

Non-contributory social protection through a child and equity lens in the United Arab Emirates¹

International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG)

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) comprises seven Emirates (Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al-Quwain), bordering Oman to the east and Saudi Arabia to the south. In 2016 the total population was 9.2 million people, of whom 5 per cent under the age of 5 and 16.6 per cent under the age of 18. In 2013, immigrants constituted more than 83 per cent of the total population, with the majority of migrant workers being of South and South-East Asian descent. Children born to Emirati women married to non-Emirati men can only acquire citizenship when applying for it at the age of 18.

Classified as a high-income country, the UAE ranks equally high in terms of human development at both regional and global levels. The country's Human Development Index has been increasing constantly since the 1990s and reached a value of 0.840 in 2015, placing the country 42nd out of 188 countries. The UAE has not officially adopted a poverty line, and estimates on the prevalence of poverty are uncertain. Economic growth has been subject to great volatility over the past decade due to lower oil prices. Nevertheless, real gross domestic product (GDP) growth is expected to recover slowly and reach about 3 per cent in 2018.

Health and education indicators reveal low mortality ratios, and high rates of school enrolment and attendance. Evidence shows that over the past two decades, important improvements have been made to reduce maternal mortality, which fell from 17 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 6 in 2015. In 2015, net primary school enrolment reached 93 per cent; however, little information is available on enrolment and attendance rates in secondary education. Health care used to be free to all until the government introduced charges for non-nationals in 2001. Likewise, public schools are free for UAE nationals, while non-nationals are subjected to fees.

The UAE stands out among the oil-exporting countries in the region for its low levels of subsidies, mainly for food and energy products. In 2015 the Emirates introduced substantial subsidy reforms, including the termination of fuel subsidies and an upward adjustment of electricity tariffs.

The UAE's social protection system falls under the purview of the Ministry of Community Development. Only UAE nationals are eligible for social assistance. Moreover, the different Emirates offer additional welfare services for citizens under their respective jurisdiction. At the national level, the Monthly Cash Benefit targets specific groups, including widows, divorced and abandoned women, people with disabilities, elderly people, families of prisoners and orphans. This financial assistance is only available to nationals residing in one of the seven Emirates. As of 2012 about 40,100 families and 4,900 children benefited from the programme.

Access to modern housing is considered a right of every citizen.

As of September 2011, more than 48,000 beneficiaries from low-income families received housing assistance through the Sheikh Zayed Housing Programme. In addition, the Social Welfare Against Disasters provides financial assistance, food and shelter to all citizens affected by a natural disaster. The amount paid covers up to 80 per cent of the total estimated financial and property losses.

In addition to UAE national programmes, Dubai offers a variety of financial assistance programmes that only Dubai residents can apply for. The Periodic Benefit Programme aims to support households whose income is lower than the benefit limit (ranging from AED10,700 to AED21,700 according to the number of family members). The benefit is available to divorced women and widows, and the amount depends on the number of household members. An Emergency Benefit is granted to low-income residents, including divorced women, widows and their dependent children, in the aftermath of an accident or other emergency situations. The One-Time Benefit offers financial support for specific predefined purposes, including financial support to furnish a house, a benefit to supply electricity and tuition costs for children with disabilities. As such, this benefit can be characterised as improving access to education for children with special needs. The Temporary Housing Benefit aims to support low-income households to pay for temporary housing in case of homelessness or property damage following an emergency.

Although living standards are relatively high in the UAE and a number of social protection schemes exist to cater to lower-income households, more information is needed to assess coverage rates and to glean a better understanding of the impact of these programmes on children's well-being. More importantly, however, evidence shows that the existing programmes are only available to UAE citizens, and no information exists about social assistance programmes for the vast number of migrant workers and their families who reside in the country. Children of non-UAE citizens may be more prone to vulnerability and poverty; hence improved data availability is crucial to determine the state of child-sensitive social protection in the country.

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>>.