has only been investigated by a few evaluations.

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>>.