Rethinking Social Transformations:

Inequalities in the Arab Region in Light of COVID-19 Pandemic

Main Researcher/ Rima Majid
Editor/ Mohamed Elagati

Rethinking Social Transformations:

Inequalities in the Arab Region in Light of COVID-19 Pandemic

منتدى البدائل العربي للدراسات
Arab Forum for Alternatives

Special Thanks to Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies **at the American University of Beirut for their efforts in this work**

Translator/ English editor
Sonia Farid
Arabic Editor
Zeinab Srour
Main Researcher
Rima Majid
Editor
Mohamed Elagati
Research Coordinator
Shimaa El Sharkawy

Rethinking Social Transformations:

Inequalities in the Arab Region in Light of COVID-19 Pandemic

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

1. Inequalities and Social Transformations in the Arab Region in Light of COVID-19

Dr. Rima Majed

A Global Pandemic and Crisis: Capitalism in Question

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide since early 2020 has laid bare the implications of the deep and rising global inequalities on our societies[1]. The threat of this novel virus exposed the weakness of the neoliberal capitalist model. For decades, neoliberalism has pushed for the rolling back of the welfare state in many countries, encouraged austerity measures under the guidance of the International Monetary Fund, and gave primacy to profit and capital over human (and non-human) lives. Large private pharmaceutical companies and privatized healthcare systems have been in control of public health in most countries and have contributed to the inequalities in terms of access to healthcare and medication. The scale of the pandemic, the unpreparedness of most countries – including those of the Global North - to deal with it, and the exorbitant economic and social costs to contain the virus and flatten the curve, highlighted how socio-economic policies and political decisions taken by governments have affected the ability of millions of individuals to survive in such unprecedented times. As argued by Eric Toussaint, the deep economic crisis we are facing today is not merely the result of the COVID-19 crisis, but it was rather in the making for long years and the pandemic only came to expose it[2].

The study of the implications of inequalities on access to healthcare, safety and protection, decent jobs, clean water, basic services, or quality education is not a new topic. It has been long researched and documented by scholars, international organizations and governments. However, in extraordinary times such as the current pandemic, these implications have expanded rapidly and became much more visible and acute as the emergency of the moment uncovered the inability of most systems around the world to socially, economically, and medically protect the most vulnerable and marginalized in societies[3]. Building on Achille Mbembe's notion of "necro-politics" and borrowing Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee's concept of "necro-capitalism", Mark LeVine has recently argued that the pandemic has unraveled "the unprecedentedly racialised, racketised, militarised, revanchist and necropolitical form of capitalism"[4].

The pandemic came at a time when issues of inequalities and injustices had already pushed millions into the streets around the

[1] World Inequality Report. (Paris: World Inequality Lab, 2018). https://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-summary-english.pdf

[2] Eric Toussaint, "The Capitalist Pandemic, Coronavirus and the Economic Crisis". (CADTM: Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt, 19 March 2020)

[3] World Social Report 2020: Inequality in a Rapidly Changing World. (NY: Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, 2020). https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/02/World-Social-Report2020-FullReport.pdf

[4] Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee. "Necrocapitalism." Organization Studies 29, no. 12 (December 2008): 1541–63; Mark LeVine, "From neoliberalism to necrocapitalism in 20 years". (Al Jazeera, 15 July 2020). https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/7/15/from-neoliberalism-to-necrocapitalism-in-20-years/?gb=true;

globe throughout 2019[5]. Uprisings and mass mobilizations were already taking place in many countries – from Chile to Iraq – protesting neoliberal measures of austerity, high unemployment rates, as well as dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. COVID-19 came to exacerbate these inequalities as the world has entered a global recession caused by the lockdown that led to a deep drop in global production, unprecedented travel and movement restrictions, and devastating implications on the labor market globally[6]. Similarly, lockdowns forced most protesters back into their homes, giving some regimes a golden opportunity to crack down on the movements that had filled the streets and occupied public squares since 2019. However, the effect of lockdowns on protests has not been the same everywhere. Several months into this plague, the world is witnessing again new waves of mass protests ranging from the George Floyd protests in the Unites States in June 2020 as part of the Black Lives Matter movement, to protests in Germany, Belarus, Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan or Nigeria.

While the world is facing this pandemic concurrently, the world system is far from facing it as "one"; and countries around the globe are also far from being able to deal with this pandemic equally. The global unequal and combined development, and the high levels of inequalities amongst and within countries, mean that the pandemic has most harshly hit the most vulnerable and marginalized communities. These include the unemployed, the daily-wage workers, women, refugees and migrants, racial minorities, people with disabilities, the elderly, people with previous health conditions, people living under occupation, people living in war zones, or people living in countries already witnessing economic collapse or political instability. Therefore, the catastrophic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide are expected to be even more severe and dangerous on the long run in the "Global South" where societies were already suffering from higher levels of inequality and instability, and where the lack of infrastructure makes most states ill-equipped to face this multi-faceted crisis[7].

In the MENA region, the year 2019 had witnessed a return of uprisings in many countries from Sudan and Algeria to Lebanon and Iraq. This new wave of "Arab Uprisings" was clearly focused on demands related to socio-economic inequalities, covering issues such as living costs, fair taxation, corruption, universal health care, free quality education, unemployment benefits, housing, and women's rights. People around the region were protesting the extremely high living costs, the deteriorating living conditions, the rising rates of unemployment and poverty, the inaccessibility to the highly privatized healthcare system, the continuation of violence against women, the "corruption" of the ruling elites, and the inability of the current states of providing a minimum level of social protection. In brief, the outcry in most streets of the Arab region was against an unequal neoliberal state that has exacerbated inequalities and deepened vulnerabilities. It is in such a context of social and economic suffering that the COVID-19 pandemic reached many Arab countries to lay its weight on the already fragile and collapsing social protection nets.

What does it mean to "press pause" on the economy at a global scale? How will it affect societies and communities differently? How will it affect the Arab region more specifically? How can we understand the implications of the pandemic in countries – such as Iraq, Sudan, Lebanon or Algeria – that were experiencing uprisings and revolutions? What about countries – such as Lebanon – that were already going through a financial crisis? What about the millions of refugees and displaced people living in camps around the Arab region? Or migrant workers who have left their countries to come work

[5] Robin Wright, "The Story of 2019: Protests in Every Corner of the Globe". (New York Times, December 30, 2019). https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-story-of-2019-protests-in-every-corner-of-the-globe

[6] World Economic Outlook Update, A Crisis Like No Other: An Uncertain Recovery. (Washington: IMF: June 2020). https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/06/24/WEOUpdateJune2020

[7] Adam Hannieh, "COVID-19: This is a Global Pandemic, Let's Treat it as Such". (London: SOAS Blog, March 31, 2020). https://www.soas.ac.uk/blogs/study/covid-19-global-pandemic/

in dire conditions in Arab countries? How does the "lock down" affect daily-wage workers? How does it impact job security, or unemployment in a region that has the highest rate of youth unemployment globally? Moreover, what does the lockdown mean for women and children who suffer from domestic violence? After all, not all "homes" are safe and comfortable. What about people who don't have homes? Or those who don't have free access to healthcare, especially in countries where the healthcare sector is highly privatized and where insurance companies have replaced a universal healthcare system? What about those who live under occupation, such as in Palestine? Or those who live under war such as in Syria, Libya or Yemen? Moreover, how does the pandemic affect our educational systems? What does it mean to suddenly move to online learning? How does this expose, yet again, the structural inequalities and the "digital divide" in society?[8] How does the response to the pandemic through 'charity' and benevolence of rich individuals affect the plight for social justice and social protection in the Arab world? Finally, how does the pandemic affect our understanding of labor (especially 'essential labor'), production, and consumption in our societies? These are some of the most pressing questions that this edited volume will attempt to better understand in order to reflect on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on societies in the Arab region.

This volume builds on the regional reflection on "Addressing inequalities in the Arab region" at the launching conference of the Arabic version of the World Social Science Report 2016[9]. The conference brought together a number of leading scholars, researchers and practitioners in September 2018 to reflect on issues of inequalities in the Arab world. The figures presented were already worrying back then, and most participants raised the alarms given that the Arab region suffers from the highest rates of economic inequality and youth unemployment globally, and forms the biggest site for refugees and forced displacements in the world[10]. Little did we know that a global pandemic was upon us and that our teams will come together again to reflect on the implications of this deep and unexpected crisis on inequalities in the Arab region. This edited volume is the fruit of eight months of work with researchers from various countries in the Arab world to attempt at grasping the social transformations and the implications of public policies in light of COVID-19 on inequalities in the region.

COVID-19 and Inequalities in the Arab Region

While the Arab region had initially kept relatively low rates of COVID-19 transmission and mortality compared to Europe or the United States, more recent trends highlight an alarming increase in the spread of the virus against the backdrop of ill-equipped healthcare systems[11]. This public health challenge has clearly exacerbated other already worrying trends in the region ranging from the lack of social security and safety nets, to high rates of inequality, unemployment and poverty, gender inequality, in addition to wars and conflicts that have resulted in huge waves of forced migration and displacement[12].

Following at least two decades of neoliberal policies, the Arab region finds itself unprepared to weather this storm. According to a new policy brief by the United Nations, the Arab region's economy is expected to shrink by 5.7%, with expectations that some countries' economies might contract by more than 13%, which will lead to an overall loss of around $152 billion USD[13]. Similarly,

[8] Joe Myers, "5 things COVID-19 has taught us about inequality". (World Economic Forum, 18 August 2020). https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/5-things-covid-19-has-taught-us-about-inequality/

[9] The meeting was convened by UNESCO, the Arab Forum for Alternatives, and the Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies Department at the American University of Beirut (Beirut, Sept 2018).

[10] World Inequality Report, ibid; Adam Hanieh, ibid.

[11] The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region: An Opportunity to Build Back Better (United Nations Policy Brief, July 2020). https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_arab_states_english_version_july_2020.pdf

[12] Ibid

[13] Ibid

expectations point to a downward mobility of almost 14 million people from the middle classes around the Arab region having already fallen into poverty. By the end of 2020, it is estimated that around a quarter of the Arab population will be living in poverty[14]. Similarly, OXFAM estimated that the economic recession will eventually "push an additional 45 million people into poverty across the region"[15]. Moreover, while the Arab region already suffered from high rates of unemployment – especially amongst the youth – it is estimated that aggregated working hours have severely dropped in the second quarter of 2020[16]. It is expected that more than 1.7 million jobs have been lost in the Arab region, including around 700,000 jobs that were held by women[17]. This is compounded by the fact that the region has a high rate of labor informality (71.2%), with women constituting 61.8% of informal workers, which means that large sections of society – especially the most vulnerable groups – have been hardly hit by the lack of safety nets or social security[18]. This comes at a time when, according to a recent OXFAM report, "the wealth of billionaires in MENA increased by at least $9.8bn between March and August 2020, more than twice the total IMF emergency financing that the region received to help it weather this global crisis"[19]. Therefore, the economic crisis that the pandemic has unraveled has exacerbated the already immense inequalities in the Arab region, "where the richest 10% of the population control 76% of all income, and 37 individual billionaires own as much wealth as the poorest half of the whole adult population"[20].

Moreover, the pandemic has clearly affected women, and other minority groups, at higher rates. The majority of healthcare workers (nurses, midwives, etc.) and social workers in the Arab region are women, which increases their risk of contamination while their work conditions are generally unsafe and their incomes are limited[21]. Similarly, women in agriculture and women who work as domestic workers in the Arab region have suffered tremendously from the pandemic's effect[22]. In addition, women's care labor within the household has reached new levels with the move to online schooling falling mainly on the shoulders of women, and with a rising digital gender gap identified across the Arab region[23]. More generally, the lockdown and the restriction on movement have caused a higher burden on women's care labour, in addition to increased rates of domestic violence and decreased access to sexual and reproductive health services[24].

In light of such alarming trends in the Arab world, this edited volume will tackle the question of the implication of the pandemic on inequalities in the region from a multi-disciplinary approach. It is

14 Ibid

15 Nabil Abdo and Shaddin Almasri, "For a Decade of Hope Not Austerity in The Middle East and North Africa: Towards a fair and inclusive recovery to fight inequality". (London: Oxfam International: 2020), https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621041/bp-mena-inclusive-recovery-260820-en.pdf

16 ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work, (International Labour Organization, fourth edition, 27 May 2020). https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_745963.pdf

17 The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality in the Arab Region. (ESCWA and UN Women Policy Brief No 4, 2020). https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2020/04/impact%20of%20covid%20on%20gender%20equality%20-%20policy%20brief.pdf?la=en&vs=4414

18 Ibid

19 Nabil Abdo and Shaddin Almasri, ibid.

20 Nabil Abdo and Shaddin Almasri, ibid.

21 The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality in the Arab Region, ibid

22 COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: impact on gender equality and policy responses. (OECD, 10 June 2020). https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-in-the-mena-region-impact-on-gender-equality-and-policy-responses-ee4cd4f4/

23 Ibid

24 Hall et al., "Centring sexual and reproductive health and justice in the global COVID-19 response" ***The Lancet 395***, no. 10231 (2020): 1175-1177.

divided into four main sections, each comprising an introductory note and a series of articles focused on the subtheme of the section.

The first section focuses on the topic to economic inequalities in the Arab region in light of COVID-19. This part is introduced with a reflection note by Wael Gamal on austerity, debt and inequality in the Arab world. It is then followed by two research papers: one by Janan Al Jabiri looking at the conditions of informal workers in Iraq throughout the pandemic; and another by Mohammad-Said Saadi focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on labor markets in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.

The second section of this volume examines public policies and state responses to COVID-19 in the Arab region. It starts with a review by Ibrahim Awad reflecting on public policy as state response. This review ushers in three main research papers, with two papers tracing public policies at the regional level and one paper serving as a case study on online learning in Morocco. The article by Nancy Kanbar, Roy Kanbar and Ziad El Sayegh addresses the topic of COVID-19 and human security with a broad developmental economic approach looking at public policies regarding labor markets, healthcare systems and education in the Arab region. The second paper by Nessaf Ibrahimi and Shimaa El Sharkawy tackles the question of the rights of vulnerable groups in the response to the pandemic in four Arab countries (Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco). This section ends with an in-depth analysis of the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational system in Morocco by Rajaa Al Kassab.

The third part of this volume zooms into the cases where war, occupation or uprisings were ongoing when the pandemic spread in the Arab region. This section is introduced with a reflection essay by Sari Hanafi on the challenges of countries in the Arab region ravaged by conflict and violence. This is then followed by three research papers covering the case studies of Palestine, Syria and Iraq. Abaher El Sakka's paper analyzes the implications of the pandemic in light of the Palestinian authorities' social policies, and Israeli biopolitical policies of occupation. This paper is followed by a research by Fadi Esber dissecting the Syrian public policy response to the pandemic and its implication on inequalities. The last paper in this section focuses on the impact of the pandemic on the Iraqi uprising that had started in October 2019.

Finally, the last section of this edited volume looks at the effects of COVID-19 on citizenship, civic engagement, and human rights in the Arab region. It starts with a reflection note by Asma Nouira on social transformations and inequalities in the Arab region in light of the pandemic. This introductory note is followed by four main research papers in this section. The first paper, authored by Sawsan Abdulrahim and Farah Salka, tackles the issues of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, highlighting the intersections between racism, social inequalities and the pandemic's effect. This is followed by a paper by Abdelmawla Ismail dissecting the situation of farmers in Egypt and the effects of the pandemic on their lives and livelihoods. The third research in this final section is by Azza Mustafa who studied the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups in Sudan, with a special focus on women street sellers. Finally, this part ends with a paper by Lardi Sadiki and Layla Saleh calling for a reflection on the COVID-19 experience in light of Arendt's concept of the "human condition" and Brecht's notion of the "risk society". Focusing on Tunisia and the Gulf countries, this paper calls for adopting an ethnographic approach in dissecting the effects of the huge transformations brought about by the pandemic.

Policy Recommendations

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak globally, renowned author Arundhati Roy wrote[25]:

> *Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.*

[25] Arundhati Roy, "The Pandemic Is a Portal," ***Financial Times***, April 3, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca

In the hope that this pandemic serves as a "portal" as Roy has called it, below are some policy recommendations that seem to be urgent for the Arab region in order to start addressing the huge inequalities highlighted in this report:

- Governments in the region should work towards achieving economic and fiscal justice. This can be done by imposing a progressive taxation system in order to redistribute wealth more equitably, given that the region's wealth are concentrated in the hands of a few of the richest people. This measure can be compounded with in a one-time tax on wealth in order to address the urgent needs stemming from the pandemic and its impact on social inequalities.
- Austerity measures are not helpful in terms of closing the inequality gap. Governments in the region need to play a bigger role in redistributing wealth and providing social security to all instead of imposing austerity measures.
- All countries in the region should provide free and accessible universal public services for everyone, regardless of nationality or residency status. Governments should ensure that their health care systems are well-resourced, and their public schools are equipped to receive all students and provide them with quality education. The privatization and unaffordability of the healthcare systems and private schooling for most of the population pauses a major challenge that has been exposed more clearly during this pandemic.
- The move to online learning and work-from home options for some of the labor force with the pandemic unraveled a digital gap that needs to be addressed by governments through the offering of free high-speed internet and equipment (laptops, tablets, etc.) where needed, in addition to the offering of support in terms of care labor (child care and elderly care) in order to cushion the burden that has fallen on the most vulnerable populations with the lockdown – women, economically disadvantaged, elderly, children, and workers.
- An effective unemployment benefit needs to be activated in order to address the huge losses of jobs in light of the pandemic. This could also serve to help those who work in the informal sector on the short run since they are amongst the most vulnerable groups during the pandemic. Labor policies that work to formalize informal labor need to also be activated in order to respond to the crisis on a longer run.
- Support packages that target small and medium businesses could help in cushioning the effect of the lockdown on large numbers on small business owners and their employees.
- Abolish the kafala system for all workers, and ensure labor rights for all – including the right to organize in unions and associations.
- Adopt/activate policies and legislations that protect women in terms of access to reproductive health and gender-based violence services.
- Finally, governments in the region should implement strict policies in order to limit carbon emission and to mitigate the effect of climate change. Without effective environmental policies, inequalities will continue to affect the most marginalized communities

SECTION I

ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES IN THE ARAB REGION IN LIGHT OF COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

Austerity, Debt, and Inequality: How the Arab Region Responded to Coronavirus

Wael Gamal

Since the 2007-2008 financial crisis, global economy has not fully recovered and previous growth rates were never restored as the world entered into a state of "secular stagnation." Levels of social and economic inequality increased and so did unemployment rates, which led to a remarkable growth in the number of informal and unstable jobs in both developed and developing countries. This was accompanied by a substantial deterioration in public services. Meanwhile, public and personal debts increased, and austerity measures were imposed.

It is against this backdrop that Coronavirus hit the world to create a health crisis that further complicated the economic situation. The pandemic caused a global economic contraction of at least 5% and led to the loss of at least 400 million jobs[1], hence foreboding the exacerbation of poverty and inequality even in developed countries[2]. The Arab region was not an exception for the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) expected that an additional 8.3 million people would be categorized as poor so that the number of the poor would reach 101.4 million in addition to a major increase in the number of people who suffer from malnutrition to reach 52 million[3]. Before the pandemic, the region had already been suffering from growing unemployment rates, especially among youths, and ranked first in terms of disparities in income and wealth and social and economic inequality[4]. This situation is expected to get worse with the pandemic.

Oxfam International estimated that the wealth of billionaires in the region increased by 9.8 billion dollars since the outbreak[5]. For example, the wealth of Egyptian businessman Naguib Sawiris reached eight billion dollars, compared to 6.4 billion in March 2019. According to Forbes, the wealth of Moroccan businessman Aziz Akhannouch reached in September 3.5 billion dollars, compared to 1.7 billion in January[6]. In Egypt, official statistics show that the income of 73% of the people dropped while the income of only 1% increased a few months after the outbreak of Coronavirus[7].

1 World Economic Outlook Update, A Crisis Like No Other: An Uncertain Recovery`. (Washington: IMF: June 2020). https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/06/24/WEOUpdateJune2020

2 Heather Long, Andrew Van Dam, Alyssa Fowers, and Leslie Shapiro, "The Covid-19 Recession Is the Most Unequal in Modern U.S. History", Washington Post, September 30, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/business/coronavirus-recession-equality/?fbclid=IwAR3SeVdaom3_IxqXYv1wQcjl6XbIiyQ2zQ0fk-ZEP3rS3YVrTz1QbAmqKrs

3 New ESCWA brief: 8.3 million people will fall into poverty in the Arab region due to COVID-19: https://www.unescwa.org/news/new-escwa-brief-83-million-people-will-fall-poverty-arab-region-due-covid-19

4 World Inequality Report. (Paris: World Inequality Lab, 2018). https://wir2018.wid.world

5 Nabil Abdo and Shaddin Almasri, "For a Decade of Hope Not Austerity in The Middle East and North Africa: Towards a fair and inclusive recovery to fight inequality". (London: Oxfam International: 2020), https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621041/bp-mena-inclusive-recovery-260820-en.pdf

6 Forbes Magazine, September 30, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/profile/nassef-sawiris/#6a017b6a2456

7 "The impact of Coronavirus on Egyptian families until May 2020 [Arabic]."The Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics: https://bit.ly/3hU81nm

The paper by Mohamed Saeid El Saadi about the impact of Coronavirus on the labor market in the Maghreb and the paper by Jinan El Jabiri about the impact of the pandemic on fragile workers in Iraq underline a number of significant concepts. The first is the dominance of the austerity approach on the economic policies in both countries, which led to the fragility of state institutions and lack of social protection plans that can mitigate the impact of the pandemic, especially in light of the growing numbers of workers in the informal sector. The second is the inefficiency of immediate measures taken to curb the spread of the virus and this is not only the case with the Maghreb countries and Lebanon, but also Egypt and most Arab countries. The third is related to the fact that governments offered support to the healthcare sector and workers in the former sector yet companies, such as in Egypt, received more support that was not conditioned on not laying off staff or meeting health and safety standards in the workplace. Fourth, instead of reconsidering the neoliberal austerity approach that limits government resources, Arab governments faced the crisis through taking more loans from international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. For example, Egypt already received two loans to deal with the pandemic, one of which is contingent upon the continuation of austerity measures even if this results in increasing social disparities and stagnation as well as taking public debt to unprecedented levels.

Austerity measures and economic policies in the Arab region

A study conducted by the economic research consultancy Capital Economics noted that the "most important lesson from history is that seismic shocks tend to accelerate changes to economic structures, institutions and behaviours that were already underway. This implies that the current pandemic could leave a legacy that touches on everything from globalisation to the future of work"[8]. At the same time, several economists saw the pandemic as an opportunity to reconsider neoliberal givens on economic policies, economic growth, and investment and move towards empowering vital sectors such as agriculture, industry, public services, and environmental policies as the main components of an economy that improves people's living conditions while being able to deal with crises and social disparities[9]. Despite rising levels of inequality and poverty, the drop in incomes, and the deterioration of living conditions in addition to the current health challenge, it is still "business as usual" in the Arab region.

Since 2010, this "usual" has meant the reduction of spending on public services. In fact, the Middle East and North Africa region has the world's highest percentage of the reduction of public spending with an average of 3.2% of the gross domestic product[10]. However, economic intervention packages to deal with the pandemic were less than any other region in the world[11]. In half the countries in the world, those packages were funded through "expenditure reallocation or revenue measures." Since the end of the April, "most of the additional policy responses have

[8] Gabriella Dickens, "What can we learn from past pandemics?" (London: Capital Economics: September 16, 2020), https://www.capitaleconomics.com/publications/global-economics/global-economics-focus/what-can-we-learn-from-past-pandemics/

[9] Trade and Development Report 2020. (Geneva: UNCTAD: September 2020), https://unctad.org/en/pages/PublicationWebflyer.aspx?publicationid=2853

[10] Isabel Ortiz and M. Cummins "Austerity: The New Normal A Renewed Washington Consensus 2010-24", (New York: Initiative for Policy Dialogue (IPD) International Confederation of Trade Unions (ITUC) Public Services International (PSI) European Network on Debt and Development (EURODAD) The Bretton Woods Project (BWP): 2019), http://policydialogue.org/files/publications/papers/Austerity-the-New-Normal-Ortiz-Cummins-6-Oct-2019.pdf

[11] Regional Economic Outlook Update: Middle East and Central Asia. (Washington: IMF: July 2020), https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/MECA/Issues/2020/07/13/regional-economic-outlook-update-menap-cca#report

focused on enlarging fiscal support packages, in particular through support to small and medium enterprises"[12]. Like austerity measures have failed through the past years to reduce public debt and its impact on the Arab region, the measures taken to address the impact of Coronavirus were similarly ineffective.

Based on the International Monetary Fund, the average percentage of budget deficits to gross domestic product has been remarkably increasing in the Middle East, North Africa, and Pakistan despite austerity measures. While this average increased by 5.6% in 2012, it dropped to 3.9% the following year and continued dropped starting 2014 to reach 1.5% of the GDP then reached 3.8% in 2019 and is expected to reach 9.8% in 2020[13]. The Arab region was not exception as the public debt kept increasing despite austerity measures. In fact, the public debt in several Arab countries reached 100% of the GDP in the past decade, particularly Lebanon and Egypt. The average public debt in 15 countries reached 82.3% in 2015, compared to 65.5% in 2007. Statistics show that average percentage of public debt to GDP increased from 25% in 2009 to 35% in 2019 and is expected to reach 46.6% in 2020[14]. This applies to both oil-exporting and oil-importing countries. Lebanon is currently going through one of the worst debt crises in the history of the region as it stopped payments, which had a detrimental impact on the salaries and savings of the majority of the people.

Ramifications of austerity and debt

The poor, the most affected group by budget imbalances, are always the ones to bear the brunt of public debt since payments for this debt are deducted from public spending. This, in turn, leads to the exacerbation of social and economic inequality and increased poverty rates through a number of factors:

- Reduction of spending on healthcare, education, social protection, and salaries among others, which affects fragile groups, the poor, and women.
- A regressive tax system that increases the burden on the poor, especially in light of the reduction of progressive taxes, the absence of wealth and inheritance taxes, and expansion of indirect consumer taxes especially in the form of value added tax.
- The emergence of a segment of society whose high-income members, many of whom work in the banking sector, benefit from public debts not only through the profit they make from investments that expand through this debt but also through taking part in the decision-making process to promote policies that widen the gap between them and the rest of society and that serve their own agendas only. This is particularly the case in Egypt and Lebanon.
- The use of debts and budget deficits as an excuse by the government for not reconsidering austerity measures or increasing public spending, including in a crisis such as the one caused by the pandemic and which not only leads to the deterioration of living conditions but also obstructs the economic growth austerity measures are initially expected to achieve. This is particularly the case with Saudi Arabia since, according to Capital Economics, the severe austerity measures followed by the kingdom in the aftermath of the pandemic, which were linked to a 1% contraction in the first quarter of 2020 then 7% in the second quarter, are the main obstacle in the way of reviving government and personal consumption and achieving economic growth[15].
- Unsustainable debts have detrimental effects on economic conditions and are expected to cause crises as is the case with Lebanon since late 2019, where the value of the local currency dropped and so did the value of savings and salaries, which led to the

[12] Ibid

[13] Fiscal Monitor, (Washington: IMF: April 2020), https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/FM/Issues/2020/04/06/fiscal-monitor-april-2020

[14] Ibid

[15] Saudi Arabia GDP (Q2) Economy slumps, recovery already stuttering. (London: Capital Economics, September 30, 2020).

deterioration of living conditions and rising poverty levels. According to a World Bank report, the sustainability of public finance in the Middle East and North Africa declined in 2019, compared to 2018 even though in 2018 the "primary fiscal balances were insufficient to stabilize their gross-debt-to-GDP ratios" in Algeria, Bahrain, Morocco, Oman, and Saudi Arabia[16].

In search for an alternative

As demonstrated in the papers on the Maghreb and Iraq, any modification in government policies to address the impact of the pandemic require a structural modification in austerity and loan policies, which is also the case with other Arab countries. It is also important to modify the tax system so that it can be fairer and more efficient. These steps are not only necessary for dealing with the ramifications of the pandemic but are also crucial for dealing with increasing inequality and for improving the conditions of poor and fragile groups.

Such modifications require a reversal of neoliberal policies on austerity and borrowing and the making of new policies that give precedence to increased spending on healthcare. There are also calls for mandating a minimum wage in order to make up for the losses caused by lockdown measures during the pandemic[17], especially with the increasing number of informal workers. Governments should also work on expanding the scope of rationed goods and subsidizing foodstuffs, contributing to the payment of salaries in the private sector provided that workers are not laid off, and supporting agricultural production and small farmers. Added to this is the necessity of reforming the tax system, especially through progressive taxes and imposing a wealth tax. For example, the implementation of a 5% solidarity tax on net wealth in Egypt is expected to cover the needs of 10 million poor families and informal workers for a year and cover the minimum wages of three million workers also for a year[18].

In addition, debt management policies need to be reconsidered, including interest rates, which are extremely high in some Arab countries, and transparency and accountability in relation to loans. These also include renegotiating the conditions of some loans through a revision of public debt as was the case in Brazil and Ecuador and which was demanded by several social movements in Tunisia. These crucial changes in economic policies are undoubtedly linked with similarly crucial changes in the current balance of power in the region, which is the main trigger for the protests in Iraq and Lebanon and social movements in Morocco as well as all uprisings that erupted in the Arab world in 2011 .

[16] MENA Economic Update: How Transparency Can Help the Middle East and North Africa: https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/publication/mena-economic-update-april-2020-how-transparency-can-help-the-middle-east-and-north-africa

[17] Nabil Abdo and Shaddin Almasri, Op. cit.

[18] Ibid

1. Social Policies on Fragile Workers in Iraq during the Corona Pandemic

Dr. Janan Aljabiri

Introduction

Thousands of unemployed young men and women have been taking part in six-month-long protests that called for economic and political reforms. Then another crisis emerged: the spread of Coronavirus. This was accompanied by a remarkable drop in oil prices, hence negatively impacting the main source of revenue in the country that is already suffering from weak economic and administrative structures and has been categorized as a fragile state since 2008[19]. These crises came at a time when the former prime minister resigned in the aftermath of the protests and the appointment of a new one was facing a number of challenges. Added to that was the parliament's inability to ratify the 2020 budget, which forced it to ratify the 2019 budget for 2020.

The spread of Coronavirus created several economic hardships that particularly affected fragile segments of the working class as well as workers in the informal sector. State institutions were far from prepared to face this kind of crisis, especially in light of the absence of a healthcare system and shortage of financial and medical resources required to curb the spread of the pandemic[20]. Added to this is the absence of social policies that could deal with the ramifications of lockdown and cover the needs of fragile groups and informal workers, the latter making up two thirds of Iraq's workforce.

The paper examines social protection policies adopted in Iraq during the spread of Coronavirus and how far they contributed to addressing economic inequality in the country. The paper used a qualitative approach through development strategies and plans and annual reports issued by the state as well as procedures taken by the government to face the spread of Coronavirus that started in April 2020. Statements by international organizations such as the International Health Organization, the World Bank, and others were also examined. The paper made use of previous interviews with officials from the ministries of planning and communication and civil society activists. The paper starts with a theoretical background on vulnerable workforce and social protection then will discuss the economic and social situation before Coronavirus. The paper will then tackle the impact of the economic crisis on vulnerable workers and the measures taken by the Iraqi government to face the pandemic. The paper will end with remarks on the role of adopted policies on dealing with poverty and inequality and policy recommendations for mitigating the impact of the crisis on vulnerable workers and the informal sector.

Fragile workers and social protection in Iraq: A theoretical framework

Fragile or informal workers are those who are not registered in state institutions and who work without employment contracts, hence have no retirement plan or social insurance. Wages in this type of employments are paid outside the banking system and are not part of the calculation of national income[21]. Jobs in the informal sector

[19] Polese. A, & Santini .R.H (2018), Limited Statehood and its Security Implications on the Fragmentation Political Order in the Middle East and North Africa, Small Wars & Insurgencies. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09592318.2018.1456815. (Accessed October, 13th 2019).

[20] The World Bank: Iraq Overview (2020) [Arabic]: https://www.albankaldawli.org/ar/country/iraq/overview

[21] Abbas, Mohamed Ahmed. "Informal Economy in Egypt: Problems and Solutions," April 2, 2019. https://en.eipss-eg.org/author/mohamed-ahmed-abbas/.

are usually temporary or part-time and they do not help workers find better, more stable jobs. Because this work is not officially registered, workers do not pay income taxes.

A report entitled "Transitioning from the informal to the formal economy," issued by the 2014 International Labor Conference, states that "most people engaged in the informal economy: are exposed to inadequate and unsafe working conditions, and have high illiteracy levels, low skill levels and inadequate training opportunities; have less certain, less regular and lower incomes than those in the formal economy, suffer longer working hours, an absence of collective bargaining and representation rights and, often, an ambiguous or disguised employment status; and are physically and financially more vulnerable because work in the informal economy is either excluded from, or effectively beyond, the reach of social security schemes and safety and health, maternity and other labour protection legislation"[22]. Workers in this sector do not have what the International Labor Organization calls "adequate work" since it lacks basic rights such as economic safety, freedom, and dignity[23]. They might not always get their wages on time, do get pensions even if they spend years in the same jobs, and are exposed to termination without a severance package. In addition, workers who object to working conditions are always penalized.

Social protection policy

Despite the fact that there is no fixed definition of the concept of "social protection," there is a general consensus that it is a set of policies and programs adopted by governments to protect vulnerable and marginalized segments of society to mitigate their poverty through different stages of their lives. Social protection also aims at enhancing individuals' coping mechanisms and their ability to receive and absorb shocks during crises. Social protection policies can include programs that offer financial assistance on contributory basis which is the case with social insurance and retirement plans. This is the most common system in the Arab region, including Iraq, and it mainly relies on the contributions of involved workers/employees as well as employers to fund these programs. This system is usually applied to workers in the formal sector. Another option is offering financial assistance that is not contributory and this includes social networks that cover poorer and more vulnerable segments of society, those physically unable to work whether because of age or health conditions or because of their social status such as widows and divorcees, and orphaned children. However, there is still one group that does not fall under those categories, those who are physically able to work and work in non-governmental entities and are, therefore, not included in any social protection plans offered by the state. There are large numbers of workers of this type in Iraq and all over the Arab region.

Fragile/informal workers in Iraq

There are no accurate statistics on the number of workers in the informal sector in Iraq. Conflicting numbers are provided by multiple sources, yet there is general consensus that informal workers constitute the majority of the workforce in Iraq and that their percentage could amount to 88%[24]. Workers in the informal economy are involved in all forms of economic activities and are divided into three main categories:

- **Public sector workers:** Those workers either have monthly contracts or are paid daily wages. These work in almost all sectors including oil, electricity, water, education, healthcare, municipalities, and transportation. Despite the fact that

[22] "Transitioning from the informal to the formal economy." International Labor Conference no. 103, 2014: https://www.ilo.org/ilc/ILCSessions/previous-sessions/103/reports/reports-to-the-conference/WCMS_218128/lang--en/index.htm

[23] Munck, Ronaldo. "The Precariat: A View from the South," 2013. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263724631_The_Precariat_A_View_from_the_South

[24] Samir Aita, 2017. The Informal labor in the Arab Countries Facts and Rights. http://www.economistes-arabes.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/General-Report-Informal-Employment-Samir-AITA-englishff.pdf

public sector employment increased between 2003 and 2014 from 0.9 to three million employees[25], the government is more inclined towards not permanently employing workers in the public sector and opts for temporary contracts based on which monthly or daily wages are paid. This system decreases employment costs not only because those workers are paid less than permanent ones, but also since they are not given any form of social protection like annual and sick leave, pension plans, or any of the other benefits attached to working in the public sector. The government in Iraq has been following this employment system since 2006, particularly in the electricity sector, the most important service sector in Iraq after the oil sector.

- **Private sector workers:** Those work in small facilities affiliated to the private sector such as print houses, cement, brick, and food factories as well as construction, restaurants, and hotels. More than half of private sector companies are not registered in state records and the same applies to their workers. This means that neither employers nor workers have to pay their share in contributory social insurance to the government, hence workers do not get any form of protection if they are incapable of working at any point. As for family-run businesses, neither women nor children receive money for their work and do not enjoy any form of protection outside their families.

- **Independent workers:** Those include peddlers and street vendors, drivers, owners of smalls businesses such as stores, coffee houses, and internet cafés. In Iraq, the number of peddlers has reached 46,041 and the percentage of women working in this sector does not exceed 1% based on 2014 statistics[26]. This sector is a vital one since, according to the minister of planning, mobile trade units play a major role in decreasing unemployment and poverty and generate income for many families[27]. In 2012, the contribution of the informal sector to the national income was estimated at 37% even though there are no official records of this percentage.

Fragile workers and the Covid-19 pandemic

The Iraqi government adopts neoliberal policies that rely on limiting the role of the state in the management and distribution of wealth. These policies are not new for they started in the late 1980s when the government started selling public sector facilities to the private sector to ease the economic burden on the state in the aftermath of the Iraqi-Iranian war. However, it after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime that Iraq officially adopted these policies through agreements with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This was accompanied by a remarkably diminished state role as the private sector started interfering in the economy and a deterioration in public educational institutions as private education, which started from nurseries till college, took over.

Lack of adequate services increased the economic burdens of Iraqi families both before and after the pandemic. The deterioration of public healthcare forced many to resort to private hospitals and the state's inability to provide stable electricity made people go to local companies and the same applies to water that is sold in many parts of the country by the private sector. Billions of dollars were allocated to investment yet none of the projects towards which the money was supposed to be channeled were implemented. This is mainly because of how fragile the state is in addition to rampant corruption and the sectarian system. The budget in Iraq is based on distributing financial

[25] Price, Roz. "Iraqi State Capabilities," May 18, 2018. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b18e952e5274a18eb1ee3aa/Iraqi_state_capabilities.pdf

[26] "Ministry of Planning: More than 46,000 peddlers in Iraq with a capital of 73 billion dinars [Arabic]." December 14, 2015: http://www.alliraqnews.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=24065.

[27] Ibid

resources among ministries. Since each of those ministries is controlled by the particular party/ sect and in the light of lack of transparency and accountability, there is no system to monitor the implementation of projects.

Iraq's dependence on oil led its economy to be substantially impacted by the fluctuation of its global prices and linked economic growth to oil sales. The Iraqi economy has since 2003 become one-dimensional when it started depending almost solely on selling oil in global markets. This, in turn, meant that sources of the economy, which usually include industry, agriculture, tourism… etc., were no longer diverse. In addition, this dependence on oil affected the process of budgeting since plans and strategies are constantly changed based on the rise and fall of oil prices. This was demonstrated in the five-year development plan for 2010-2014, which was rewritten in 2012-2013 because of the rise of oil prices, based on an interview with officials at the Ministry of Planning. Iraq sells four million oil barrels every year. It is an oil-rich country that owns one fifth of the world's oil reserves and also owns around 149 billion barrels. Iraq's annual production ratio "is 93.6 years, almost double the world average of 50.6 years"[28]. Despite the fact that oil industries constitute 90% of its annual budget and contribute to the GPD by 60%[29], these industries do not employ more than 1% of the workforce in Iraq[30]. Meanwhile, the private sector employs 95% of informal workers.

The fragility of the state and its inability to monitor the implementation of projects that provide social services such as healthcare, education, and employment led to an increase in poverty rates and the exacerbation of inequality. Iraqis living in multidimensional poverty are estimated at 36.9% of the population (more than 40 million)[31]. Poverty in Iraq is manifested through inequality in income distribution, purchasing power, and spending. Spending patterns in Iraq differ based on class. In 2018, the spending percentage of poorer groups did not exceed 7.5% while the percentage of richer groups reached 40.5% and in 2012, the percentages were estimated at 7% and 31%, respectively[32]. Workers who get a daily wage equivalent to USD 3 are estimated at 31% of the workforce in Iraq[33]. According to statistics, 28% of families do not have access to an income while 45% depend in their income on fragile jobs, usually more than one[34]. Before 1991, when economic sanctions were imposed on Iraq, public services offered by the government covered more than 80% of citizens' needs. In 2016, only 3.3% of the national income was spent on healthcare and this percentage dropped to 1.06% of the 2019 budget. That is why the degree of satisfaction with healthcare services did not exceed 20%[35]. This is a low percentage compared to other countries in the region such as Morocco in which spending on healthcare reaches 5.8%, Sudan (5.7%), Tunisia (7%), and Algeria (6.7%) to cite a few examples[36]. This is despite the fact that Arab countries witnessed a drop in spending on health

[28] First National Voluntary Review on Sustainable Development Goals 2019 (The Triumph of National Will)," 2019. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/23789Iraq_VNR_2019_final_EN_HS.pdf

[29] Hannah, John. "FDD | COVID-19 in Iraq." FDD, April 6, 2020. https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/04/06/covid-19-in-iraq

[30] European Asylum Support Office. 2019. "EASO Country of Origin Information Report Iraq Key Socio-Economic Indicators." Accessed July 23, 2020. https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/Iraq-key-socio-economic-

[31] Ibid

[32] Ibid

[33] "Report on index and dashboard of sustainable development goals in the Arab region in 2019 [Arabic]." Emirates Diplomatic Academy: https://eda.ac.ae/docs/default-source/default-document-library/eda_sdsn_2019_sdgindexreport_ar.pdf?sfvrsn=2

[34] UN Women. "A Gender Response to COVID-19 in Iraq: A Guidance Note on Actors' Engagement," 2020. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/un_women_gender_response_to_covid-19_in_iraq._a_guidance_note_on_actors_engagement_final.pdf.

[35] 17 Price, 2018, Op.cit.

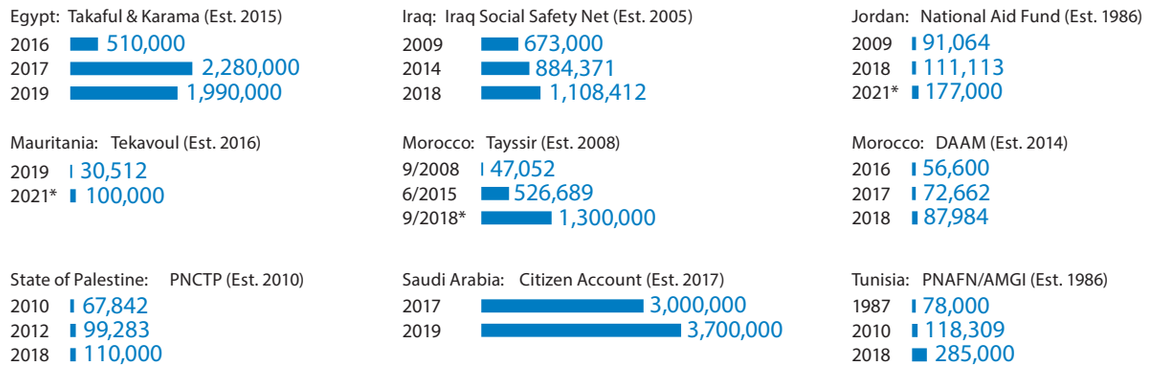
[36] United Nations. 2020. Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region An Opportunity to Build Back Better https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_arab_states_english_version_july_2020.pdf

between 2000 and 2015 from 6% to 4%, which translated into a drop from 1.8% to 1.3% from the national income[37].

Spending on education in Iraq was 3.5515% in 1989 and dropped in 2019 to 0.83% of the budget that reached 111.8 billion US dollars[38]. This percentage is less than in the entire Arab region. Egypt, for example, dedicated 2.2% of the 2019 budget to education[39]. In Iraq, government spending on electricity was estimated at 2.4 billion UD dollars, that is 1% of the gross domestic product and 2.78% of spending in Iraq's federal budget. In Egypt, spending on electricity was estimated at 2.1% in 2018-2019. Arab countries differ in terms of spending on social protection whether contributory funds or programs that financially assist individuals and families who live under poverty line through direct payment from taxes or other state resources. In general, 57.4% of the poorest one fifth in the Middle East and North Africa get social assistance. In Iraq, 75% of the poorest segments of society got financial assistance in 2012, compared to 65.7% in Jordan in 2010 and 7.4% in Sudan. The percentage of people who benefited from social protection increased in the last few years. Table (1) underlines the types of social protection programs in the Arab world and the number of beneficiaries.

As for municipal services, the percentage of people who have access to garbage collection services does not exceed 67% in Iraq. On the other hand, the number of people who live in informal housing is estimated at more than three million and they live in 222 housing units[40]. These same groups are always threatened with a food crisis. Based on a report released by the World Food Program in 2017, half Iraqi families are exposed to loss of food security and are unable to handle more crises such as conflicts or increases in food prices[41] at a time when the number of the unemployed reached two million and half out of the nine-million-strong workforce. The percentage of unemployment among youths is 40% while the percentage of working women is

Figure 1. Social protection programs and the number of beneficiaries in the Arab region



Source. ESCWA, 2019.

37 ESCWA. 2019. Social Protection Reform in Arab Countries 2019. https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/E.ESCWA_.ADD_.2019.1.pdf

38 UNECIF. THE COST AND BENEFITS OF EDUCATION IN IRAQ: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UN064587_Costs_of_EDU.pdf

39 Abdel Rahman Mohamed. "1019: Healthcare and education are excluded from Egypt's economic reform plan [Arabic]." https://www.aljazeera.net/ebusiness/2019/7/30/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A9

40 Sheikhly, Bahira al-. "The Slums of Mesopotamia." AW, December 18, 2018. https://thearabweekly.com/slums-mesopotamia

41 World Food Programme. 2017 "More Than Half Of Iraq's Population At Risk Of Food Insecurity - Government - WFP Analysis," 2017. https://www.wfp.org/news/more-half-iraqs-population-risk-food-insecurity-government-wfp-analysis

42 European Asylum Support Office. 2019. "EASO Country of Origin Information Report Iraq Key Socio-Economic Indicators." Accessed July 23, 2020. https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/Iraq-key-socio-economic-indicators.pdf

estimated at 17%[42]. It is under those conditions that the Coronavirus started spreading in Iraq, hence accentuating the economic crisis, especially for the poor and the vulnerable.

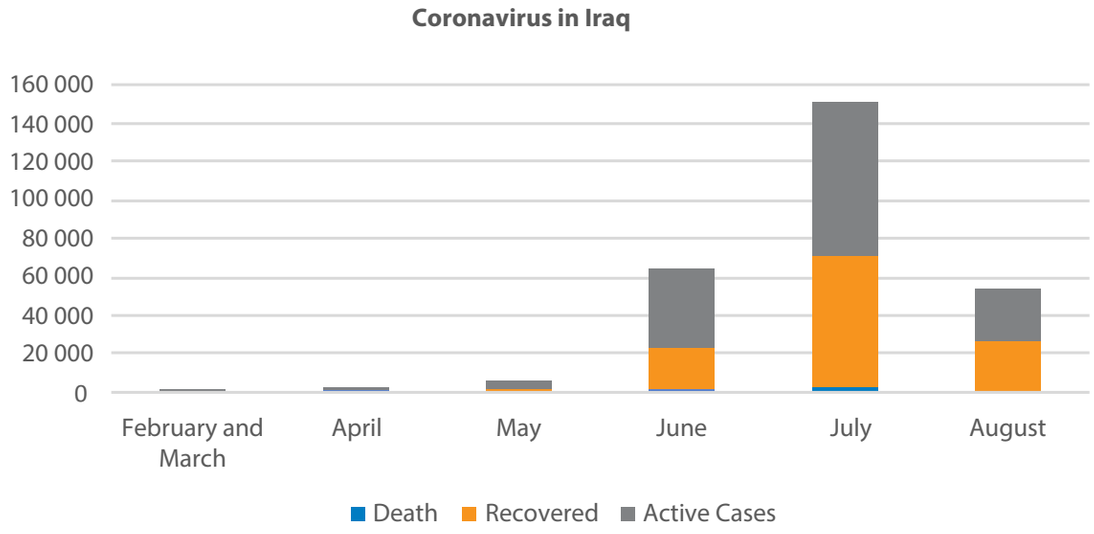
The impact of Coronavirus on fragile workers in Iraq

The spread of the pandemic has a direct impact on aggravating inequality in the Middle East in which 10% of the population owns 64% of the wealth[43]. While some segments of society in the region got richer during the pandemic and even gained billions of dollars in a few months, poverty increased remarkably among women, children, refugees, the displaced, and immigrant labor. Losing sources of income or not getting paid on regular basis weakened the purchasing power of many, including some workers in the public sector. Fragile workers were the most harmed since they do not have access to any social or healthcare benefits in case of physical disability or retirement in addition to the fact that their wages are originally less. That is why inequality increased even among workers since the conditions of workers in the informal sector were worse and got much worse after the pandemic.

The pandemic started in Iraq at a time when oil prices had dropped because of a drop in demand especially in China, one of the main importers of Iraqi oil, and because of the rivalry between Russia and Saudi Arabia over oil prices[44]. As a result, Iraq's exports dropped by half, which led to a decrease in oil revenue on which the Iraqi government depends in funding the budget. This crisis threatened the contraction of gross domestic product by 9.7% through 2020, hence leading to a deterioration in economic growth, which reached 4.4% in 2019[45].

As was the case with many countries across the world, Coronavirus proved detrimental on the health, economic, and social fronts. One of the most immediate ramifications was the government's inability to curb the spread of the virus. The curve kept rising as more cases were reported and the government could not cover the basic needs of workers in the informal sector who had to stay at home during the lockdown. Table (2) shows the rise of cases across Iraq.

Figure 2. Coronavirus cases, recovery and death



Source. The Author.

[43] https://www.theigc.org/blog/the-economic-figures-behind-the-protests-in-the-middle-east/

[44] John Hannah. 2020. "FDD | COVID-19 in Iraq." FDD, April 6, 2020. https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/04/06/covid-19-in-iraq/.

[45] The World Bank. "Iraq is in dire need to structural reforms to manage a multi-dimensional crisis [Arabic]." Press release, 2020: https://www.albankaldawli.org/ar/news/press-release/2020/05/04/iraq-structural-reforms-critically-needed-to-manage-a-multi-faceted-crisis

Temporary workers from service companies in different cities were laid off and the same applied to workers in the private sector and daily wagers. Salaries were suspended in electricity and water sectors for three consecutive months because of lack of liquidity. Women were dismissed from their jobs and men were kept in some jobs, based on the statements by rights activist Tiba Saad in an online seminar on June 22, 2020. The lockdown and suspension of salaries as well as not considering the time away from work during lockdown sick leave all contributed to a remarkable increase in the numbers of the unemployed. Added to this is the fact that poorest families live in condensed areas, such as Sadr City on the outskirts of Baghdad and several neighborhoods in the capital such as al-Shuala and al-Shaab, which led to increasing the number of cases.

Several economic sectors were hardly hit by the pandemic such as construction and manufacturing, food and agriculture, and wholesale and retail trade. Workers in the private sector and the informal sector were the most hard such as workers in service sectors, which employs 56% of the workforce and include tourism and transportation[46]. Fragile workers in the agriculture sector make up 18.6% of the workforce and rank fifth across Iraq in terms of their size[47]. All workers in public schools and universities stopped working when classes were suspended, hence lost their salaries. Table (3) shows the sectors most affected by the pandemic and the percentage of lost jobs.

Measures to protect fragile workers in Iraq during the pandemic

The Iraqi government first responded to the spread with relative indifference and did not seem to take the matter seriously. For example, it did not close the borders with Iran with which it shares 11 crossings that are more controlled by militias than by the government, as demonstrated in interviews with a number of Iraqi officials. This led protestors to launch a Twitter hashtag that called for closing the borders with Iran as cases in Iran were remarkably on the rise.

An emergency committee was formed through a ministerial decree on February 3, 2020 and included representatives of several ministries. It included no representatives of trade unions or employers' unions despite the significant contribution they could have made and their insightful knowledge of developments in the job market.

Table 1. Lost jobs by percentage to sectors

	Average % employees who lost their jobs	Average % employees with reduced hours or days	Average % employees at home with full salary
Construction and manufacturing	-52	65	86
Food and agriculture	-45	50	62
Services	-39	90	67
Wholesale and retail	-21	51	82
All sectors combined	-40	60	77

Source. International Organization for Migration, 2020

[46] Mohammed Jamal, Essam Munir, Faisal Al-Saffar, Faisal Habib, Sarah Sallam, Hanguin Ramadani, and Abbas Riyad. Surviving the COVID-19 Crisis: Preliminary Findings of the Economic Impact on Iraq. https://kapita.iq/storage/app/media/Research/Covid19-IRAQ-Research.pdf

[47] World Bank 2019

On February 26, the committee announced a series of protective measures that included suspending flights between Iraq and several Asian countries in which the virus was spreading fast, closing schools and universities, banning gatherings on religious occasions, and reducing working hours in the public sector by 50%[48]. The Iraqi government adopted nation-wide plans to mitigate poverty and protect economic rights. The most important of those measures was continuing the distribution of rationed quotas and a two-month-long emergency grant in addition to a number of health measures that were still limited.

First: Rationed quotas

The rationing system started in 1991 after economic sanctions were imposed on Iraq. It included 21 food items offered to everyone without exception. After 2003, the World Bank attempted to change this system in collaboration with the Iraqi government through proposing a number of alternatives that did not include all the people and made the system applicable to families in need only while setting criteria for measuring the degree of poverty. This plan was implemented and now the rationing system includes only four food items: flour, sugar, oil, and rice. Those are sometimes distributed alternately, which defeats the purpose of a system that was to provide vulnerable segments of society with their basic needs. One of the demands put forward by trade unions was adding more items to the ration quota. However, the Ministry of Commerce, which is responsible for distributing those quotas, did not distribute those quotas on a regular basis during the pandemic, which made their impact extremely limited.

Second: Social protection policies

Social protection law number 11 for the year 2011 replaced law number 126 for the year 1980. The new law offered non-contributory social assistance in which a monthly amount of money is given to groups that live under poverty line, which were identified in advance and included orphans, the elderly, heads of households who do not have an income, the disabled, married students, and women without income who lost their parents. The program included assisting the poor who lived in Iraq whether they were citizens or non-citizens[49]. The amount allocated to this program after the raise applied in early 2020 is 105 thousand dinars for each individual, 210 thousand dinars for two individuals, 235 thousand for families of three members, and 420 thousand for families of four members or more[50] . The government continued paying for the social protection program during the pandemic and dedicated 328 million US dollars for the third quarter of 2020[51]. However, it is not clear whether poor segments of society or fragile workers actually benefited from this program.

Third: Emergency grant

This is a government grant initiated on April 7, 2020. It targeted poor and low-income families that were harmed by the lockdown based on a recommendations by the Ministry of Planning. The grant was launched after almost eight million low-income citizens lost their income because of the lockdown[52]. The Supreme Commission of National Health and Safety allocated 600 billion dinars (500 million dollars) for this grant. Applications for the grant were made available for five days (April 11-16) on the Facebook page of the Ministry of Labor

[48] Ayman al-Faisal. "The ramifications of Coronavirus in Iraq [Arabic]. *Al-Bayan*, March 21, 2020. https://www.bayancenter.org/2020/03/5733/.

[49] Atif Khurshid. "Iraq's Social Safety Nets: The Need for Reform," December 2017. https://ipcig.org/pub/eng/PIF40_Social_protection_after_the_Arab_Spring.pdf

[50] "Labor Committee: Raising social assistance grants [Arabic]." Al-Sabah, January 10, 2020: https://alsabaah.iq/19567/العمل-النيابية-زيادة-رواتب-الرعاية-الاجتماعية

[51] This system changed to a new one inspired by those used in several European countries. The new system included offering regular financial assistance to individuals and families based on their financial status and after making sure they have no income and don't own property.

[52] Al Toama, 2020, Op. Cit

and Social Affairs and on the ministry's website (minha.iq). The grant was not confined to the unemployed who are registered with the ministry (one million and four hundred thousand), but was also extended to anyone to whom the conditions apply. Conditions included that applicants do not have other sources of income and are not paid by the government whether for work or in pension. Applicants would register on the website or the page then will receive a message on their cell phones with a number that they use to receive the money from the designated places. Two million and 700 thousand families applied for the emergency grant or around 13 million individuals[53]. According to the Iraqi minister of labor and social affairs Adel al-Rakabi (April 22, 2020), the number of families who got the grant is two million and 432 thousand. The value of the grant is 30 thousand Iraqi dinars (25 US dollars) for an individual and does not exceed 300 thousand dinars (250 UD dollars) for a family of five. The grant was paid for only two months.

In addition to the grant, the government allotted 42 million dollars to the emergency committee to respond to healthcare needs following the spread of the pandemic, which means that the government allotted 0.48% from the 2020 budget to deal with the pandemic. Iraq's spending on healthcare at the time of Corona is less than countries with medium-high income such as Lebanon and Algeria. The National Solidarity Fund in Lebanon allocated 1.2 trillion Lebanese liras (1% of the 2020 GDP) to caver the needs of 200 thousand poor families, each family getting 150 US dollars[54] . In Algeria, the government adopted the new finance law on June 4, 2020 and dedicated 70 billion dinars to facing the crisis caused by the pandemic, including 20 billion to workers who lost their jobs and 11.5 billion in financial assistance to poor families[55]. Libya allocated 354 million dollars to facing the pandemic while the Central Bank of Tunisia allocated 15.5 million euros to the Ministry of Health for purchasing the necessary medical equipment[56] . Egypt dedicated 6.13 billion Egyptian pounds (1.8% of the GDP) to face the economic repercussions of the pandemic and eight billion pounds for purchasing medical equipment and giving bonuses to members of medical teams[57]. In Algeria, the government dedicated 3.7 billion Algerian dinars for the heath sector, 16.5 billion dinars as bonuses for medical teams, and 8.9 billion to develop the medical sector.

Governments in the region were always assisted by internal organizations such as the United Nations, which was the case in Iraq as well as Lebanon and Algeria. In Iraq, civil society organizations also offered relief and tried to fill the gaps the government left.

Financial assistance offered to informal workers was not enough since it covered a few groups and only lasted for two months, especially that informal workers constitute two thirds of Iraqi workforce which is estimated at nine million. This was aggravated by the absence of economic, financial, or protective procedures to enable workers in the informal sector to survive the crisis whether through direct payment to workers or to employers so that they do not lay off workers. This, in turn, led to constant violation of restrictions imposed by the government to curb the spread of the virus, hence increasing the number of cases among informal workers and accentuating poverty and inequality.

According to a report issued in April 2020 by the International Organization for Migration, around 68% of Iraqis had no jobs. In a report issued by the Humanitarian Aid Commission, 87% of Iraqis lost

[53] Khaled al-Taei. "Iraq gives emergency financial aid to those affected by Coronavirus [Arabic]." *Diyaruna*, April 29, 2020. https://diyaruna.com/ar/articles/cnmi_di/features/2020/04/29/feature-01.

[54] Interanational Monetary Fund. https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19

[55] Ibid.

[56] OECD. 2019. COVID-19 crisis response in MENA countries https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-mena-countries-4b366396/

[57] International Monetry Fund. Policy Tracker: https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19

their jobs and unemployment rates reached 94% in al-Anbar and 96% in Duhok and only 4% were able to work from home in Karabala and Baghdad or still received salaries. In addition, 73% had to reduce the amount of consumed food and the number of meals, 68% started using their savings, and 61% became indebted. The minister of labor and social affairs stated that poverty rate rose from 22% to 34%, which is highly attributed to the government's inability to protect fragile segments of society from the ramifications of the pandemic. In this context, workers started organizing protests to end the lockdown and one of the main slogans used by informal workers was "If we don't die of Corona, we die of hunger." Locals in impoverished areas kicked out security forces that attempted to impose the lockdown by force. Security forces also clamped down on one of the protests, killing activist Afrah Abbas in the city of Nasiriyah in April. The deterioration of social and economic conditions is linked to an increase is violence against women[58] and children. Official media in Iraq reported several cases of violence as well as an unprecedented suicide rate. Women rights organizations called for drafting a law that criminalizes domestic violence and the law was submitted to the parliament by the new prime minister in early June.

Mitigating the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups

Conclusion and Recommendation

The spread of Coronavirus revealed the absence of social protection policies that would enable vulnerable segments of society to face its ramifications. It is true that the virus spread across all segments of society, yet not all of them were affected equality. Workers in the informal sectors were among the most harmed, which showed how the government was not prepared to protect vulnerable groups at times of emergency. This lack of preparedness was demonstrated in the remarkable rise of poverty rates and the deterioration of the social and economic conditions of six million informal workers. The impact of this development is expected to manifest itself in the near future as social disparities would deepen and inequality would be accentuated.

The Iraqi government's inability to curb the spread of the virus while simultaneously protecting vulnerable groups from its impact reveals the necessity of developing new strategies that offer social protection to the unemployed, informal workers, and vulnerable groups.

The following are policy recommendations to mitigate the impact of Coronavirus on vulnerable groups in Iraq:

- Extending the payment of emergency grants instead of limiting them to two months and making sure they reach all vulnerable groups
- Expanding social protection networks to cover all groups that lost their incomes in the aftermath of the pandemic.
- Equal treatment of workers in the public, private, and informal sectors so that all the workforce across the country is registered with the state and included in non-contributory social assistance as well as starting procedures for the transition from informal to informal work
- Increasing food items in the rationing system based on the number of family members so that each of them gets the required daily calories without having to risk their lives by working during the pandemic and making sure the system is inclusive of all vulnerable groups
- Increasing spending on healthcare to give families access to free of charge medical services

The question that poses itself at the end is how the Iraqi government can fund those proposed policies. The government took several steps towards controlling the squandering of public funds through taking control of ground and maritime border crossings, abolishing double salaries, reducing the salaries of senior state

[58] OECD. "COVID-19 Crisis Response in MENA Countries." OECD, 2020. http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-mena-countries-4b366396/.

officials, and ending payments to former detainees at Rafha camp[59]. These procedures remain limited in light of the current deterioration. It also remains to be seen whether such procedures would actually be implemented in a fragile state where the rule of law does not always take precedence.

Loans the Iraqi government plan to take from the International Monetary Fund are not likely to solve the problem. In light of rampant corruption and lack of transparency and accountability, there are no guarantees that the five-billion-dollar loan requested by the Iraqi government will be channelled towards dealing with the impact of the pandemic. It is necessary to have the political will to take the country out of its fragile condition so that it can use its resources in a way that enables it to deal with emergencies like the pandemic and protect the groups that are most affected by it. It is also important to work on achieving economic diversification through developing vital sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism so that Iraq does not solely rely on oil as its only source of income.

[59] Government of Iraq. Cabinet ends payment of two salaries to former detainees at Camp Rafha. https://gds.gov.iq/cabinet-ends-payment-of-two-salaries-to-former-detainees-at-camp-rafha/

2. The Impact of Coronavirus on the Labor Market in the Maghreb

Mohamed Saeid El Saadi

Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic is the world's worst crisis after World War One according to the International Health Organization. In addition to its detrimental health impacts, the pandemic led to a global economic crisis whose ramifications can be similar to those of the Great Depression that took place from 1929 to 1933. The crisis is expected to aggravate poverty and inequality around the world and the most affected groups would be low-income workers. The sectors that were hit the hardest by the pandemic were service sectors such as tourism, hospitality, aviation, transport, retail trade, and food services in addition to some transformational industries. All these sectors employ large numbers of low-skilled workers with low wages.

In the Arab region, inequality rates are among the world's highest. The labor market is fragile, and the percentage of informal workers is remarkably high. That is why the pandemic is expected to increase the suffering of workers, especially as far as poverty and inequality are concerned. According to preliminary reports by the International Labor Organization (ILO)[60], quarantine and border closures would lead to a reduction of working hours by 13.2% or around eight million fulltime workers, that is a 2.9% increase compared to the fourth edition of the ILO Monitor.

The Coronavirus pandemic posed serious challenges to the Maghreb region (Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco) on the medical, economic, and social levels. These challenges are expected to negatively affect the labor market and exacerbate inequality. This paper aims at examining the impact of the economic crisis that resulted from the spread of Coronavirus in the Maghreb region based on similarities and differences between its three countries in terms of political economy. Algeria, for example, is an oil-rich country unlike Tunisia and Morocco while Tunisia is going through successful democratic transition unlike Algeria and Morocco in which social movements abound. In addition, the balance between the private and public sectors differs among the three countries.

The first part of the paper reveals that the Maghreb countries face a lot of difficulties, though in different degrees, in curbing the spread of the virus and tracing its impact on citizens. The second part shows the economic ramifications of the virus while the third focuses on its impact on the labor market, which forebodes a social crisis. The fourth part underlines the setbacks of conventional policies employed to face the pandemic and the resulting social and economic crises let alone a potential second wave.

1. A relatively controlled pandemic

1.1 The spread of Coronavirus in the Maghreb

Countries in the Maghreb region suffer in different degrees from a general deterioration in the health situation following the relative containment of the virus in the initial stage through preemptive quarantine. The three Maghreb countries took a set of measures upon the outbreak of the virus on March 19, 2020. These included complete lockdown, reducing working hours in the public sector, a curfew from 6:00 pm till 6:00 am, closing schools, and banning gatherings in Tunisia,

[60] ILO Monitor, 2020

declaring a state of emergency, closing maritime, ground, and air borders, imposing a nation-wide quarantine, closing industrial facilities except those that produce people's basic needs in Morocco, and imposing quarantine in areas in which cases were reported in Algeria. These preemptive measures played a role in relatively curbing the spread of the virus. This was shown in the limited cases reported till July 7, 2020: 1,191 in Tunisia, 14,379 in Morocco, and 16,404 in Algeria. The three countries also had a medium ranking among countries affected by the virus: Algeria ranked 60, Morocco 62, and Tunisia 124.

The relative containment of the virus and the economic ramifications of the lockdown led the Maghreb countries to start easing up measures gradually, which resulted in a remarkable deterioration in the health situation in the three countries. Table (1) traces the remarkable increase in the number of cases, especially in Morocco that became one of the most affected by the virus and ranked 36 with 99,816 reported cases till September 20, 2020. Algeria ranked 57 with 49,623 cases while Tunisia ranked 92 with 9,736.

Table 1. The development of the pandemic till September 20, 2020[61]

Country	Total confirmed cases	Total confirmed new cases	Total deaths	Total cases per million	World ranking
Algeria	49623	210	1665	1131,626	57
Morocco	99816	2552	1795	2704,267	36
Tunisia	9736	625	155	823,735	92

Several factors explain this deterioration. On the state level, borders were opened too soon without protective measures in Tunisia. The fragility of medical structures and the scarcity of resources as a result of austerity measures applied in the three Maghreb countries in the aftermath of the Arab Spring contributed to the spread of the virus especially among disenfranchised groups. Capitalist policies also led to the deterioration in several rural areas, especially in Morocco. Added to this was a prevalent belief that the easing up of restrictions meant that the virus is over, hence leading to a great deal of negligence in terms of observing protective rules such as wearing face masks, social distancing, and using sanitizers.

2. Economic ramifications and impact on different sectors

The pandemic impacted economic activities in different degrees across the Maghreb, which affected corporate transactions, led to a remarkable deterioration in the labor market, and exacerbated inequality especially with the large numbers of workers in the informal economy in the three countries.

2.1 Unprecedented economic contraction

According to speculations, an unprecedented economic crisis is expected to hit the three Maghreb countries, especially Algeria. The World Bank predicted that Algeria will witness a negative growth estimated at 6.4% during 2020[62]. The African Development Back predicted that Algeria will be one of the three most affected African countries by the pandemic since economic contraction will be 4.4%-5.4%, compared to 6.3%-7.5% in South Africa and 4.4%-7.2% in Nigeria[63]. The World Bank expected a contraction in the Tunisian economy by 4%[64] whereas the African Development Bank predicted a contraction between 5.5% and 6.1%[65]. As for Morocco, the World Bank expected in its July report an

[61] World Health Organization, Update COVID-19

[62] Algeria,10/6/202

[63] African Development Bank, 2020

[64] World Bank, 2020

[65] African Development Bank, 2020.

economic contraction of 4% throughout 2020 while the African Development Bank expected between 3.3% and 4.6%.

These contraction percentages are expected to have a negative impact on macro-economic balances through a deficiency in the public budget and the balance of payments. For example, the sudden drop in oil prices in global markets due to the disputes between OPEC members and decreased demand on raw material in the aftermath of the pandemic led to the collapse of Algerian exports since oil constitutes 95% of its revenue. This deterioration will affect the government budget, 60% of which depends on oil revenues. The Algerian government is also expected not to keep its promise in increasing minimum wages and to keep the income tax in place[66].

2.2 Channels of impact on economy and employment

Impact on economy

The pandemic led to a severe economic crisis through its impact on supply (the production of goods and services) and demand (consumption and investment).

1. On the supply level: The lockdown imposed by China to curb the spread of the pandemic led to grave consequences as far export chains are concerned since China is the main supplier of intermediate and finished goods in vital sectors such as medicine, textiles, clothing, automobile and aviation industries… etc. For example, the clothing and automobile industries were impacted in Tunisia and Morocco because of the damage sustained by global export chains that rely on intermediate goods from China and the European Union. On the other hand, quarantine and protective measures such as social distancing and border closures, or "general lockdown" as the International Monetary Fund calls it, made people unable to go to work, which led to the obstruction of production, hence a drop in supply. This negatively impacted production in several industries, including several crops such as fruits for local consumption in Tunisia and industrial products for export[67]. In Morocco, automobile assembly line factories had to close after the government imposed quarantine.
2. On the demand level: Measures to curb the spread of the virus and the damage sustained by global export chains led to a drop in demand on oil. This led to the collapse of oil prices, which had already been deteriorating in late 2019 following the oil prices dispute between OPEC members. In Algeria, revenues from combustibles dropped remarkably while Tunisia and Morocco benefited from this development. A substantial drop was detected in demand for exports/imports (clothing, automobile and aviation industries), tourism, foreign investments, and remittances. This was especially applied to Tunisia and Morocco owing to their dependence on European economies. The European Union constitutes 65% of Tunisian imports and 70% of its exports. It also constitutes 58% of Moroccan exports, 59% of foreign investment reserves, 70% of tourism revenues, and 69% of remittances. What aggravated the situation is that Europe became one of the pandemic's major epicenters around the world. Similarly, local consumption is expected to decrease because of restrictions on mobility, the drop in the income of disenfranchised groups especially workers in the informal sector in addition to business owners, and fear of future complications. Private investment is also expected to be impacted negatively because of the problems companies are currently facing after the pandemic, and the same applies to public investment, which was already affected by austerity measures the governments of the three countries imposed. For example, the Moroccan parliament lately ratified a fiscal law to reduce investment by the public sector and local entities.

[66] Dzair Daily, 2020

[67] El Kadhi et al, 2020

Impact on labor market

1. The impact of the economic and medical crisis on the labor market is closely related to the magnitude and significance of the sectors that were impacted. The effect of the crisis differed across countries in the Maghreb. In Tunisia, industries were affected by 52.7%, services by 49%, and agriculture by 16.2% based on estimates and another study[68]. Service sectors such as tourism, transportation, and communications were deeply affected and the same applies to construction, public works, and transformative industries especially construction material and textiles, clothing, and leather products.

   The situation in Morocco is similar, which is attributed to the similarities between the economic structures of both countries. Based on the new finance law for the year 2020[69], Tourism in Morocco is one of the most affected sectors as 94% of Moroccan hotels stopped working. In addition, 76% of companies working in textiles, clothing, and leather products closed and their exports dropped by 74% by the end of May 2020. Exports in automobile industries dropped by 90% and in aviation industries by 72%. The only exception was an increase in agricultural exports, such as fruits and vegetables, to the European Union as a result of a drop in imports from Spain and Italy.

   In Algeria, the limited information available indicate that public entities working in combustibles and transportation sustained a loss of more than 879 million Euros[70]. A poll by the National Organization for Employers and Contractors showed that 60% of contractors stopped working, with 20% of which laying off their staff. Meanwhile, around 90,000 small and medium contracting businesses are on the verge of bankruptcy[71].

   The most common development in the three countries is the deterioration of the services sector that controls the economy and employs a large segment of informal economy. The percentage of unreported domestic product reached 35% in Algeria, 37% in Morocco, and 39% in Tunisia. The informal sector employs a large segments of the active population[72].
2. Based on the above-mentioned information, it becomes obvious that the ramifications of the pandemic affected the labor market on different levels. The drop in supply and demand negatively impacted all companies, especially small and medium ones that work in low-income services and which are not backed by a solid financial structure and suffer a lot of restrictions that reduce their effectiveness and incomes. This drove many companies to lay off workers or suspend work temporarily. Border closures and quarantine made it impossible for people to go to work or participate in economic activities, which had a detrimental impact on their incomes. This particularly applies to workers in the informal sector and in fragile jobs.

3. Labor market deterioration to exacerbate poverty and inequality

3.1 Higher unemployment rates

It is difficult to determine the exact impacts of the general lockdown and the magnitude of the economic crisis and its effect on the labor market owing to the limited information provided by official institutions in the Maghreb countries. This is because it is difficult to collect the required data and establish the necessary communication in order to determine the developments in the labor market. In addition, some information might be withheld for allegedly compromising security or social stability. That is why this study relies on statistics provided by international or official

[68] El Kadhi et al, 2020

[69] Moroccan Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2020.

[70] Algeria 20/7/20

[71] Algeria 28/5/20

[72] World Bank, 2013

institutions in addition to what is reported in the press and published by research centers.

Reduction of working hours

The International Labor Organization depends in its estimates of the damage sustained by the labor market on the working time index. This index takes into consideration the following four factors: the reduction of working hours compared to before the pandemic, suspension of work without termination, unemployment, and not taking part in any activity.

Working hours were reduced on the international level through the second quarter of 2020 by 14%, that is around 400 million fulltime jobs. The losses of working hours during the same interval were estimated at 15.5% in North Africa, which according to the ILO includes Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania, and Sudan. This is biggest loss compared to other regions in Africa as well as other countries in the Arab region since it translates into nine million fulltime jobs. This estimate is much higher than the losses reported in the first quarter of 2020 and which reached 2.5%, that is around two million fulltime jobs. This remarkable increase is attributed to the fact that the impact of the lockdown did not show until the second quarter of 2020[73].

National data

Based on the limited information available, unemployment rates are expected to rise remarkably in the three Maghreb countries. The International Monetary Fund expected the unemployment rate in Algeria to change from 11.2% in 2019 to 15.1% in 2020 and 13.9% in 2021 and in Morocco from 9.2% in 2019 to 12.5% in 2020 and 10.5% in 2021[74]. The IMF did not release any data on Tunisia except a study conducted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) that underlined the impact of economic contraction on employment. According to the study, the unemployment rate is expected to rise from 15% in 2019 to 21.6% in 2020, which means more than 274,500 unemployed[75]. This means that the impact of the pandemic in the labor market would be more severe in Tunisia than in Algeria and Morocco.

It is noteworthy that unemployment rates do not reflect the reality and magnitude of the negative impacts of the pandemic especially when taking into consideration other forms of damage the labor market can sustain such as reduction of working hours, temporary suspension of work, and stopping economic activities. These other damages are expected to have a negative impact on incomes and living standards in addition to exacerbating inequality for the economically active population.

Based on a study by the Moroccan Higher Planning Commission[76], two out of three economically active people (66.2%) had to stop working because of quarantine. Out of those, only one third (36%) were able to resume working while more than half (53%) are still not working and 11% are either inactive or looking for a job.

Suspension of work had a negative impact on the income of the active population. Two out of three active people (62%) who engaged in wage labor said that their incomes dropped during quarantine and 35% said their incomes stayed the same while 3% said their incomes increased. The situation was worse in rural areas where incomes decreased by 70%, compared to 59% for residents of cities.

This demonstrates that the economic crisis caused by the pandemic is bound to deepen disparities and to impoverish and marginalize large segments of the active population especially low-skilled workers and those who engage in wage labor.

[73] ILO Monitor, 2020

[74] International Monetary Fund, 2020

[75] UNDP, 2020

[76] Moroccan Higher Planning Commission, 2020

3.2 Impact on the informal sector

The majority of workers in the informal sector work in trade, crafts, agriculture, and daily services that are essential for individuals and families. These workers are the most harmed by the spread of Coronavirus because they do not have health insurance and do not get pensions or severance pay. They also live day to day because their expenses are entirely contingent upon their daily wages. That is why the crisis they face is more severe and is bound to have a negative impact on the economy as a whole.

In addition, workers in the informal sector are more likely to get the virus because of their inadequate living conditions, scarcity of preventive tools such as face masks, sanitizers, and detergents, and not observing social distancing which particularly applies to peddlers and marketplace vendors.

Information available on Tunisia and Morocco highlights the suffering of workers in the informal sector, but no information is available on Algeria. According to the Moroccan Higher Planning Commission[77], one third of families (34%) said they do not have any source of income since their work stopped during quarantine. The percentage of these families reaches 44% among poor families, 42% of families that live in slum areas, 54% of craftsmen and skilled workers, 47% of traders, and 46% of workers and farmers. On the other hand, the percentage of families that have no income among decision-making civil servants is 12.3%, agricultural exploiters 22.8%, and middle-wage jobs 31.3%. Around 38% of families say that their income hardly covers their expenses and that 49.6% of the families have to either use their savings (22%), borrow money (14%), or depend on aid provided by the government (8%) to cover their expenses during lockdown. The crisis of workers in the informal sector was aggravated during lockdown, which lasted till the end of June 2020. Craftsmen and skilled workers lost around 74% of their average monthly income and freelancers and operators 70% while the percentage did not exceed 24% for those working in high-wage jobs and 32% for those working in middle-wage jobs. This was accompanied by the deepening of class disparities as the drop in monthly average income reached 66.7% for active people who belong to the 40% "less well-to-do" segment of the population, compared to their counterparts who belong to the 20% "more well-to-do" segment.

Even though available information is limited compared to Morocco, the situation is Tunisia is quite similar. A field study conducted by the National Institute of Statistics in Tunisia in collaboration with the World Bank[78] underlines the development of the economic situation of family production units during and after the lockdown, taking into consideration that this type of units is categorized as informal economy. According to the ILO, informal economy "encompasses both perspectives and is defined as all economic activities by workers and economic units that are—in law or in practice—not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements." The study shows that one third of family production units did not have any income during the lockdown while the income of the remaining third dropped compared to the previous month. This drop in incomes is either caused by a direct reason (the closure of production units) or indirect (drop in the number of customers, inability to move goods, lack of raw material).

3.3 Gender-based impact

Owing to the fact that women are generally more vulnerable than men in the Arab region, women are expected to suffer more from the ramifications of the pandemic for several reasons[79] . First, women live in conditions that make them more vulnerable to the virus since they constitute a large part of medical care and social services sectors. Second, women are in charge of household chores in what is known as "care economy." The lockdown, which also included closing schools, increased women's burden, which affects their immunity

[77] Moroccan Higher Planning Commission, 2020

[78] INS(a), 2020 et INS(b), 2020

[79] United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2020

to diseases including Covid-19. Third, gender-based violence increases during emergencies, including pandemics. Fourth, the participation of women in the labor market is expected to recede and it is already limited across the Arab region. The pandemic is expected to lead to the loss of around 1.7 million jobs in the Arab region, including 700 thousand occupied by women. This is mainly because of the high percentage of women working in sectors most affected by the pandemic such industries and services. In addition, the percentage of women working in the informal sector is estimated at 61.8% and since this sector was extremely harmed by the pandemic, women are expected to be among the most harmed groups.

In Morocco, only 31% of women who stopped working were able to get back to work while 22% of them became unemployed while the percentage among men was estimated at 38% and 7%, respectively. On the other, women's income dropped by 51%, compared to 65% for men. On the medical level, the number of reported cases in export-oriented factories, which employ large numbers of women, increased. This was demonstrated in the factories of preservatives and strawberry fields in the town of Lalla Mimouna in the Kenitra province, textile and leather factories in Casablanca, and the cable wiring factory in the town of Berrechid. The governor of Tangier-Tetouan closed down all industrial and free zones after many cases were reported among male and female workers. The Moroccan interior minister stated that the deteriorating health situation is mainly caused by negligence on the part of business owners who did not abide by protective measures.

Women rights organizations in Morocco decried the increase of domestic violence during the lockdown. The Union of Feminist Action documented more than 1,000 cases of domestic violence across the country, 60% of which were directed at housewives and more than 24% at those who work in the informal sector[80] .

3.4 Impact on youths

The spread of Coronavirus proved detrimental to youths, who have always been faced with an unjust labor market across the Arab region[81]. The pandemic accentuated the problems youths in the region were already suffering from such as marginalization, exclusion, unemployment, and lack of access to services. Three factors played a major role in the deterioration of the situation of youths after the pandemic. First, youths, both male and female, constitute 85% of the informal sector. Second, the closure of schools deprived most youths of access to education, especially that most of them could not benefit from distance learning. Third, youths suffer psychologically because of their vulnerability.

This is particularly demonstrated in Morocco where 50% of youths between 25 and 35 years old work in jobs[82] that are usually both inadequate and fragile. This percentage remarkably decreases for men and women in cities. Job opportunities are expected to drop remarkably since one employer out of five plans to hire new employees while giving preference to applicants with experience.

4. Public policies on the labor market

4.1 Headlines of public policies

Like other countries in the world, the three countries of the Maghreb adopted a set of measures to mitigate the impact of Coronavirus on the economy and disenfranchised groups. Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria provided a budget cover of 3.2%. 2.2%, and 0.003%, respectively. This discrepancy underlines the status of the economy in each of the three countries as well as the level of poverty and marginalization. For example, poverty is more wide-spread in Morocco than it is in Algeria and Tunisia.

[80] Al Araby Al Jadeed website, 2020

[81] United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2020

[82] Nazih, 2020

Economic policies

Economic policies aim at supporting companies that were harmed by the ramifications of the pandemic and at stopping layoffs especially in small, very small, and medium companies. These measures covered the tax, customs, and banking sectors.

Tax measures included postponing the payment of corporate tax and the suspension of penalties on payment defaults (Algeria and Tunisia), facilitating the rescheduling tax debt payments (Algeria), or postponing the issuing of tax statements by small and medium businesses (Morocco). Banking measures included the possibility of postponing loan payments for affected companies (Morocco and Algeria), developing a new mechanism that allows seeking state loan guarantees (Tunisia and Morocco) provided that those loans are directed towards responding to treasury needs to cover current expenses. The central banks of Morocco and Tunisia adopted a flexible monetary policy through decreasing interest rates and liberating bank reserves in favor of the banks while making it possible for banks to resort to all available forms of refunding. The government encouraged ministries and public institutions to expedite due payments to companies, especially small, very small, and medium businesses. As for customs, several measures were taken to expedite importing essential foodstuffs and medical supplies required for fighting the pandemic.

Social policies

Social policies adopted by Arab countries to face the pandemic included a set of measures, as follows[83]:

1. **Social assistance:** money transfers/ income subsidies, in-kind transfers or food coupons, housing assistance, exemption from payment of utility bills, exemption from or reduction of governmental fees
2. **Loans and tax privileges:** cancelling or reducing debts, exemption of custom fees for individuals, reducing interest rates, postponing loans and interest
3. **Social protection:** enrolling in social insurance, unemployment benefits, sick leave, paid maternity leave, health insurance, pension plans, disability support pensions
4. **Labor market assistance:** wage assistance for employers to prevent layoffs, paid leave or work from home, regulation of work and working hours
5. **Healthcare:** healthcare services, free Coronavirus tests, supply of basic goods and medications, awareness campaigns

The three Maghreb countries applied several of those measures, as follows[84]:

- **Tunisia:** The government initiated a fund of 300 million dinars to help unemployed workers and payments of monthly installments for loans were postponed for people with a monthly income of less than 1,000 dinars for six months. The government also provided 150 million dinars in monetary transfer and income subsidies for vulnerable groups. Poor families benefited from in-kind transfers and food coupons.
- **Morocco:** A temporary financial assistance was offered to heads of working families in the formal sector and who lost their jobs in the aftermath of the pandemic. The assistance ranged between 800 and 1,200 dirhams, depending on the number of family members. A monthly compensation of 2,000 dirhams was given to workers enrolled in the National Social Protection Fund and who temporarily stopped working while suspending the payment of social contributions until June 30, 2020. Workers in the formal sector benefited from the postponement of paying bank loans (consumption and housing loans) until June 30, 2020.
- **Algeria:** An amount of 10,000 dinars was given to independent workers and families that were affected by the lockdown. Independent workers also benefited from the postponement of paying social contributions for April 2020 for 30 days.

[83] United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2020

[84] AISS, 2020

4.2 The limitations of adopted public policies

The limitations of policies adopted to face the pandemic are shown in the modest results that have so far been achieved, especially on the social level. For example, lifting the lockdown in Morocco saw the return to work of only two thirds of workers in the formal sector, hence one third remained unemployed. Assistance offered to people who lost their jobs in the private sector only covered 35% in average of lost incomes (63% in urban areas and 28% in rural areas) and covered 39% of men's incomes and 20% of women's incomes[85]. This situation is expected to get worse in case of a second wave of the pandemic. In addition around three of four families (72%) who benefit from state assistance said that it is not enough to make up for lost incomes[86].

These results highlight the effect of the pandemic on the informal economy which is the main source of income for millions of workers in the Maghreb. Poverty rates are expected to rise among these workers in addition to anticipated deterioration in their health conditions as a result of lack of social protection and healthcare. This deterioration started manifesting itself in the increase of the number of cases in August 2020, which led to imposing partial lockdown while the government did not renew social assistance for individuals and families in the both the formal and informal sectors.

Social assistance offered by the state did not achieve the required results partially because of lack of state funds in the three Maghreb countries. In order to reverse this situation, unconventional public policies need to be adopted. This could be done through partial tax system (progressive income taxes, excess profit taxes, and solidarity tax on wealth and inheritance) and an expansionary monetary policy that requires doing away with austerity measures currently adopted by the three Maghreb countries. It is also important to start restructuring public budgets in favor of education and healthcare and at the expense of security-oriented sectors in order to prompt economic growth, increase productivity, and create new job opportunities. The loans Morocco and Tunisia recently took from the IMF mean that more austerity measures are to be imposed, hence further deteriorating the social and economic situation in the two countries.

Fighting the pandemic also requires doing away with the neoliberal approach to development that relies on privatization and the liberalization of the economy while giving precedence to macro-economic balances and investors' interests at the expense of the social and economic rights of workers and disenfranchised groups. This developmental pattern proved its failure since it only benefited an oligarchical minority and crony capitalists who are associated with European and global capital. Meanwhile social, class, gender disparities deepened and the informal sector expanded as this form of development proved fragile and unsustainable. Redressing these mistakes requires a plan that aims at improving social and economic conditions, one that requires global solidarity through stopping payments for external debts, initiating new commercial credits by the IMF without conditioning them on austerity measures, and increasing aid channeled towards global development[87]. Last but not least, it is noteworthy that the response of adopted public policies to gender equality was quite limited[88].

Conclusion

The three Maghreb countries might have avoided the catastrophic ramifications of the pandemic and which hit several parts of the world, yet the economic contraction that took place as a result and the remarkable decrease in supply and demand are quite alarming, especially in the case of Algeria whose economy mainly relies on oil. Several economic sectors were negatively impacted, especially services and transformative

[85] Moroccan Higher Planning Commission, 2020

[86] Moroccan Higher Planning Commission, 2020

[87] Oxfam 2020

[88] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020.

industries. This development was reflected on the labor market through the reduction of working hours and temporary suspension of many businesses in addition to higher unemployment rates. Workers in the informal sector were the most affected by the general lockdown, especially in light of their already fragile conditions that include lack of adequate housing. This led to a remarkable deterioration in the incomes and living conditions of those workers, which means a deepening of disparities, poverty, and marginalization. The crisis caused by the pandemic had a more severe impact on women and youths in particular, especially in light of the public policies adopted by the three Maghreb countries.

References

Ahlam Nazih, 2020. Covid-19: La suite, une aggravation du chômage des jeunes! L'Economiste No: 5777, 8 juin, Rabat.

Algérie: les autorités commencent á reconnaitre l'ampleur du désastre, Le 360 afrique.com du 20/7/20.

Algérie: Après le FMI, la Banque mondiale prévoit une récession inquiétante, le site 360 Afrique, 10/6/2020

Algérie. Coronavirus: 60% des entreprises ont cessé leurs acitivités, selon une confederation patronale, le 360 afrique.com du 28/5/20

Association Internationale de la Sécurité Sociale (AISS), 2020. La réponse de la sécurité sociale au COVID-19: le cas de l'Afrique du Nord, juillet.

Banque Africaine de Développement, 2020. Perspectives économiques en Afrique 2020dans le context de la COVID 19.

Banque mondiale, 2013. Jobs for shared prosperity: time for action in the Middle East and North Africa (Vol. 4)

Dzair Daily, Algérie: Goldman Sachs prédit un baril á 20 dollars, 9 mars 2020.

En Algérie, les Médecins face á l'inertie du pouvoir, journal "Le Monde", 15/7/2020).

ILO Monitor: Covid 19 and the world of work, Fifth edition, June 2020.

Institut National de la Statistique (INS) (a), 2020.Suivi de l'impact socio-économique du COVID-19 sur les ménages tunisiens. Analyse des données de la 1ére vague (29 avril 2020-8 mai) Tunis.

Institut National de la Statistique (INS) (b), 2020. Suivi de l'impact socio-économique du COVID-19 sur les ménages tunisiens. Résultats de la 2ème vague (15 mai 2020- 21 mai) Tunis.

International Monetary Fund ,2020. World Economic Outlook, June

Oxfam, 2020.Dignity not destitution, "An Economic Rescue Plan for All" to tackle the Coronavirus crisis and rebuild a more equal world, Oxfam Media Briefing.

Programme des Nations Unies pour le Développement, 2020. Impact économique du COVID 19 en Tunisie. Analyse en termes de vulnérabilité des ménages, des micro et très petites enterprises.

Soussi Mouez. La Crise Covid-19 en Tunisie: Impacts et Préoccupations, IEMed, June 2020).

Zouhair El Kadhi, Dalia El Sabbagh, Aymen Frija, Thouraya Lakoud, Manfred Wiebelt, and Clemens Breisinger, 2020. The Impact of COVID 19 on Tunisia's Economy, Agrifood System, and Households, IFPRI, May.

WHO, 2020. Update COVID -19.

World Bank, 2020. Tunisia Economic Update, April.

References in Arabic:

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2020. "The impact of Covid-19 on youths in the Arab region." Beirut.

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2020. "The impact of Covid-19 on gender equality in the Arab region."

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2020. "Social protection policy responses to mitigate the impact of Covid-19." April.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020. "Response to the Coronavirus crisis in the Middle East and Africa." May, Paris.

Febrayer.com, August 2, 2020, Rabat.

Hespress website. "Covid-19 cases on the rise." August 2, 2020, Rabat.

Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed, June 6, 2020.

Moroccan Higher Planning Commission, 2020. "The impact of Covid-19 on families' economic conditions," July, Rabat.

Moroccan Higher Planning Commission, 2020. "Study on the impact of Covid-19 on families' economic, social, and psychological conditions."

Moroccan Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2020. "The new finance draft law for 2020." Rabat.

SECTION II

PUBLIC POLICY AND STATE RESPONSES

INTRODUCTION
The Covid-19 Pandemic: Public Policy as State Response

Ibrahim Awad[1] *(Arabic Version Translated by Sonia Farid*[2]*)*

Although in the making for over two months, the announcement by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 16 March 2020 of Covid-19 as a pandemic looked as a surprise for the global society. Industrialized countries were affected first, some among them badly. They seemed at a loss about how to face up to the public health challenges that had befallen them. The human race looked equally threatened. Development levels and policy-making systems did not seem to make a difference. In Egypt, sarcastically, one political cartoon considered Covid-19 "democratic"! It did not distinguish between rich and poor. Its targets were humans, irrespective of their statuses, sex and age.

The sarcastic observation was a veiled denunciation of inequality. It expressed an aspiration to justice. Not before long, the observation was proven wrong. The novel Coronavirus that causes the disease did not equally attack human beings. The policies devised to check its spread did not equally affect human beings either. The social, economic and political contexts were essential in the spread of the virus. They also determined the policies put in place to check it and to respond to the public health, economic and social implications of the disease. They finally affected the outcomes of the said policies for the populations of the concerned countries. No, the virus and the disease did not equally strike humans in different income groups; in urban and rural areas; women and men; and old and youth.

Three insightful papers are included in this part of the volume. These are *the Implications of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Educational System in Morocco* by Rajaa Alkassab, *The Rights of Vulnerable Groups in the Response to Coronavirus in the Arab Region* by Nessaf Brahimi and Shimaa El Sharkawy, and *Covid-19 and Human Security* by Nancy Kanbar, Roy Kanbar and Ziad El-Sayegh[3]. This introduction will make observations suggested by the contents of the three papers and then formulate a general comment.

The papers by Alkassab and by Kanbar, Kanbar and El-Sayegh differ in their scope. The former is specifically about the impact of the pandemic on education in Morocco. The latter deals more broadly with the consequences of the pandemic for reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to health, education and the labor market. However, both start with a review of the *status quo ante* the pandemic. The two papers consider that the situations in the areas they study were far from satisfactory. Alkassab denounces the consequences of the structural adjustment policies implemented in Morocco for the country's educational system. These policies resulted in the fragmentation of the system and in reducing budget allocations for public education, which produced negative effects at all levels and exacerbated inequalities. With lower budget allocations the quality of education deteriorated, which resulted in drop outs among the underprivileged, especially in poor urban areas and in rural Morocco. Increasing members of

[1] Professor of Public Policy at the American University of Cairo.

[2] Translator and Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University.

[3] The first two papers are written in Arabic and the third in English

the middle classes and of higher income groups shifted to private educational establishments. Privatization had already been one significant element in the structural adjustment implemented in Morocco since 1983. Alkassab does not fail to signal that the Morocco situation is comparable to that of other Arab countries. Kanbar, Kanbar and El-Sayegh do not attribute the deficiencies in the health, education and labor market sectors to structural adjustment. For them, they are due to poor policy analysis, formulation and implementation. Establishing a linkage between education and the labor market, they denounce the mismatch between demand and supply of labor. Outputs of the educational system do not correspond to enterprises' demand. Alkassab slightly differs with this assessment. The assumed mismatch was purportedly addressed in Morocco by encouraging students from low-income groups to join vocational education. However, when these students graduate, they do not find the jobs that were supposed to be waiting for them. In fact, the Moroccan economy does not generate sufficient jobs for the outputs of vocational education. Alkassab is not far from the truth. In fact, with large informal economies implying low technological and knowledge content, production processes in Arab countries do not generate sufficient demand for the educated and highly-educated. This is not necessarily in contradiction with the complaints of enterprises about the unavailability of workers to fill specific job opportunities. These opportunities are few. They do not rise to the level that would make a compelling case for raising budget allocations to public education. The result is poor education that do not produce quality graduates for the few jobs offered by enterprises. It is a perfect vicious circle!

Brahimi and El Sharkawy also take up employment in the informal economy. In their paper, the two authors focus on the policies implemented by Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia in respect of four vulnerable groups. These are women, migrants and refugees, workers in informal employment, and prisoners. But the two authors cannot avoid to refer to the prevailing situations for these groups at the time the pandemic broke out. Obviously, the intersection between women, migrants and refugees, and the informal economy cannot be overemphasized. For Brahimi and El Sharkawy, the context is of great importance. The living conditions of migrant and refugees, whether in camps or in densely-populated neighborhoods in urban areas, make them more vulnerable to infection. They share this vulnerability with the native poor among whom they live.

Alkassab, and Brahimi and El Sharkawy examine the policies formulated and implemented to face up to the virus and the disease, their effectiveness and their inequality outcomes in the fields they cover in their papers. In contrast, without neglecting the pandemic, Kanbar, Kanbar and El-Sayegh are more interested in the opportunity that the pandemic constitutes to formulate and implement policies that promote the realization of SDGs in the three sectors they examined. However, all three papers reveal the strong interconnectedness between the different sectors and policies. For instance, the lockdowns decreed to address threats to public health greatly affected the livelihoods of the poor and vulnerable groups. In turn, these groups had great difficulty in strictly observing the lockdowns given their working and living conditions and the nature of their social relations.

For Alkassab, the unequal conditions prevailing before the pandemic diminished the effectiveness of policies. In fact, these policies were formulated with high-income groups and middle classes in mind. Therefore, these groups and classes did relatively well after distance learning policy measures, intended to ensure the continuity of educational processes, were put in practice. In the meantime, they aggravated inequality since the less privileged groups could not cope with the implications of these policies. The non-possession of hardware and the poor quality of internet connections in low-income urban and in rural areas undermined learning processes. These processes were further affected by the roles expected from parents in the learning processes during the lockdown. Children were penalized when their parents were uneducated. No one took over the supposedly equalizing role of the public school. The promise of progress and greater equality inherent in distance learning and new technologies could not be realized. To materialize, this promise requires the adoption of prior policies that promotes equality in all policy

areas. The reader concludes that equality cannot be realized in one issue area but not in others.

Brahimi and El Sharkawy review the measures adopted by the four countries they study with respect of the identified vulnerable groups. Similarities and dissimilarities exist between these measures. The public health measures were extended to refugees and migrants in Egypt. They could access public health facilities, which is positive even if no information is provided about the actual exercise of this entitlement. In contrast, while all four countries gave financial assistance to workers in the informal economy, refugees and migrants did not benefit from this policy measure. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) assisted in Egypt but its activities were disturbed by the lockdown and remote working. In any case, the definition of the beneficiaries from the assistance is not clear. The number of beneficiaries looks far below the volume of informal employment, which means that a great many workers and their families were left out. Added to rising unemployment resulting from the complete or partial lockdown, and to the endemic underemployment, this explains the increased poverty rates. The importance of the political context is clearly and repeatedly brought out in the paper by Brahimi and El Sharkawy.

In Lebanon, refugees and migrants were impacted by the dire economic situation in the country. But during the pandemic as in other normal times, Palestinian and Syrian refugees were affected by political attitudes in their respect. Whereas in Morocco and Tunisia, authorities released a number of inmates to reduce prison densities, this was not done in Egypt. The authorities especially did not heed calls to release individuals in provisional detention for political reasons. Clearly, the extended political confrontation in the country is behind the refusal to release these individuals. A further instance of the significance of the political context originates in Tunisia. The Union générale des travailleurs tunisiens (UGTT), the most influential and historical trade union federation, reached an agreement with the Union tunisienne de l'industrie, du commerce et de l'agriculture (UTICA), the employers' organization, on keeping all workers in their jobs during the period of the pandemic. The agreement between the two social partners is reflective of the negotiating approach to dealing with economic and social questions in pluralistic political systems. Crises are also opportunities because they reveal existing shortcomings, on the one hand, and because actors are keen to overcome them, on the other. Kanbar, Kanbar and El-Sayegh in wishing to seize the opportunity mix policy measures intended to face up to the pandemic with those that should help realize the SDGs. The latter aim at reducing inequalities and are ambitious. They are particularly emphasized in what follows. In the public health area, enhancing the resilience of the health care systems is vital in order to ensure continuity, recovery and adaptation of health services. Trained national multidisciplinary rapid response teams, inter-ministerial structures, technical and scientific committees are necessary for monitoring, investigating and responding to public health threats.

The three authors call for political commitment, resources, and management capacity in order to strengthen public health functions and policies or to develop them where they do not exist. In the education field, the three authors emphasize the linkages between SDG4 on quality education and other SDGs such as SDG1 on poverty, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG 8 on employment and decent work and SDG10 on reducing inequality. The implication is that action on these different SDGs should be coordinated. For the three authors, policy makers in the Arab region need to rethink education policies so as to make education a powerful agent of change related to poverty, health, sustainable consumption and production, peace and justice. Principles of sustainable development, human rights, citizenship and gender equality should be integrated in curricula at all levels. Educational institutions should reallocate resources to invest in human capabilities and to empower students. In the labour market area, in order to reduce the particularly high unemployment rates, the authors advocate that governments prioritize the transformation into digital economies, which they consider would promote job creation. Governments should increase public spending and procurement so as to raise demand for labour. They should also

support small and medium enterprises though tax exemptions, wage subsidies and deferment of debt obligations.

The Covid-19 pandemic shocked the global society. Nation states, groups and individuals searched for responses to the threat that menaced them all. These responses seemed elusive. In the panic that gripped them in the first weeks and months after the pandemic was declared, some dug deep to uncover the causes of their helplessness. Many considered that changes in policies, institutions and structures were finally possible. Six months later, despite the resurgence of Covid-19 in a number of countries and its continuing devastating effects in others, the world seems to have become used to the pandemic. Talk about deep policy changes has receded. However, this does not mean that the necessity of change has in any way diminished. In the Arab region, this is particularly the case. The shortcomings that were revealed in policy responses are typical of developing countries. Addressing them is tantamount to making several steps forward in the development process.

The three papers in this part of the volume make compelling diagnoses and either suggest or clearly formulate varied and very useful policy suggestions. This introduction has only touched on some of these diagnoses and suggestions. The reader will find a great intellectual and practical interest in perusing them.

1. COVID-19 and Human Security: A Developmental Economic Approach Towards a Paradigm Shift in Healthcare, Education, and Labor Market Policies in the Arab Region

Nancy Kanbar, Roy Kanbar, Ziad El-Sayegh[4]

(Arabic Version Translated by Sonia Farid)[5]

The emergence of COVID-19 is perhaps the most crucial global health crisis of our time. The virus has spread worldwide transforming the 'standard' world we knew to a 'new standard'. The pandemic and its socio-economic implications require a new outlook on the policy-making process and state responses to addressing challenges and bring opportunities to the poor; while considering the collective responsibility of individual rights as well as the individual responsibility of collective rights. Before COVID-19, countries in the Arab region witnessed protests against the corruption of ruling elites who adopted policies that exacerbated social inequalities and deepened vulnerabilities. People demanded employment, social protection, and access to basic services. Despite the 'Arab Spring' movement, the region continues to suffer ineffective governance, political and economic instability; causing threats to human security. It is in such a context that the pandemic lays its weight on the already fragile populations; revealing the incapability of the systems to provide socio-economic and medical protection. The health crisis further increased social inequalities and extreme poverty. In light of this dire situation, countries should adopt a new methodology to develop comprehensive and sustainable policies. Emphasizing the concept of human security, the study uses a developmental economic approach to examine policies in healthcare, education, and labor market in the Arab region. The objective is to conduct a regional analysis in the aim of understanding the social transformations and socio-economic inequalities intensified by COVID-19. The study develops a framework to adopt social and economic requirements for carrying out structural and institutional transformations that can bring economic progress, social protection, as well as access to healthcare and education services to the broadest segments of the populations. The results will help governments embrace policies that promote transformational change and contribute to sustainable development.

1. Introduction

Since December 2019, the COVID-19 virus has spread worldwide resulting in a health emergency with complex socio-economic repercussions that transformed the 'standard' world humans knew to a 'new standard'. Many restrictions were

[4] **Nancy:** Associate Professor. Faculty of Economics and Business Administration Branch II, Lebanese University

Roy: Associate Professor, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, School of pharmacy, LAU

Ziad: Expert in Public Policies, Communication & Geo-Politics: (1) Senior Policy Fellow at "Issam Fares Institute for Public Policies & International Relations, American University of Beirut; (2) Policies and Strategic Communication Advisor to the Middle East Council of Churches – MECC.

[5] Translator and Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University.

put in place to limit the spread of COVID-19. Lockdowns and containment measures have caused severe challenges, deepening health and socio-economic problems and turning them into political crises, especially in developing countries. The pandemic has put countries' economies, healthcare systems, educational institutions, communities and individuals under utmost pressure due to closure of businesses, loss of jobs, inflation and difficulties in importing basic goods including food and medical materials. In this sense, the pandemic is perceived to be a systemic human development crisis, compounding risks to the advancement towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). COVID-19 has hit the Arab region at a critical time when most countries are suffering great pressures of diverse sorts due to regional conflicts, fiscal pressures, inequalities, unemployment, economic instability, and lack of social protection. The virus threatens to further intensify these challenges, worsening human security. Besides tackling the health emergency, a new outlook on the policy-making process is vital in order to address the social impacts, the economic responses, and the recovery measures.

2. Research Design

It is critical to realize that the planet is a system with integrated parts. That said, public health challenges are associated with social justice and together they form an indivisible connection with human rights, economic growth, education, democracy and peace. Moving towards sustainable solutions requires a holistic vision and a better understanding of the inter-relationships among the different parts of the system. Rapid social and political changes bring to the forefront the need to re-think public policy and state responses towards human security grounded in a vision of sustainable development.

The concept of human security emerged in 1975 out of the Helsinki Agreement that emphasizes three issues: security and peace; economic, scientific and cultural cooperation; as well as respect for human rights[6] (Kaldor, 2011). Ranging from natural disasters to violent conflicts, extreme poverty and epidemics, the world faces complex crises that create various forms of human insecurity and impair prospects for sustainable development. When addressing the multiple facets of development, insecurities must be tackled comprehensively. People enjoy human security when they have the opportunities to attain well-being and when they know that their rights are respected. In its UN General Assembly resolution 66/290 adopted in 2012, the universal value of human security was affirmed as an "approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people"[7].

The COVID-19 outbreak in the Arab region underlines the need to adopt a human security approach to protect people from any human rights violations including, but not limited to, extreme poverty or disease. This approach contributes to a paradigm shift away from traditional thinking that pervades in the institutions of the region towards development in terms of creating new institutional policies that are better adapted to a globalized situation. An ethical policy framework rooted in human solidarity plays a key role in addressing human security to better plan development solutions and assist people in eliminating drivers of insecurity. There is a need to envision the collective responsibility of individual rights as well as the individual responsibility of collective rights as an integral component of human security in the aim of building resilience to risks through securing quality health and education services, as well as decent jobs. This approach helps governments and people solve problems in ways that are proactive and inclusive. Without denying the importance of conventional threats, human rights do not just cover political and civil rights, but also health, education and socio-economic rights. Human security depends on empowering individuals to make choices that can secure their lives. It also requires institutions that guarantee individuals' progress and safety, through good governance, rule of law, and social safety nets.

[6] Kaldor, Mary. "Human Security". *Society and Economy*, Volume 33 (2011) 3: 441–448. doi:10.1556/SocEc.33.2011.3.1.

[7] UN General Assembly resolution 66/290, https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/66/290.

In light of the pandemic, this study aims to examine the main sectors that are essential to ensure human security in the Arab region; namely healthcare, education, and labor market. A developmental economic approach is used to analyze policies pertaining to these sectors in an attempt to address social transformations and downgrade the inequalities exacerbated by the outbreak. This regional analysis proposes a fundamental paradigm shift directed towards re-purposing the aim of policy-making. At this time of crisis, empowering people remains the most crucial need to ensure human security. As per the World Health Organization (WHO), all Arab countries have already reported COVID-19 cases. The focus of governments in most countries is limited to flattening the curve and saving human lives. Consolidating efforts for effective crisis management and supporting the health response are at the forefront of defense in saving lives, but they are not enough to address the systemic risks in the region.

The current crisis offers an opportunity for governments to engage in a comprehensive reform agenda and address some of the underlying structural issues (planning, coordination, governance, social protection, inclusiveness, etc.) by proposing a new developmental paradigm (health and education spending, digital economy, job creation, innovation, etc.) that encompasses all segments of the society. This study is timely because governments should carry out structural and institutional transformations that can efficiently bring economic growth, social protection, and access to education and healthcare services. The study results will help governments address the structural barriers to attaining the 2030 agenda for sustainable development.

3. Healthcare in the Arab Region

The region presents great disparities in achieving the health-related SDGs across and within countries afflicted by significant income inequalities. The low-income countries have the highest infant and maternal mortality rates and are facing the greatest health-related challenges, whereas the middle-income countries have made substantial improvements in health outcomes albeit with some inequalities between urban and rural areas within the same country. In contrast, the high-income countries have achieved good health outcomes by relying on oil revenues to fund health services, such as decreased prevalence of communicable diseases and malnutrition. The WHO emphasized the need for Arab countries to tackle a number of identified weak issues; namely limited inter-sectoral cooperation, weak community involvement in planning and provision, poor policy analysis, formulation, coordination, and regulation, inadequate health information systems, bad organization and management of health services, and improper human resource policies. The healthcare systems could also significantly benefit from a more improved primary healthcare approach that not only provides regular and extended care to patients, but also combines preventive and health promotion services concurrently with curative services[8,9].

COVID-19 Implications on Healthcare

There is a rising concern about the COVID-19 outbreak in countries with weak healthcare systems. In the context of limited medical resources and unorganized healthcare systems, pandemic responses can often raise issues of efficiency and equity. The efficacy of prevention, containment, diagnostic, and treatment efforts depend on the quality of the healthcare services[10].

[8] Samer Hamidi, Fevzi Akinci, Measuring Efficiency of Health Systems of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region Using Stochastic Frontier Analysis, *Applied Health Economics and Health Policy* volume 14 (2016): 337–347, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40258-016-0230-9.

[9] Mate Kedar, Bryan Caitlin, Deen Nigel, McCall Jesse, "Review of Health Systems of the Middle East and North Africa Region", *International Encyclopedia of Public Health* 2nd edition, Volume 6 (2017): 347–356, https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-803678-5.00303-9.

[10] Omar B. Da'ar, Haji Mohamed, Jradi Hoda, "Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Potential implications for weak health systems and conflict zones in the Middle East and North Africa region", *The international journal of health planning and management* (2020): 1-6, https://doi.org/10.1002/hpm.2982.

The WHO estimates that about 20 to 40% of resources spent on healthcare are inefficiently used. The inefficiency scores in the healthcare systems in the region provide insights into mismanagement of available health resources. Interventions to advance management in healthcare systems are urgently needed. These may include: providing trained skill-mixed teams who can deliver preventive care and effective treatment at the primary care level, investing in preventive public health programs and promotion of healthy lifestyles, as well as shifting from a rigid input-based payment towards a performance-based payment system[11].

Furthermore, the pandemic emphasizes the need for an overarching national monitoring and evaluation system that is intended to effectively track emerging infections and other existing conditions. A review of disease surveillance systems by the East Mediterranean Regional Office of the WHO indicates that there is insufficient commitment to the systems, lack of practical instructions and guidelines, overwhelming reporting requirements, inadequate involvement of the private sector, lack of transparency, shortage of human resources, and poor data management. Consequently, it becomes challenging to successfully develop and implement measures that proactively control the widespread transmission and to provide appropriate healthcare services[12].

Heath Policy Recommendations

Most countries in the region are already trying hard to address the immediate priority of saving human lives. The majority have national rapid response for timely investigation and response to public health threats. However, the national health teams require updated training to investigate and respond to the pandemic that created health disasters even in the most developed countries with robust healthcare systems. Policymakers and regulatory agencies are frequently communicating COVID-19 updates and continuously announcing new measures to respond to the pandemic based on clear evidence underlying required behavioral changes. It is vital to use this opportunity not only to respond to the current crisis, but also to build health systems that are more resilient, and more able to withstand the impact of health emergencies.

COVID-19 will not affect everyone equally; thus national policies need to be transformative in anticipating and addressing inequalities. In order to overcome barriers and prioritize access to healthcare resources for those individuals in greatest need, public health initiatives must track the socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics, as well as improve the equity of health funding and service delivery[13]. For instance, the disparity in confinement conditions jeopardize the health of poor families living in crowded homes with small spaces which impacts the efficacy of these measures in preventing the disease transmission. Furthermore, large homes allow residents to better cope with the psychological effects of confinement[14]. Gender differences also uncover health inequalities, especially that women constitute the majority of the healthcare and social sectors support-personnel. They are in the frontlines of the COVID-19 response, putting them at a higher risk of exposure. Women's health is also adversely impacted by the reallocation of resources and changes in priorities away from crucial areas such as sexual and reproductive health services.

The most important aspect of the COVID-19 response to-date remains to successfully slow transmission and protect health systems. National policies to develop public health awareness strategy are most needed. Large-scale public health capacities must be implemented with

[11] Hamidi, "Measuring Efficiency".

[12] Kedar, "Review of Health Systems".

[13] Hargreaves James, Davey Calum, "Three lessons for the COVID-19 response from pandemic HIV", The Lancet Vol 7 (2020): e309-e311, https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-3018(20)30110-7.

[14] Souvik Dubey, Payel Biswas, Ritwik Ghosh et al., "Psychosocial impact of COVID-19", *Diabetes & Metabolic Syndrome: Clinical Research & Reviews* 14 (2020): 779-788, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dsx.2020.05.035.

urgency to adopt individual behaviors such as hand-washing and physical distancing to protect communities and vulnerable groups[15]. Many governments have cooperated with the televised broadcasting corporations to launch awareness campaigns[16]. Supporting safe behaviors requires an enabling environment to facilitate the behavioral change by addressing structures that constrain or enable individuals' choices. For instance, access to protective and sanitation equipment would be facilitated by partially or fully subsidizing costs, commensurate with the socio-economic status of individuals.

National policies should integrate digital technologies to address systemic challenges in health information systems to provide data in order to assess, plan, manage and implement the required healthcare services. Mobile applications, artificial intelligence, and healthcare databases allow monitoring of the spread of the disease, tracking the symptoms, disseminating prevention procedures, tracing contacts, and enforcing quarantine measures[17]. Further, digital technologies help establish a real-time automated monitoring and evaluation systems to identify and address complex emergencies[18]. However, this requires extensive technical assistance and financial support, particularly in low and middle income countries. Partnerships between private and public sectors, academic and health institutions, as well as between governmental entities and the world tech giants are needed. While digital tools serve the collective good, they raise concerns about individual rights to privacy, personal freedom, and data security.

When facing multifaceted emergencies, national policies to enhance the resilience of the healthcare systems are vital to ensure continuity, recovery and adaptation of services. Countries need to create a leading coalition. Trained national multidisciplinary rapid response teams are necessary for monitoring, investigating and responding to any public health threat[19]. All public procurement systems should be adapted to streamline and accelerate the process and address short and long term needs[20]. Furthermore, continuity of health services should be safeguarded by shifting from a facility-centered approach towards a patient-centered approach. For example, launching telemedicine and rolling out mobile medical units ensure that patients continue to receive non-urgent care, particularly those with chronic conditions and in distant rural areas[21]. These measures help mitigate inequalities and ensure equitable distribution of healthcare services.

Governments should support related research in detection, preventive medicine, health education, treatment approaches, and vaccination to improve health outcomes. Collaborative research and knowledge sharing have shed light on the transmissibility of the virus, the clinical spectrum of the disease, as well as the benefits and costs

[15] World Health Organization (WHO), "COVID-19 Strategy update", 14 April, 2020, https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/strategic-preparedness-and-response-plan-for-the-new-coronavirus.

[16] United Nations Development Program (UNDP), "Arab countries respond to COVID-19: Heightening Preparedness Integrated Multi-sectoral Responses Planning for Rapid Recovery", accessed 28 July 2020, https://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/coronavirus.html.

[17] Miguel Amral, Goran Vranic, Prasanna Lal Das, "Technology helps strengthen countries' regulatory capacity to respond to COVID-19", Blogs worldbank, May 6, 2020, https://blogs.worldbank.org/psd/technology-helps-strengthen-countries-regulatory-capacity-respond-COVID-19.

[18] Scott Weingarten, Jonathan R. Slotkin, Mike Alkire, "Building A Real-Time COVID-19 Early-Warning System", Harvard Business Review, June 16, 2020, https://hbr.org/2020/06/building-a-real-time-COVID-19-early-warning-system.

[19] WHO, "COVID-19 Strategy update".

[20] Hynes William, Trump Benjamin, Love Patrick, Linkov Igor, "Bouncing forward: a resilience approach to dealing with COVID-19 and future systemic shocks", *Environment Systems and decisions* 40 (2020): 174-184, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10669-020-09776-x.

[21] Denizhan Duran, Rekha Menon, "COVID-19 (coronavirus): Ensuring continuity of health services in the Middle East and North Africa", May 13, 2020, https://blogs.worldbank.org/health/COVID-19-coronavirus-ensuring-continuity-health-services-middle-east-and-north-africa.

of different response strategies. This requires a platform to facilitate, support and fund multidisciplinary and collaborative research[22]. To address these challenges, political commitment, resources, and management capacity are needed to strengthen existing and develop new health related research policies.

4. Education in the Arab Region

The education sector in the region reflects weak quality, inequitable access and infrastructure within and between countries, as well as inadequate reforms in the education systems[23]. The governments' spending on education in the region remains lower that the world average. Also, other barriers to inclusive and equitable education are the widespread conflicts and displacements that have long devastated people in the region. Many refugees and internally displaced children are at risk of being excluded for diverse reasons; namely lack of status, difficulty in adapting to curricula, languages or financial burdens. The SDG4 vision of promoting human rights, gender equality and sustainability has not been effectively incorporated in curricula that still lack innovation. Teaching jobs remain underpaid and only few resources are allocated for teachers' professional development and use of new methodologies. Learning continues to rely on acquiring knowledge rather than producing it; undervaluing problem-solving, critical and analytical skills. Current educational systems are not well-adapted to the rapid progress in technology and industry. Thus, school education does not prepare learners to transition to higher education, employment and innovative industries. This situation results in high unemployment rates among educated youth, low productivity, low value-added economies and poor citizenship education. Policy-makers should rethink the role of education in driving transformative learning that reflects the potential of young generations.

COVID-19 Implications on Education

The pandemic has resulted in a major education crisis that affected learners and teachers over the world, including the Arab region. Regular classes were suspended as most governments have closed educational institutions to limit the spread of the virus. In most countries, considerable efforts were made to ensure the continuity of learning, through offering distance learning alternatives. However, many students, particularly the most vulnerable, risked to be excluded due to lack of internet access, absence of equipment needed for distance learning, and lack of effective parental support[24]. The interruption of regular education services carries social and economic costs that exacerbate already existing disparities. When learning is interrupted, students are deprived of opportunities for growth and development. Repercussions are severe for the most underprivileged children who tend to have fewer educational opportunities. Healthy nutrition can be compromised as many children rely on free or discounted meals provided at schools[25].

Despite efforts to mitigate the impacts of the unexpected closing of educational institutions, the crisis presents huge human and technical challenges. These are related to educators' capacity building, lack of preparedness, inadequate infrastructure as well as digital gaps that put pressures on the learners, parents and teachers. The closure created high demands for distance learning and overwhelmed the available

[22] Rola El Rassi, Lokman I Meho, Acile Nahlawi, Johnny S Salameh, Ali Bazarbachi, and Elie A Akl, "Medical research productivity in the Arab countries: 2007-2016 bibliometric analysis", *J Glob Health*, Dec 2018, 8(2): 020411, doi: 10.7189/jogh.08.020411.

[23] United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA), "COVID-19 Economic Cost to the Arab Region", accessed 30 July, 2020, https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/escwa-covid-19-economic-cost-arab-region-en.pdf.

[24] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19): UNICEF support to the Middle East and North Africa", April 2020, https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/novel-coronavirus-COVID-19-unicef-support-middle-east-and-north-africa.

[25] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), "Adverse consequences of school closures", accessed on 30 July 2020, https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/consequences.

capacity of the digital infrastructure. Switching learning from classrooms to homes in such a rushing mode posed enormous challenges. Without proper training, the transition to online platforms was frustrating for many. When schools closed, parents were asked to assist in home learning activities. Many parents, especially those with limited education and resources, were unprepared for home schooling. Particular issues remain essential to address; namely infrastructure disparities within countries between public and private schools in rural and urban areas, pedagogical techniques, students' assessments during remote learning, as well as capacity-building on the use of digital platforms.

Educational systems were not well-equipped for this journey in terms of ensuring equitable access to digital infrastructure, and the extent to which education contributes to building inclusive societies. Distance learning has generally been unrecognized by many countries, whose educational systems still rely on traditional face-to-face teaching methods. Policy-makers should make structural changes to acknowledge and accredit distance learning.

Education Policy Recommendations

Acknowledging the fact that education is a fundamental driver of development should compel governments to invest in new technologies, expand educational opportunities and drive transformative learning. Countries seeking sustainable development must ensure quality of their education systems, a strategic challenge for the region in the coming decades. Quality education is necessary not only for social and economic well-being, but also for human security and progress towards development through enriching the human capital needed to boost productivity and incomes. A closer look at the SDGs shows the linkages of SDG(4) to other SDGs; namely SDGs (5) and (10) emphasizing gender equality, lifelong learning, and inclusion; SDGs (1) and (8) highlighting the need to produce individuals prepared for continued learning and productivity for better employment and income generation; SDG(9) underlining the contribution of research to sustainability and innovation; and SDG(16) fostering social cohesion, encouraging work for the common good, and contributing to peace[26].

Facing increasingly complex global challenges, the world needs to re-purpose the role of education to guide transformative change. To achieve SDG(4), policy makers should design policies that enhance the power of education as an agent of change. The time spent home-schooling provides an opportunity for students to remain engaged in learning by developing life skills, learning to live together, to cope and be creative[27]. Being confined at home builds the learners' capacity to live together, to respect each other's personal space, while at the same time ensuring enough space for oneself. It provides opportunities to learn to cope with new situations and to explore creativity and enhance capacity for self-learning[28]. The crisis underlines new learning contexts that are distinctive from those in traditional classes; namely mutual recognition, responsibility and freedom. It emphasizes skills and competences, such as relationship-building, dialogue, tolerance, trust, respect, collaboration, as well as taking on the responsibility for the common good.

Policies need to reconsider the goals of education beyond building individual capabilities to further support collective efforts for social change by enhancing productivity, technological awareness and sustainability. They should enforce a humanistic approach to education grounded in a vision of citizenship and human security that acknowledges individual and collective rights. This re-envisioning of education is critical to achieving a transformative change, namely related to poverty reduction, sustainable consumption

[26] UNESCWA, "Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020", accessed July 26, 2020, https://www.unescwa.org/publications/arab-sustainable-development-report-2020.

[27] UNICEF, "Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19): UNICEF support to the Middle East and North Africa".

[28] UNICEF Middle East and North Africa, "COVID-19 Response in Education", July 12, 2020, https://www.unicef.org/mena/education/COVID-19-response-education.

and production, peace and justice. Barriers to change are similar across countries in the region. They include shrinking civic space, rentier economies, inadequate macroeconomic policies, unsustainable patterns of resource extraction, weak educational visions and research capabilities, low returns to education, inadequate science-policy interface, gender inequality, high unemployment rates among the youth, conflicts and wars.

The region has many young people who are ambitious and eager for knowledge, but suffering unemployment. Educational policies should address the youth potential to harness the power of technology and innovation. People across the region, including women, the youth, academics and civil society organizations are calling for a better Arab world. They are actively engaged in changing their communities, demanding political change, justice, social protection, healthcare, inclusive education, and decent jobs. Institutions should reallocate resources to invest in human capabilities and empower students so they can pursue better opportunities.

Educational policies should protect the freedom of thought and expression to unleash the potential of research and development. Educational institutions have a mission to transform societies through research and innovation, particularly in higher education. This transformation requires a solid foundation in primary and secondary education, which is also a mean to achieve equity and social justice. Institutions should encourage inter-disciplinarity and linkages across subject areas; they should promote research in sustainable development, human rights, and citizenship. Such policies cultivate future generations that are conscious of the needs to address local and global challenges.

Policy-makers need to develop educational policies that ensure access to lifelong learning opportunities across all age groups. If education is committed to drive transformative change, curricula should be reformed to integrate innovative methodologies that encourage creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving, and allow learners to apply knowledge throughout their lives as citizens and lifelong learners.

Educational institutions should be prepared to address learning gaps students may have, especially when home schooling. It is essential to reform assessment methods to measure abilities rather than information acquisition. Accurate assessments help build better opportunities to meet the learning objectives. This requires preparing teachers for distance learning, use of technology, and innovative methodologies.

Educational policies should guarantee the right to equitable quality education, ensuring that disparities are reduced. Inequalities may exist according to gender, income level and area of residence. Institutions need to collect data by these markers in order to develop policies that reduce inequalities and ensure quality. They should ensure equitable spending to supplement gaps in rural and marginalized areas and allow a fair distribution of opportunities for girls and boys alike as well as individuals with disabilities. In the absence of targeted policies, children from poorer backgrounds face pressures to drop out to financially support their families. Policies need to link educational strategies to social protection schemes in order to ensure all children remain in school.

5. Labor Market in the Arab Region

The COVID-19 pandemic is much more than a health crisis; it is a socio-economic and labor market crisis[29]. Recent global data indicate that the slowdown of economic activity has huge costs imposed on economies and societies worldwide. The literature has documented large employment losses devastating the labor market[30]. The International Labor Organization

[29] International Labor Organization (ILO), "COVID-19: Labour Market Impact and Policy Response in the Arab States", 15 May, 2020, https://www.ilo.org/beirut/information-resources/factsheets/WCMS_744832/lang--en/index.htm.

[30] Cho Seung Jin, Lee Jun Yeong, Winters John V., "Employment Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic across Metropolitan Status and Size. Discussion Paper Series" IZA DP No. 13468, Institute for Labor Economics, July 2020, https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/13468/employment-impacts-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic-across-metropolitan-status-and-size.

(ILO) reveals a decline in global working hours in the second quarter of 2020 due to the pandemic, estimated at 400 million full-time equivalent job losses[31].

Despite major differences that exist between Arab countries in terms of their health systems preparedness to face the pandemic, the region is not well-set to address critical socio-economic impacts of a fast-spreading deadly disease[32]. The effects on the labor market are envisioned in two ways: the quantity of jobs, both unemployment and underemployment with the latest to be especially significant due to increased informal employment; and the quality of work and associated wages, incomes and social protection[33]. The economic slowdown resulting from the pandemic will further exacerbate the vulnerable situation of the young people who are likely to experience higher unemployment levels and significant income losses. The region has the highest rate of youth unemployment in the world (exceeding 27% on average) and youth are five times more likely to be unemployed than adults. It is reported that 80% of youth work in informal economic sectors, which provide fewer or no benefits or social protection at all[34].

COVID-19 Implications on Labor Market

Evolving similarly to a wave smashing the poorest groups, the pandemic has devastating socio-economic impacts for individuals and businesses across sectors in the region[35]. The ILO 2020 warns that the labor market crisis will have disproportionate negative repercussions on vulnerable groups. These include women who dominate the care sector and social services fields and have less social protection[36], migrant workers, refugees/displaced, informal economy workers, the young and those above the age of 55, and workers with special needs. The migrant workers and the refugees/displaced are two prevalent groups that require special attention as they face severe challenges. The ILO forecasts rising discrimination against migrants and in some cases layoffs, worsening living conditions, and forced returns as they may be stigmatized as carriers of the virus[37].

Migrant workers play a key role in the labor market (particularly in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries), predominantly in sectors that provide essential services, such as agriculture, food production, healthcare, domestic work, hospitality, and construction. Migrant workers are at risk, and the most susceptible are low-skilled and low-income as well as informal workers, who will be in irregular status and with limited access to health services in case their jobs are lost. This constitutes a problem for the migrant workers and for their countries of origin (particularly applies to Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon). The World Bank estimates that remittance flows are expected to decline by about 19.6% in 2020 due to the economic crisis induced by the pandemic as well as the impact of lower oil prices in GCC countries that caused a fall in the wages and employment of migrants. The anticipated decline in remittances represents a loss of a crucial financing support

[31] ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fifth edition: Updated estimates and analysis. ILO monitor, 30 June 2020, https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/impacts-and-responses/WCMS_749399/lang--en/index.htm.

[32] Amirah-Fernández Haizam, "Coronavirus in Arab countries: passing storm, opportunity for change or regional catastrophe?", Real Instito Elcano Royal Institute, April 6, 2020, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/ari37-2020-coronavirus-in-arab-countries-passing-storm-opportunity-for-change-or-regional-catastrophe.

[33] ILO, "COVID-19: Labour Market Impact and Policy Response in the Arab States".

[34] Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), "COVID-19 crisis response in MENA countries", 9 June, 2020, http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/COVID-19-crisis-response-in-mena-countries-4b366396

[35] UNDP, "Arab countries respond to COVID-19".

[36] UNESCWA, "The impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality in the Arab Region", accessed 30 July 2020, https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/the-impact-of-covid19-on-gender-equality-in-the-arab-region.

[37] ILO Policy brief, "Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic Recommendations for Policy-makers and Constituents", April 2020, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---migrant/documents/publication/wcms_743268.pdf.

for vulnerable households affecting access to food, healthcare and basic needs[38]. Also, women migrant domestic workers comprise a significant large workforce across GCC, Lebanon, and Jordan and they are particularly vulnerable. After the lockdown imposed by the host countries, these women have either lost their jobs and incomes, or are risking their lives by going to work without real protection measures. UN agencies interventions (UNHCR, UNRWA, and ILO) play a key role in helping them.

The region had one of the highest unemployment rates globally, with more than 4.68 million unemployed in 2019[39]. The pandemic forced governments to take strict restrictions freezing economic activities and limiting work to teleworking when possible. The preventive measures helped reduce fatalities, but have worsened the economic situation. As per an initial estimate of the impact of the pandemic, the region would lose about $42 billion of GDP. Preliminary estimations indicate that businesses lost $420 billion in market capital during the first three months of 2020. Unemployment rate would increase by 1.2% as the region would lose at least 1.7 million jobs in 2020. When broken down by country, this rate is quite higher in some countries with increased underemployment and informal employment, which adds to unemployment and raises poverty rates. Due to lockdowns, employment across all sectors was adversely impacted- especially in the service sector, the main employment provider in the region. The longer stringent lockdown measures are imposed, the heavier will the economic cost be. Recently, few countries are lifting restrictions progressively in an attempt to mitigate the socio- economic implications. The key is to create a balance between economic returns and health risks[40].

Labor Market Policy Recommendations

The virus knows no geographic boundaries and has impacted individuals from all socio-economic backgrounds. Countries need to ensure their national readiness to effectively respond to the emergent threat, and to develop recovery plans addressing the socio-economic challenges, especially for the most vulnerable groups.

Governments should resume their efforts towards sustainable development. Despite variations in income level, national wealth, natural resources, and demographic profiles, the region faces similar structural barriers. Transformative change necessitates the mobilization of interdisciplinary knowledge to address the SDGs interlinkages. A transformation requires structural changes across social, economic, political, cultural and environmental dimensions[41]. Human welfare, social solidarity as well as collective action must be at the core of this transformation. Policies need to be reexamined to promote economic growth, reduce social inequalities and help communities build resilience to threats.

Governments should revamp their economic systems by adopting measures at the macro and micro levels based on ethical equity principles. Central banks should enhance liquidity and alleviate financial stresses. Fiscal policies should support small and medium enterprises through tax exemptions, wage subsidies and deferment of debt obligations[42]. The pandemic imposed high human costs through increased poverty levels and social inequality. Governments should combine effective health interventions with social protection measures. They must enhance social safety nets for the vulnerable through the creation of unemployment funds and the rescheduling of loans, income taxes and other government fees.

[38] The World Bank, "World Bank Predicts Sharpest Decline of Remittances in Recent History", April 22, 2020, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/22/world-bank-predicts-sharpest-decline-of-remittances-in-recent-history.

[39] ILO, "COVID-19: Labour Market Impact and Policy Response".

[40] UNESCWA, "COVID-19 Economic Cost to the Arab Region".

[41] ESCWA, "Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020".

[42] ESCWA, "COVID-19 Economic Cost to the Arab Region".

Most economic systems have long failed to create sufficient jobs to reduce unemployment. Governments need to prioritize the labor market with an opportunity to transform their economies into the digital economy, advancing demand and job creation[43]. World Bank data revealed that unemployment has increased less for tele-workable occupations during the pandemic. This suggests that people in tele-workable occupations tend to keep their jobs not only because they satisfy the physical distancing requirement, but also because they tend to be highly-skilled and educated. Thus, transformations in the educational systems are needed to empower individuals by reinforcing training policies that provide workers with skills in demand in the changing labor markets. Training policies are also necessary for low-skilled workers who have livelihood needs and for which there is potential demand in the Arab countries economies. Policies to boost the labor market through increased government spending and procurement should also be adopted.

Regional and global efforts should be intensified and coordinated. The global community must deliver on its pledges to support developing countries. Regional development and multilateral financial institutions should enhance fiscal space for middle- and low-income countries by considering debt deferral and debt reduction mechanisms. Multilateral organizations should consider debt reduction instruments for enhancing social investments. Multilateral organizations and international financial institutions should increase their support to least developed countries.

6. Final Remarks

While no 'best' policy is a conclusive pathway to success, this paper adopts a people-centered approach with human security as a central focus. No trade-offs should be made between maintaining economies and securing human lives; a balance to have a win-win situation should be sustained. After about ten months of the COVID-19 emergence, many policies have shown to be effective, yet better integration of health and socio-economic concerns into regional planning decisions is needed. Policies should go beyond traditional regulatory approaches to protect human security. Response options might include:

- Improved planning and coordination among national, regional and international institutions. International agreements are indispensable for addressing global problems that span national boundaries.
- Intergovernmental cooperation between countries through the leaders and commissions in the League of Arab states, through the exchange of experiences and lessons learned.
- Improved governance that responds to societal needs.
- Increased transparency and accountability in both the public and private sectors.
- Social and behavioral changes through communication and education about the consequences of human practices in light of the pandemic.
- Empowerment of the poor and vulnerable populations to strengthen new constituencies for human security.
- Promoting research and development of new technologies in the healthcare and education sectors.
- Collective reflections on the ethical and social dimensions affecting human security.

[43] Moosa Dalal, Saliola Federica, "Prioritizing jobs during COVID-19 in MENA", April 15, 2020, https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/prioritizing-jobs-during-COVID-19-mena.

2. Vulnerable Groups and Coronavirus in the Arab Region: Are they more at Risk Now?

Nissaf Brahimi, Shimaa El Sharkawy

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development focused on the importance of achieving comprehensive development that does not exclude any of groups in society. According to the third issue of the Social Development Report released by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the agenda, which was ratified by 193 UN member states in 2015, focuses "on the principle of 'leaving no one behind' and on the importance of a development process, inclusive of all excluded and marginalized community groups" and emphasizes "the need for involving all in the development process, and 'empowering and promoting the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, and economic status'[44].

Several groups suffer from marginalization in the Arab region, and the Coronavirus outbreak intensified their suffering. Women, the elderly, teenagers, youths, the disabled, refugees, and immigrants generally suffer from social and economic marginalization, which makes them more vulnerable at times of crises[45]. Even though the pandemic had a strong impact on all countries all over the world, there is no doubt that less developed countries with a weak healthcare system were more affected and the same applies to marginalized groups. In fact, the pandemic played a crucial role in underlining the fragility of states, incumbent regimes, and the International Community as a whole.

The study aims at examining the impact of Coronavirus on vulnerable groups in the Arab region while placing special emphasis on Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon, and Egypt. This will be done through a qualitative methodology that analyzes reports, studies, and statistics about vulnerable groups in the Arab region, how they are defined, and the impact of the pandemic on them.

Vulnerable or fragile groups are defined as those whose members are weak physically or mentally because of pregnancy, sickness, disability, senility… etc. and who are protected by law from social and criminal violations[46]. Other groups are vulnerable without necessarily being physically or mentally weak such as women and refugees. Vulnerable groups usually live in deteriorating conditions compared to other groups. At times of crisis, vulnerable groups are at more at risk, are subjected to acute forms of inequality, and are more likely to face exclusion. They also have

[44] "Leaving no one behind: Integrating marginalized groups in some Arab countries." United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Beirut, 2020: https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/leaving-no-one-behind-integrating-marginalized-groups-english.pdf

[45] *The Regional Risk Communication and Community Engagement* (RCCE), March 2020, COVID-19: How to include marginalized and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement, Relief Web, https://bit.ly/2AWAf0c

[46] Cohet-Cordey, Frédérique. 2000. Vulnérabilité Et Droit. Le Développement De La Vulnérabilité Et Ses Enjeux En Droit. Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble. p. 336.

a harder time accessing basic and public services and are less capable of coping with crises[47]. The study will focus on the impact of the Coronavirus crisis on women, refugees, informal workers, and prisoners. A crisis here is defined as a situation faced by individuals or a community, one that cannot be dealt with through routine procedures and is accompanied by the tension resulting from abrupt changes[48].

The study aims at answering the following questions: How did the pandemic affect the rights of vulnerable groups? What are the strategies followed by the countries subject of the study to mitigate the impact of the crisis? What is the role of civil society in protecting those groups? The study will be divided into three parts. The first part examines the impact of Coronavirus on vulnerable groups subject of the study, the second looks at the strategies followed by countries subject of the study to help those groups, and the third will underline the similarities and differences between the approaches those countries adopted and the role played by civil society.

First: The impact of Coronavirus on the rights of vulnerable groups

The outbreak of Coronavirus did not only result in a health crisis, but also a social and economic one whose impact is expected to be stronger on weaker groups[49] who would suffer from higher levels of inequality. These include women, who have less access to social protection and are burdened by more responsibilities[50], youths who suffer from different forms of economic and social marginalization[51], workers above 55 years old, and migrant labor in addition to refugees and immigrants who had already been exposed to discriminatory practices and inadequate working and living conditions.

The pandemic increased the time women spend in reproductive labor with the closure of schools. This burden is doubled in the cases of women who work fulltime or in the healthcare sector[52]. Women are also exposed to conditions that make them more at risk to contract the virus since they constitute the majority of staff in healthcare and social services in several Arab countries. In Egypt, for example, the ratio of women to men in the nursing sector is 10 to 1[53]. The pandemic exposed the fragility of women's economic conditions in the region and the injustice of the economic system in which they work. Despite their vital contribution to the development process, women are not only deprived of the gains of development but also more exposed to its losses at times of crisis compared to men.

[47] *The Regional Risk Communication and Community Engagement* (RCCE), March 2020, COVID-19: How to include marginalized and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement, Relief Web, https://bit.ly/2AWAf0c

[48] Mohamed Abdallah. *Crises: Concepts, reasons, impacts, and role in enhancing nationalism* [Arabic]. Riyadh: Law and Economy Library, 2014.

[49] "COVID-19: Labour Market Impact and Policy Response in the Arab States." International Labor Organization, 2020: https://www.ilo.org/beirut/information-resources/factsheets/WCMS_744832/lang--en/index.htm

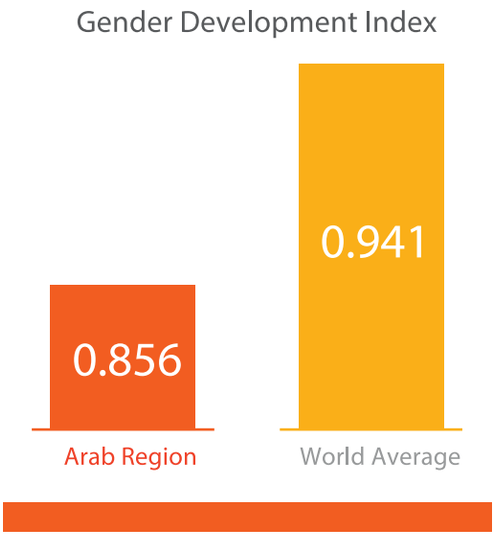
[50] "ILO: 4 billion people worldwide are left without social protection." World Social Protection Report 2017-2019: https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_601903/lang--en/index.htm

[51] "Population and Development Report, Issue No. 5, Youth Exclusion in the ESCWA Region: Demographic, Economic, Educational and Cultural Factors." United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Beirut, 2011: https://www.unescwa.org/publications/population-and-development-report-issue-no-5-youth-exclusion-escwa-region-demographic

[52] "COVID-19: Labour Market Impact and Policy Response in the Arab States." Op. cit.

[53] "The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality in the Arab region." ESCWA and UN Women, 2020: https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/impact_of_covid_on_gender_equality_-_policy_brief.pdf

Figure 1. The Arab region scores 0.856 on the Gender Development Index, below the world average of 0.941



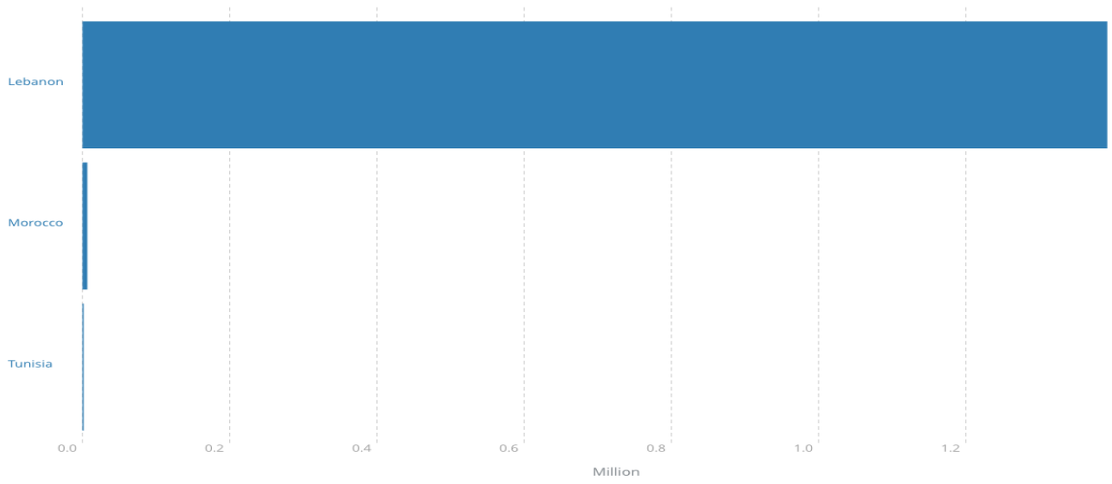
Source: "The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality in the Arab region." ESCWA, 2020: https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/impact_of_covid_on_gender_equality_-_policy_brief.pdf

Unpaid labor is one of the most significant issues that were highlighted in the aftermath of the pandemic as a source of injustice to women. Household chores such as cleaning, cooking, and the like are looked upon at natural duties women have to perform based on the prevalent assumption that women are by definition care givers. This approach overlooks the economic value of women's domestic labor[54].

In Morocco, women constitute 21.3% of the labor force and this percentage is particularly concentrated in the agricultural and industrial sectors and around 17% of women work in the informal sector in addition to domestic work. A study conducted in 2017 revealed that Moroccan women dedicated 38% of their free time to domestic work while men dedicate only 5%. Women are also more exposed to domestic violence during lockdown[55].

Refugees in the Arab region are faced with numerous challenges. They are more at risk to contract the virus due to living in densely populated refugee camps and poor neighborhoods where it is not only impossible to practice social distance, but also where there is limited, if any, access to utilities such as sewage and running water. Added to this is lack of healthcare services. Refugees either lost their jobs in the aftermath of the pandemic or are forced to take the risk of going to work where they are not offered the necessary protection[56].

Figure 2. Refugee population by country or territory of asylum



Source. World Bank

[54] Dina Ibrahim. "Eco-feminism and women's economic fragility during the Corona pandemic [Arabic]." *The Monthly Journal of the Faculty of Economics and Political Science*, Cairo University, issue no. 21, July 2020 : https://bit.ly/3f5gvpU

[55] The COVID 19 crisis in Morocco, 2020. (OECD): https://bit.ly/2ZML1jg

[56] "COVID-19: Labour Market Impact and Policy Response in the Arab States." Op. cit.

This coincided with the lack of adequate international support since refugees mainly depend on international organizations, on top of which is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). On the domestic level, measures taken by governments in most host countries did not include refugees. In Egypt, for example, the lockdown did not only cost refugees their jobs, but also affected the financial assistance the UNHCR offers them. Rasha Maati, the executive director of Fard Foundation, an NGO that works in economic empowerment, education, and social services and targets both Egyptians and refugees, speaks of the effect of the pandemic on refugees in Egypt. According to her, most Syrian and Sudanese refugees are daily wagers in restaurants, which closed during lockdown, and factories, that work with less capacity and laid off many workers. A considerable number of refugees, she added, worked as teachers in community schools and became unemployed when those schools closed. In addition to being unemployed, those refugees are threatened with eviction from their houses. Refugees who had jobs were not registered in the UNHCR financial assistance programs and after losing their jobs found it difficult to apply for assistance since the UNHCR reduced its working hours and staff during lockdown, hence receiving less applicants, which means the process would take much longer than it did before. Meanwhile, many registered refugees received their monthly assistance through post offices. Also, the financial resources of all UN organizations, including the UNHCR, decreased in the past two years. In an attempt to mitigate the impact of the crisis, the World Food Program gave food assistance in cash instead of coupons so that beneficiaries can buy food from any place and not particular stores as was the case before[57].

In Lebanon, a study conducted by the International Labor Organization (ILO) revealed that one third of Syrian refugees work in agriculture and constitute 25% of the workforce in this sector while 19% work in construction, and 20% in retail trade, equipment repair, and other services. In addition, 95% do not have valid work permits, which means they work in the informal sector. This is mainly because of the restrictions imposed on them in the Lebanese labor market. After the pandemic, around 60% of Syrian workers were laid off permanently and 31% temporarily. According to the above-mentioned study, 37% of Syrian workers said that no precautionary measures were taken in their workplaces, compared to their Lebanese counterparts. This discrepancy between Syrian refugees and Lebanese citizens can be seen across the country with more protection offered to the latter whether at work or in everyday life including restrictions on gatherings, which makes Syrians more exposed to danger[58]. Workers who rely on daily wages are exposed to the same risk as informal workers owing to lack of social and economic security. Those workers suffered from the fragility of social protection systems in the countries in which they work since only such a system can, in coordination with the state, help those workers and their families through such a crisis[59].

According to the Tunisian Institute of Competitiveness and Quantitative Studies, the pandemic resulted in the loss of 143,000 jobs after one month of lockdown and 430,000 after three months. The lockdown in Tunisia lasted till June 2020[60]. In Morocco, the lockdown imposed on March 20, 2020 led stores, cafes, and factories to close and the impact of this closure was much stronger on workers in the informal sector who are always underpaid and have no savings[61]. In Lebanon, when the Supreme Defense Council

[57] Hadeer El Mahdawi. "Refugees in Egypt: Hunger at home and Coronavirus in the streets [Arabic]." *Mada Masr*, May 13, 2020: https://bit.ly/31bTQEf

[58] "Impact of COVID-19 on Syrian refugees and host communities in Jordan and Lebanon." International Labor Organization, 2020: https://www.ilo.org/beirut/information-resources/factsheets/WCMS_749356/lang--en/index.htm

[59] "COVID-19: Labour Market Impact and Policy Response in the Arab States." Op. cit.

[60] Iman El Hamedi. "Tunisian trade unions get ready for post-Coronavirus [Arabic]." *Al Arabi Al Jadeed*, May 27, 2020: https://bit.ly/38KaKeV

[61] Adel Najdi. "Corona hurts day workers in Morocco [Arabic." *Al Arabi Al Jadeed*, May 12, 2020: https://bit.ly/3ekOl9b

extended the state of general mobilization in response to the pandemic, thousands of workers lost their income in addition to the 150,000 who had already become unemployed in late 2018 due to the economic crisis. These numbers are expected to increase as more facilities keep closing[62].

In Egypt, a report issued by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics revealed that around 26% of the population became unemployed since the start of the pandemic and that incomes of 73.5% dropped[63]. At the beginning of the crisis, most Egyptians respected the lockdown yet after a while, it became extremely difficult for several groups, especially daily wagers, to keep staying at home. The government gave informal workers financial assistance provided that they register on the website of the Ministry of Labor, which made it hard to know their exact numbers since many of them do not have internet access[64].

Living conditions in refugee camps are not very different from prisons in the countries subject of the study. Prisons across the Arab region are overcrowded and the number of inmates far exceeds their capacity. In addition, these prisons fail to meet the basic standards of health and safety, hence become a fertile environment for the spread of diseases[65].

While the economic impact in the form of impoverishment and marginalization seems to be the most obvious, the psychological ramifications of the pandemic cannot be overlooked. In Tunisia, for example, both official and media discourses held the poor and residents of working-class neighborhoods accountable for the spread of the virus because they did not respect the lockdown. Such a discourse totally ignored the economic impact of the crisis and the fact that those people cannot afford to stay home for months on end. It also overlooked the nature of working class neighborhoods in which locals think of the entire neighborhood as home owing to close communal ties, hence not moving around in this space would have a serious psychological impact and is seen as an encroachment upon their world by the authorities. This can be compared to what French anthropologist David Le Breton referred to as the demise of the self since they are uprooted from their community[66].

In Egypt, in addition to the psychological effects of being detached from the outside world, the stigma associated with the virus played a major role in increasing the number of deaths. John Jabbour, the World Health Organization representative in Egypt stated that 30% of Corona deaths were the result of delays in reporting or admission to hospital because of that stigma[67]. In Morocco, a study conducted by the Higher Planning Commission revealed that half of Moroccan families suffered from anxiety as a result of the lockdown, which started in March 2020. The study added that more than half of the surveyed families find it extremely hard to tolerate another lockdown[68].

The impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups was relatively similar in the four countries subject

[62] Maher El Kheshen. "Absence of an economic solution triggers civil society intervention [Arabic]." *Legal Agenda Website*, April 2, 2020: https://bit.ly/3jqGWJp

[63] "The impact of Coronavirus on Egyptian families until May 2020 [Arabic]." The Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics: https://bit.ly/3hU81nm

[64] Mohamed El Agati et al. "The Coronavirus crisis: Does the current policy system achieve justice for all? [Arabic]." Arab Forum for Alternatives, Beirut, 2020 (accessed July 12, 2020): https://bit.ly/2BSh4oO).

[65] "Amnesty International calls for the release of all prisoners of conscience worldwide." May 14, 2020: https://bit.ly/3hlvtsm

[66] Fouad Ghorbali. "Working-class neighborhoods in Tunisia: Policies of double-isolation [Arabic]." *As-safir Al-Arabi*, May 15, 2020: https://bit.ly/3iRG540

[67] Dina Helmi. "Between anxiety and depression: How Coronavirus affects our mental health? [Arabic]." *Idaat*, April 23, 2020: https://bit.ly/39fftFI

[68] "Research on the impact of Coronavirus on the economic, social, and psychological condition of families [Arabic]." Moroccan Higher Planning Commission.

of the study, which highlights the fragility of social protection systems that, in most of the Arab world, cater to the economic system in which they operate rather than the needs of the people. Even though laws that protect the right to social protection exist, they are not put into action and the pandemic exposed this.

The conditions of refugees in Egypt and Tunisia could be better than those in Lebanon, but the condition of women is quite the same in the four countries since their responsibilities were doubled during the lockdown and they became more exposed to domestic violence. The same applies to workers in both the formal and informal sectors as many of them lost their jobs and were not supported by a protection system that can help them through the crisis. While vulnerable groups generally suffer as a result of marginalization, they also bear the brunt of crises more than other groups on the economic, social, and psychological levels.

Second: Strategies to protect the rights of vulnerable groups

Countries subject of the study adopted a number of strategies to deal with Coronavirus including ones that aimed at supporting vulnerable groups. While the support given to those groups was not substantial, it is still an important step. Those strategies are to be discussed in this section.

1. Informal workers

In Tunisia, the prime minister issued decree number 2 for the year 2020 that banned the expulsion of workers under any circumstances until the end of the lockdown, which is to be determined through another official decree[69]. The General Tunisian Labor Union signed an agreement with the Employers' Union, based on which workers got their March and April wages without deductions. Workers at restaurants, cafés, and nurseries and craftsmen were given financial assistance starting April 2020. This assistance did not exceed 80 dollars[70].

In Morocco, the government launched a financial support program for those who lost their jobs because of the pandemic and particularly targeted informal workers, despite the difficulty in identifying the beneficiaries[71]. At the first stage, the beneficiaries were families covered by the Medical Assistance System (Régime d'Assistance Médicale- RAMED) and whose members worked in the informal sector and lost their incomes after the pandemic. A family of two received 800 dirhams (80 dollars), a family of three to four 1000 dirhams (100 dollars), and a family of more than four 1200 dirhams (120 dollars). The beneficiaries in the second stage were families not covered by RAMED and whose members work in the informal sector and lost their incomes after the pandemic[72].

In Egypt, the minister of labor announced on April 7, 2020 that a financial assistance of LE 500 (80 dollars) would be given to informal workers, around 1.5 million, who were harmed by the pandemic. Workers were to get the money through post offices after receiving a message from the ministry to avoid overcrowding[73]. Although around 25% of the Egyptian workforce work in agriculture and fishing, no official statements were made about compensating them, especially that many of them had to stop working[74].

---

69 Decree no. 2 for the year 2020 on the exceptional suspension of work, *Tunisia News*, April 14, 2020 (accessed April 16, 2020): https://bit.ly/3bREHKA

70 Agreement between the General Tunisian Labor Union and the Employers' Union on workers' salaries in the public sector, Shemsfm.Net: https://bit.ly/3ePoYMP

71 "Morocco launches financial assistance for workers who lost their jobs after Coronavirus despite challenges in identifying them [Arabic]." France 24, April 12, 2020: https://bit.ly/2CLgZDs

72 Adel Najdi. Op. cit.

73 "Ministry of Labor announces payment of LE 500 for informal workers [Arabic]." *Al Shorouk*, April 7, 2020: https://cutt.ly/FtJQjWu

74 Sakr El Nour. "Small farmers and the Coronavirus battle [Arabic]." *Al Manasa*, March 30, 2020: https://cutt.ly/ztJQ7G9

In Lebanon, thousands of informal and day workers lost their jobs and many businesses were closed. Domestic and migrant workers were equally affected[75]. The Lebanese government offered financial assistance to families in need, yet the main challenge was that the number of those families increased remarkably after the outbreak and it exceeded by the far the numbers registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs[76]. Migrant domestic workers were particularly suffering since most of them were kicked out of their jobs and were unable to go back to their countries because of the lockdown.

2. Women

Women face different forms of discrimination and the pandemic aggravated their situation on many levels. One of the main examples is the remarkable rise in cases of domestic violence across the world during the lockdown. In Tunisia, the minster of women's affairs said in the second half of March the line dedicated to victims of domestic violence received 133 complaints, that is five times the number at the same time of the previous year. The ministry provided temporary quarantine for these women then transferred to ministry shelters[77]. In Morocco, the government provided women in different parts of the country with safety kits in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund and also distributed kits among relevant organizations to make sure they reach the targeted groups[78]. Hotlines and counseling centers were also dedicated to victims of domestic violence[79].

In Egypt, 12 million women are the bread winners and women, mostly widows and divorcees, are the source of income in one third of Egyptian families based on statistics released on 2017 by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics. Added to that is the number of women that while not being the sole bread winners, play a major role in increasing the income of the family and keeping the family financially stable. After schools closed, women were faced with a major challenge as they had to work while their children stayed at home[80]. The prime minister decided to give women who work at the public sector and have children of less than 12 years old paid leave as long as the lockdown continues and that also applied to mothers of children with special needs[81]. The Ministry of Social Solidarity decided to add 100 thousand families to the Takaful and Karama (solidarity and dignity) program in March 2020, particularly female household heads[82]. On April 7, 2020, the president stressed the necessity of giving women and senior citizens paid leave until the crisis is over[83].

In Lebanon, the Lebanese government did not take any measures particular to women with the exception of those related to domestic violence. The public prosecutor at the Court of Cessation issued a decree to the ministries of justice and interior and prosecution offices to immediately process domestic violence reports and to communicate with victims via video calls or any other means of communication if she is unable to go to the police station because of the lockdown[84]. The number of domestic violence reports increased by 100% (88 cases) compared to 2019 (44 cases)[85].

75 Maher El Kheshen. Op. cit.

76 Mohamed El Agati el al. Op. cit.

77 Ibid.

78 "Moroccan social solidarity minister announces plan to face Coronavirus [Arabic]." *Sputnik Arabic*, April 9, 2020: https://bit.ly/2CnVl84

79 Ibid.

80 Hania Sobhi. "Distance learning: Can we live without schools? [Arabic]." *Al Shorouk*, March 23, 2020: https://cutt.ly/rtJQvRb.

81 "The Egyptian government: Paid leave for the disabled [Arabic]": *Al Youm Al Sabea*, March 17, 2020: https://cutt.ly/ltJQOK8

82 "National Council for Women releases first report on policies and programs that support women during the pandemic [Arabic]." The National Council for Woman, April 7, 2020: https://cutt.ly/ktJQZ18.

83 "Egyptian government may give women and the elderly paid leave [Arabic]." *Al Youm Al Sabea*, April 7, 2020: https://bit.ly/2XCNEDx .

84 Mohamed El Agati et al. Op. cit.

85 Sara Matar. "Abused women taken hostage at home [Arabic]." *Al Arabi Al Jadeed*, April 15, 2020: https://bit.ly/3ek318m

3. Prisoners

Owing to their confinement in tight spaces, prisoners are more exposed to danger and that is why the governments of countries subject of the study took a set of measures in this regard. In Tunisia, the General Directorate of Prisons and Rehabilitation sanitized cells and temporarily suspended regular visits while allowing each prisoner one monitored visit every week. However, more decisions need to be taken about pretrial detention and the passing of verdicts[86]. Tunisian president Kais Saeid issued presidential pardons on two stages, which resulted in the release of around 2,500 prisoners. However, around 600 people were arrested for violating lockdown, which makes the situation complicated once again[87].

In Morocco, King Mohamed VI issued a pardon for 5,654 prisoners as part of a preemptive plan to curb the spread of Coronavirus in prisons[88]. The Moroccan General Delegation of Penitentiaries and Rehabilitation took a series of protective measures, including isolating new prisoners from foreign countries for 14 days and not allowing any visits for them before that in addition to restricting visits to once every 15 days while limiting the number of visitors to one per prisoner. Prisoners who did their time were to be examined before being released and certain groups of prisoners such as those with health problems, the elderly, women, and minors were given extra care. Prisoners coming back from court were examined before going back to their cells. Cultural, sports, and religious activities were temporarily put on hold and the movement of prisoners between different parts of the facility was restricted. Doctors examined inmates on regular basis whether in cells, visiting halls, and the kitchen[89].

In Egypt, the Ministry of Interior announced sanitizing all prisons and having inmates take tests to detect any cases. Visits were suspended and sanitizing gates were erected at the entrances and the staff have their temperature taken upon entering and existing in addition to distributing face masks and sanitizers among staff and inmates[90]. The government, however, did not respond to demands by civil society to release prisoners in order to curb the spread of the virus[91]. In Lebanon, visits were reduced, cells were sanitized, and social distancing was imposed. Prisoners received assistance in the form of sanitizers and cleaning supplies. Several prisoners demanded general amnesty, reducing jail time, and processing pending cases especially in light of the large numbers of unlawful detentions[92].

4. Refugees and immigrants

The condition in which refugees live differ among countries subject of the study. In Tunisia, several municipalities provided refugees and their families with financial and in-kind assistance in coordination with the International Organization for Migration. Food vouchers for 50 dollars were distributed among those families in addition to 80 dollars for each African family with children living in Tunisia. This initiative included 650 people based on data collected by the municipalities on the number of immigrants. Despite this initiative

[86] Mohamed El Afifi El Jaidi. "Exceptional procedures in Tunisian courts and debate over penitentiary facilities [Arabic]." *Legal Agenda Website*, March 13, 2020: https://bit.ly/2Cra4zn

[87] Mohamed El Agati et al. Op. cit.

[88] "Royal pardon for thousands of prisoners to curb the spread of Coronavirus [Arabic]." *Al Arab Website*, April 5, 2020: https://bit.ly/3iPtmyP

[89] Adel Najdi. "Moroccan association warns prison measures not enough [Arabic]." *Al Arabi Al Jadeed*, March 28, 2020: https://bit.ly/3ek3WWC

[90] See "To curb the spread of the virus: Interior ministry bans visits, establishes clinics and runs regular tests [Arabic]." *Al Shorouk*, March 20, 2020: https://bit.ly/3gWVYVY
"PCR tests for prisoners, sanitization of cells and kitchens [Arabic]." *Al Youm Al Sabea*, June 1, 2020: https://bit.ly/2Y8q2W7

[91] "Egypt: Release prisoners of conscience and other prisoners at risk amid coronavirus outbreak." Amnesty International, March 20, 2020: https://cutt.ly/ptJQ2EA

[92] Mohamed El Agati et al. Op. cit.

and other initiatives by civil society organizations, thousands of immigrants in Tunisia are threatened with hunger and homelessness. The Tunisian government also extended visas starting early March 2020[93].

Based on a memorandum of understanding signed in 1954 by the Egyptian government and the UNHCR, the latter is responsible for registering and determining the status of refugees in Egypt. Based on an agreement signed in 1951, the UNHCR is also responsible, in cooperation with the Egyptian government, for the protection of refugees' rights[94]. The WHO representative in Egypt confirmed that the Egyptian government will offer all the necessary healthcare services for refugees in collaboration with the UNHCR as was the case with the treatment of Hepatitis C[95].

Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon did not benefit from financial assistance provided by the government under the pretext that they already receive assistance from the UNHCR[96]. Syrian refugees suffered from discriminatory practices since the start of the pandemic. For example, eight municipalities imposed a curfew on Syrian refugees even before the government imposed a nation-wide lockdown[97]. In addition, the Directorate of General Security issued a decree that does not allow Palestinians who were outside Lebanon when the lockdown started to be repatriated with Lebanese citizens[98]. This decree was modified later to allow Palestinians to be repatriated only in case of availability on board the planes[99].

The four countries adopted a set of measures that target vulnerable groups through different forms of assistance as was the case with Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco. Some of the strategies might have mitigated the impact of the virus on some groups, especially informal workers, yet the scope of such strategies is still a problem since not all those affected managed to benefit from assistance for a verity of reasons. For example, benefiting from assistance was contingent upon internet access and in Morocco it relied on the government's ability to identify beneficiaries. In the case of women, there are similarities between the strategies adopted by Tunisia, Morocco, and Lebanon as far as domestic violence is concerned. While in the four countries, prisons were sanitized and visits were restricted to protect inmates, Tunisia and Morocco took steps towards releasing prisoners to deal with the issue of overcrowding. Egypt, on the other hand, took a set of measures to ensure that refugees have access to healthcare services during the pandemic. The four countries, however, failed on a number of fronts. Those include discrimination against refugees in Lebanon and ignoring calls to release prisoners in Egypt. Based on a report by Human Rights Watch[100], sanitizing prisons in Egypt and restricting visits did not curb the spread of Coronavirus among inmates.

The political and economic context in each country played a major role in the success/failure of strategies adopted to face the ramifications of Coronavirus. For example, the larger the informal sector is, the harder it is to observe restrictions imposed by the government. The decision taken by the Tunisian parliament to grant the president executive powers hence expedite any necessary procedures and the discrimination against Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are both examples of the way the political context affects the decision-making process. The same applies to Egypt as far as the release of prisoners is concerned.

93 Statement by the Tunisian Ministry of Interior, April 7, 2020.

94 Hadeer El Mahdawi. Op. cit.

95 "WHO: Egypt to provide refugees who test positive with medical care [Arabic]." *Al Mal Newspaper*, March 30, 2020: https://bit.ly/2X0DF9h

96 Mohamed El Agati et al. Op. cit.

97 "Lebanon: Coronavirus measures are hurting refugees [Arabic]" *Human Rights Watch*, April 2, 2020: https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2020/04/02/340258

98 See the text of the decree on https://bit.ly/2TtRyf4

99 "Palestinians' return contingent upon seat availability [Arabic]." *Al Akhbar*, May, 2020: https://bit.ly/3gfc3Wr

100 "Egypt: Coronavirus possibly spreading in prisons [Arabic]." *Human Rights Watch*, July 20, 2020: https://bit.ly/39ucadJ

Third: The role of civil society in protecting vulnerable groups:

In light of the limited measures taken by governments in the four countries, civil society organizations launched several initiatives to support the state in facing the pandemic on one hand and to monitor state performance on the other hand. Those initiatives focused on supporting vulnerable groups.

Several civil society organizations in Tunisia coordinated with municipalities to provide vulnerable groups with assistance while others launched a campaign with the Red Crescent to sanitize streets, stores, and institutions. Organizations working on health launched campaigns in working-class neighborhoods while others focused on transparency through applications that allow citizens to monitor donations they made to the fund created especially to pandemic-related assistance and make sure they reached the beneficiaries in addition to tracing medical supplies purchased by the Ministry of Health in coordination with the Ministry of Human Rights. Among the most successful of those applications was the one called "Where did your money go?" Other organizations launched applications that allow communicating with and monitoring the progress of quarantined patients in coordination with the Ministry of Communication Technology[101].

In Morocco, civil society organizations launched campaigns in coordination with local authorities that include distributing foodstuffs and helping provide students from needy families with devices that allow them to engage in distance learning. Members of the executive office of the Communal Development Network launched campaigns to raise awareness about how the virus spreads and protective measures to be followed through social media and posters in addition to online interviews and seminars[102].

In Egypt, civil society initiatives focused on relief and awareness. For example, Ahl Masr Foundation for Development provided university hospitals with equipment and supplies needed to deal with the pandemic[103] in addition to an initiative for manufacturing 5,000 ventilators. The January 25 Hospital was built from donations via social media and placed under the administration of the Ministry of Health to use it for quarantine or as it sees fit[104]. Several initiatives used videos and infographics posted on social media to raise awareness about the virus and protection measures[105]. Youths from several governorates made posters about protection from the virus and hung them in different places across their cities, which was the case in Sharqiya and Aswan[106]. Charity organizations contributed to mitigating the impact of the pandemic. For example, the Egyptian Food Bank launched a campaign to support workers and distributed 500 thousand food boxes[107], Abwab El Kheir Association launched a similar initiative and another to support medical staff[108], and the associations of Masr El Kheir and Resala launched campaigns to support families in need. The Tahya Masr Fund also launched a campaign to collect donations from institutions and individuals to purchase medical equipment and support vulnerable groups[109]. Several initiatives aimed at supporting

[101] Mohamed El Agati et al. Op. cit.

[102] "Casablanca: Civil society mitigates impact of Coronavirus on many fronts [Arabic]." *Map Express*, 2020: https://bit.ly/2E4qSMV.

[103] "Ahl Masr Foundation for Development signs protocol with Supreme Council of University Hospitals to deal with Coronavirus [Arabic]." *DotMasr*, April 1, 2020: https://bit.ly/2K5Yvh4

[104] Ahmed Abdin. "Egypt facing Coronavirus: Weak official response and popular solidarity [Arabic]." *Daraj*, April 14, 2020: https://daraj.com/44005/

[105] See the official page of Shamseya: https://www.facebook.com/shamseyaeg/?epa=SEARCH_BOX

[106] "Provincial youths and store owners face Coronavirus [Arabic]." *Al Youm Al Sabea*, March 25, 2020: https://bit.ly/3cnUyjU.

[107] Egyptian Food Bank initiative: https://www.egyptianfoodbank.com/ar/Support/Day/Labour.

[108] Abwab El Kheir initiative: https://www.facebook.com/abwaaab/

[109] Tahya Masr official website: https://bit.ly/2VvXOTJ

refugees such as those by Rowad EL Rahman Association and Fard Foundation, the latter also supporting Egyptians. One of the initiatives started creating emergency committees within refugee communities. For example, there are ten committees for refugees from South Sudan, each responsible for refugees from a particular region[110].

In Lebanon, several civil society organizations provided training sessions in primary care centers and designed emergency plans for refugee camps in coordination with the Ministry of Health[111]. Several initiatives were taken by political parties, which assume the role of the government in Lebanon. These initiatives focused on training medical staff, establishing medical centers, and providing food assistance. Added to this were similar initiatives by volunteers and civil society organizations. The National Mental Health Program at the Ministry of Health launched an initiative in coordination with the WHO, civil society, and the Lebanese University to offer psychological support to those impacted by the pandemic[112].

It becomes obvious that the main role played by civil society organizations focused on filling the gaps in public services whether in terms of medical care, relief, or awareness in light of the fragility of the infrastructure in the countries subject of the study. The initiatives launched by these organizations were quite successful owing to their ability to identify and reach vulnerable groups as well as a long history of offering different services for the marginalized in the Arab region[113]. However, civil society organizations did not take part in the decision-making process and did not contribute to emergency plans to face the pandemic, since these areas were almost monopolized by executive powers[114]. This is attributed to restrictions, procedural and organizational, imposed on civil society organizations and the political context that obstructs many of their projects. In Egypt, for example, the roles civil society can play are limited owing to numerous restrictions on the public scene in general while in Tunisia civil society played a more effective role that was not confined to assistance and awareness but also extended to monitoring the performance of the state. In Lebanon, political parties played a bigger role in offering support and in Morocco, the work of civil society organizations mainly complemented that of the government since all of them operate under the auspices of the state.

Conclusion

Vulnerable groups across the Arab world have for long been suffering from social, economic, and political marginalization, which is mainly demonstrated in lack of access to basic and public services. The Coronavirus outbreak accentuated their suffering as their living conditions continued to deteriorate. This was seen in the conditions of informal workers in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Lebanon, refugees and immigrants in Lebanon, and women in the four countries. While governments of the four countries adopted strategies to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on those groups, they are still faced with several threats not only in terms of health but also economic security and employment. Prisoners in Egypt are more at risk than in the other three countries and the same applies to refugees in Lebanon since the two groups live in overcrowded areas where basic protection is not provided. Refugees in Lebanon do not also have access to basic utilities such as water and sewage, which makes them more exposed to the virus. Women were among the most vulnerable since

[110] Hadeer El Mahdawi. Op. cit.

[111] "Civil society on the front lines in the battle against Coronavirus [Arabic]." *UPR Lebanon*, March 23, 2020: https://bit.ly/2ODQH8L

[112] "Lebanese University alumni, professors, and students take part in campaign to counter mental effects of Coronavirus [Arabic]." Lebanese University Website, March 29, 2020: https://bit.ly/3hjMWSf

[113] "Civil society in the Arab region: Development, legal framework, and roles [Arabic]." USAID and International Center for Research and Studies, 2013: https://goo.gl/Dm1DZP

[114] Mohamed El Agati el al. Op. cit.

the start of the pandemic, which is demonstrated in the remarkable rise in cases of domestic violence. The Tunisian, Moroccan, and Lebanese governments dedicated hotlines to victims of domestic abuse, which constitute a positive step towards supporting vulnerable groups.

While those measures are on the right track, they do not cover all marginalized groups and do not guarantee the long-term achievement of sustainable development goals. That is why in order for governments to prove how serious they are about protecting vulnerable groups, these measures need to be inclusive not only of people, but also of all post-pandemic scenarios, including psychological ramifications. It is also important to take the overlapping of vulnerability into consideration, since many individuals can belong to more than one vulnerable groups. This is the case with female refugees and informal workers. That is why it is important to adopt strategies that include dealing with cases of multiple vulnerabilities.

In light of the political and economic crises the region has been going through for the past ten years, it is important to note that "recovery" will not take place without allowing all segments of society to be part of the political scene and establishing a participatory system in which integration of all groups becomes a priority. This cannot be done without cooperating with civil society organizations, which should take part in both planning and implementing those strategies.

3. Impact of Coronavirus on the Education System in Morocco

Rajaa Kassab

Introduction

Like other parts of the world, Morocco has been grappling with the ramifications of Coronavirus. The government in Morocco applied a series of measures to curb the spread of the virus, including imposing lockdown, declaring a state of emergency, and suspending classes at schools and universities and starting a distance learning plan. Concerning the latter, the government launched a number of digital platforms to facilitate the process of distance learning. This process was faced by several problems that the government acknowledged.

Those problems included students' inability to follow all classes, especially that the entire process depended on posting material and classes on digital platforms, through virtual classes, or on national TV channels. Social and regional disparities and gender inequality made it hard for several citizens to have access to the internet or to own a TV set, which means that several students would be excluded from the process, hence accentuating the already-existing problem of education in Morocco. In addition, high illiteracy rates in Morocco made it difficult for many parents to follow up on their children's education, which negatively affects the educational process. Acknowledging these problems, the government retracted a previous decision to hold support classes for students after ending the lockdown, moving back to physical classes to evaluate the students, and holding physical exams for students of the first and second year of the baccalauréat. The government gave university councils the freedom to choose the means of evaluating higher education students.

This paper examines the impact of Coronavirus on the education sector in Morocco. The paper will first analyze the relationship between the educational process and social disparities then discuss the measures taken by the Ministry of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research to guarantee the continuation of the educational process during the pandemic. The paper will then move to the process of distance learning and its role in deepening social disparities. This part will rely on both studies conducted at that time as well as on the views of students, parents, and teachers. The fourth part of the paper will look at the impact of the pandemic on the educational process. The paper will end with concluding remarks.

First: The educational process and social disparities

For decades, the educational system in Morocco has been going through a structural crisis as a result of the policies adopted by the government. This crisis was clearly manifested when international financial institutions imposed a structural evaluation program at the early 1980s. As a result, the state's role in social sectors, including education and healthcare, receded remarkably. The percentage of the budget allocated to these sectors dropped while the private sector was awarded several privileges that lifted all forms of monitoring on its activities including prices, working frameworks, and provided services. The July 2011 constitution, which was drafted in response to the demands put forward by the February 20 Movement that called for social justice, gave the people several social and economic rights, on top of which was education, yet without committing the state to warranting those rights. Article 31 only stated that the state is to facilitate equal access to those rights[115]

[115] Royal decree no. 1.11.91 to implement this article from the constitution, *The Official Gazette*, issue. 5964 (repeated), July 30, 2011

Since its independence, Morocco has been engaged in continuous attempts at reforming the educational process, but this was done only through a technical approach while the role of the state started receding in favor of the private sector that treats education as a commodity. This, in turn, put Moroccan families under the mercy of the market, hence made education exclusive to upper classes and accentuated inequality.

Issuing the framework law of education constituted a real opportunity to reform the educational system and deal with education as a right the state needs to guarantee for all citizens. However, the state once more did not act as expected and instead issued a law that reinforced previous mistakes through giving the private sector more privileges and giving precedence to investors. Article 44 of the framework law states that the state will cooperate with the private sector and offer incentives to investors, which means further privatization of education, including educational institutions[116].

The most obvious manifestation of the crisis of education in Morocco is lack of equal access to education as well as unsatisfactory results on the part of students. Despite improvement as far as access is concerned, dropouts are still on the rise. According to official statistics, around 26% of students in the last year of elementary school in rural areas drop out every year because schools are far from their houses and because of poverty[117]. The government adopted several programs to counter this phenomenon such as the Tayssir (facilitation) program, the One Million School Bag initiative, and a program that supports widows who have children in school. Despite the slight decrease in the number of dropouts, those programs were unable to eliminate the phenomenon altogether. The dropout percentage is 1.5% in elementary schools, 12% in middle schools, and 10% in high schools[118]. Moreover, Morocco is quite behind in education rankings according to the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)[119].

Moroccan schools work on reinforcing inequality instead of promoting social solidarity. This is mainly done through the existence of different educational paths that are based on social class, which does not allow equal access to the same quality of education. Those paths are as follows[120]:

- Public education for the poor and lower-middle classes in rural and semi-urban areas, where conditions differ based on the location of each school
- Private education which relies on supply and demand and in which quality becomes linked to tuition fees
- Education provided in institutions affiliated to foreign missions, which few can afford

Education in Morocco differs based on location, particularly whether the educational institution is in urban or rural area, which reinforces a culture of inequality. Despite the fact that the number of girls enrolled in schools did increase, there is still a wide gap between males and females as far as access to education is involved. This is not only measured by the initial enrollment of children aged 6-11 but is also related to dropouts at different stages of school education[121].

[116] Royal decree no. 1.19.113 to implement framework law no. 51.17 on education, The Official Gazette, issue no. 6805, 2019

[117] ESCWA, "Arab sustainable development report," 2020.

[118] Presentation by the Minister of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research to the Committee of Education and Cultural and Social Affairs at the Moroccan parliament on the working program and the 2019 budget, November 2018

[119] Supreme Council for Education, Training, and Scientific Research. "Results of Moroccan students in maths and science in the international context. "International study of directions mathematics and science (TIMSS 2015), thematic report [Arabic], 2017.

[120] An intervention by the Democratic Confederation of Labor at the House of Councilors as part of discussions on the sub-budgets of the new 2019 finance law, December 2018.

[121] Supreme Council for Education, Training, and Scientific Research. "The school of social justice: Towards a developmental paradigm [Arabic]," 2018

The government pushes people to enroll their children in private schools through reducing the amount allotted to education in the public budget, (4.3% of the GDP in the 2019 fiscal year). Legal and tax incentives given to the private sector also affected the quality of public education. This was shown in the rise in the percentage of enrollment in private schools from 4% in 1999 to 17.3% in 2018-2019 in the elementary stage and 10% in high school. It is noteworthy that the government targeted to raise the percentage of enrollment in private schools to 20% as part of what it sees as reforming the education sector[122]. Encouraging enrollment in private schools reinforces the idea that education relies on financial resources that have come to determine the quality of education each segment of society can get[123] . The quality of public education was also affected by initiating a new recruitment system in which teachers are recruited on contract basis, yet many of the teachers hired do not meet the required training criteria.

On the other hand, strict conditions are imposed on enrolling in several higher education institution, usually referred to as "regulated access" institutions, making these institutions exclusive to upper-middle and upper classes. Only institutions that do not impose such conditions, called "open access" institutions, receive poorer students, especially those who could not get the extra classes offered by the private sector to obtain higher grades in the baccalauréat, hence be able to apply to regulated access institutions. The private sector, backed by the state, has been remarkably expanding in higher education, which means that more institutions are becoming inaccessible to people with limited financial resources. The percentage of students enrolled in private universities was 5.3% in the academic year 2019-2020, compared to 9% in the previous year[124]. Due to remarkable disparities between different educational paths, job opportunities available to graduates are not equal and the same applies to their social status after they graduate[125].

The state encourages students who belong to poor segments of society to go for vocational training under the pretext that this would give them better chances at the labor market. It is noteworthy that the Moroccan economy is unable to provide job opportunities for more than one quarter of vocational training graduates every year (52 thousand jobs compared to 186 thousand graduates)[126]. This refutes claims by decision-makers that the employment crisis is associated with education's inability to cater to market needs. Speaking of how the education system caters to the market transforms education into a tool that aims at satisfying capitalist needs rather than a space the promotes knowledge and critical thinking.

Despite different claims by the government, elementary education suffers from marginalization with Quranic schools occupying 61.6%, private education 23%, and public education 16.4%. It is noteworthy that enrollment in elementary education did not exceed 57.5% in the academic year 2019-2020[127]. The government also encourages associations to employ male and female educators, but there were no programs to train them. This, in addition, to elementary education being divided between different types

[122] "National education in numbers: 2019-2019 [Arabic]." of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research, Morocco.

[123] "The school of social justice: Towards a developmental paradigm." Op. cit.

[124] Presentation by the Minister of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research to the Committee of Education and Cultural and Social Affairs at the Moroccan parliament on the 2020 sub-budget draft, November 2019

[125] "The school of social justice: Towards a developmental paradigm." Op. cit.

[126] Presentation by the Minister of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research to the Committee of Education and Cultural and Social Affairs at the Moroccan parliament on the working program and the 2019 budget, November 2018

[127] The Efficacy Project. Ministry of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research, Department of National Education, draft of finance law 2020

of schools, demonstrates lack of insight as far education is concerned[128].

Like most Arab countries, education reform programs mainly focus on material and quantitative aspects at the expense of the content of curricula and pedagogic aspects. The educational system also focuses on spoon-feeding students rather than teaching them critical and analytical skills. Also, there aren't enough resources to train teachers and adopt new methodologies that link education to social, economic, political, and environmental challenges students face after they graduate[129].

Second: Education in the aftermath of the pandemic

The first case of Covid-19 in Morocco was recorded on March 2, 2020. This was followed by many cases in which the virus was mostly transmitted by foreigners who came from hot spots. In order to curb the spread of the virus, the Moroccan government adopted a number of protective measures that included closing ground, maritime, and air borders, banning gatherings, and declaring a state of emergency in addition to imposing a general lockdown that lasted from March 20 till June 10 when restrictions were gradually eased based on the conditions of each region.

In order to protect students, teachers, and staff as well as the rest of the citizens, the Ministry of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research suspended classes on March 16, 2020 in all educational institutions then initiated the process of distance learning through which the academic year can be resumed[130]. In order to make this possible, the ministry applied a set of measures that differed according to the educational stage, the affiliation of the educational institution to the public or private sector, and at times professions/teachers.

1. Elementary and high schools

Starting March 16, 2020, several digital platforms and TV programs were introduced to facilitate the process of distance learning[131]:

- Uploading material on TelmidTICE, a platform that covers all stages (elementary, middle, high, and vocational schools). According to the ministry, 600 thousand students used this platform on daily basis, that is less than 10% of students in public schools and 8% in both public and private schools
- Broadcasting classes via national TV channels to provide access to students who do not own computers, tablets, or smart phones or do not have access to internet services. The ministry relied in this plan on data provided by the Higher Planning Commission and which indicated that in 2015 91% of families owned a TV set. In the initial stage, classes were broadcast on one channel then two other channels were added at a later stage. Some classes catered to the needs of children with hearing impairments through using sign language.
- Launching a contributory service called Teams as part of the Masar system to enable teachers to directly communicate with students and organize classes. This service covered around 96% the curricula of public education and 71% of private education, yet less than 4% of students took part in it.
- Broadcasting video classes for the pre-school stage on a TV channel in collaboration with the National Initiative for Human Development and the Moroccan Foundation for the Promotion of Pre-School Education

[128] An intervention by the Democratic Confederation of Labor at the House of Councilors as part of discussions on the sub-budgets of the new 2020 finance law.

[129] ESCWA. Op. cit.

[130] Statement of the Minister of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research, March 13, 2020.

[131] An intervention by the National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research at the House of Councilors, May 12, 2020.

In the meantime, many teachers launched individual initiatives to directly communicate with their students whether through social networking websites or other channels. This alternative worked for students who did not have fast internet, which was a requirement for other platforms. The ministry also realized that it is difficult for children in rural areas and marginalized urban neighborhoods to follow classes through platforms or TV, which led to the distribution of self-learning booklets in Arabic, mathematics, and French a month and a half after the start of the process of distance learning. This initiative included one million students in the elementary stage in remote rural areas or regions where the number of schools is limited[132].

2. Higher education and scientific research

Higher education institutions in Morocco were able to make 80%-100% of teaching material available digitally through uploading them on the electronic portals of those institutions as well as through a number of platforms that allowed direct contact between teachers and students such as Teams, Zoom, Google Meet… etc.[133].

- For open access institutions, in which 90% of students in Morocco enroll, video classes were broadcast for an average of eight hours a day on a TV channel. These classes included several disciplines (science and technology, legal, economic, and social sciences, literature and the humanities). Universities used regional radio stations to broadcast classes in the humanities.
- For regulated access institutions, students benefited 100% from digital content uploaded on platforms.
- For higher school preparatory classes, the ministry launched a digital platform in collaboration with Mohammed VI Polytechnic University.

In addition, the ministry broadcast a program called Street on World on one of the TV channels to teach English in collaboration with the British Council. It also gave free access to digital libraries such as EBSCO, DALLOZ, CAIRN, and the Arabic version of The Electric Company (al-Manahel) for students and teachers. Even though the ministry provided access to its different platforms in collaboration with Ministry of Communication, accessing videos via You Tube or WhatsApp was still costly for a large portion of families in the country.

Third: Does distance learning accentuate inequality?

Procedures taken by the ministry focused on previously available digital content whether through platforms or video classes. In 2005 and as part of a national strategy to expand the use of information technology, the Moroccan government launched a program called GENIE through which the communications infrastructure was enhanced, a pedagogical and administrative framework based on digital technologies was developed, and digital content in different disciplines was uploaded. The government also launched a platform called TaalimTICE, which made the transition to distance learning in the aftermath of the pandemic possible[134].

The question is whether distance learning managed to deliver the same results of physical classes and whether it addressed the issue of inequality in the Moroccan educational system or reinforced it even further. These are some questions that will be tackled in this part of the paper.

As of March 16, all Moroccan students (around 10 million) suddenly found themselves in a situation where they have to engage in the process of distance learning. This abrupt transition was unsettling for both students and their families.

[132] An intervention by the minister of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research at the House of Councilors, May 12, 2020.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Wiame Idrissi Alami and Safae Akodad. L'exploitation des TIC dans l'enseignement à distance: Défis et opportunités. Tribune libre n°3. Juin 2020. RSSI.

While some managed to adapt to the new conditions, distance learning posed a real challenge for others. The social and educational status of families played a major role in the coping process. In the case of families where parents are illiterate or not familiar with technology, students were left without any form of support at home. They were neither able to directly interact with their teachers and classmates nor seek help from parents. Some of them were not capable of accessing the digital content to start with. According to the Higher Planning Commission, the percentage of students from families headed by a person who did not get any education reached 67%[135]. A representative of the Ministry of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research confirmed this number in a digital seminar[136].

On the other hand, transforming houses into classrooms deepened disparities in learning since there is a wide gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not[137]. Distance learning meant that students needed to have means to access digital content, which requires owning computers, laptops, or smart phones. This also requires fast internet which is generally not the case in Morocco and with distance learning it became even slower, which made it difficult to follow virtual classes without interruption. In addition, there are areas that do not have mobile phone coverage or internet services to start with and these were estimated at 29% in 2019 based on the National Telecommunications Regulatory Agency[138] . The percentage of families that do not own computers is estimated at 64% in urban areas and 94% in rural areas[139] . Several families tried to buy devices required for distance learning despite their limited financial resources, yet the lockdown and subsequent closure of stores did not make this possible. Only 9.7% of families managed to own smart phones during this time (11.2% in urban areas and 6.2% in rural areas) and 2.8% managed to own computers or tablets[140].

The study conducted by the Higher Planning Committee revealed that lack of required devices was the main reason why students could not follow classes. According to the study, this applies to 51% of families that have members in the elementary stage and 48% of in middle school, 60% of whom are in rural areas and 53% are poor families[141].

Several families, students, and teachers said the process of distance learning mainly relied on social networks such as WhatsApp. This was confirmed by the Higher Planning Commission, which reveled that 40-46% used social networks and that this percentage increases in the elementary stage in private schools to reach 65% then drops in the high school stage in private schools to 48%[142]. TV channels came second with a percentage estimated at 39% in the elementary stage and 29% in middle school and this percentage increases in rural areas to reach 63% in the elementary stage and 44% in high school[143].

[135] Moroccan Higher Planning Commission. "Research on the impact of Coronavirus on the economic, social, and psychological condition of families [Arabic]."

[136] Intervention by the head of the Department of Curricula at the Ministry of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research in an digital seminar organized by the National Council of Human Rights under the title "Distance learning and the right to education [Arabic]." June 26, 2020.

[137] Wiame Idrissi Alami and Safae Akodad. Op. cit.

[138] Wiame Idrissi Alami and Safae Akodad. Op. cit.

[139] Higher Planning Commission, 2014 census: www.hcp.ma

[140] Higher Planning Commission. "Social relationship in the Corona pandemic [Arabic]." This is the second stage of the "Research on the impact of Coronavirus on the economic, social, and psychological condition of families." July 2020.

[141] Higher Planning Commission. "Research on the impact of Coronavirus on the economic, social, and psychological condition of families [Arabic]."

[142] Higher Planning Commission. "Research on the impact of Coronavirus on the economic, social, and psychological condition of families [Arabic]."

Platforms created by the ministry were used on a narrow scale, but the percentage increases with the level of education so that it is only 9% in elementary school, 20% in middle school, and 20% in high school. This percentage does not exceed 4%, 12%, and 27% in rural areas, respectively. This percentage increases in platforms created by private educational institutions for its reached 27% in elementary school, 34% in middle school, and 52% in high school[144]. This is mainly attributed to social status and the educational level of students' families, which are in the last case usually well-to-do, from the middle class, and live in urban areas.

According to the study conducted by the Higher Planning Commission and which covered 2,350 Moroccan families from different social and economic levels in urban and rural areas[145], students in one out of five families did not engage in distance learning. Also, the percentage of families whose children were able to follow virtual classes differed from one educational level to another for it was estimated at 48% in elementary school, 51% in middle school, 69% in high school, and 56% in higher education institutions. The study concluded that the percentage of families whose children did not engage in distance learning at all reached an average of 18% (29% in rural areas and 13% in urban areas). This percentage is distributed among educational stages for it reaches 21% in elementary school (33% in rural areas and 14% in urban areas), 24% of which belong to poor families, 17% in middle school (27% in rural areas and 12% in urban areas), and 10% in high school (21% in rural areas and 7% in urban areas)[146].

The percentage of students who regularly attended virtual classes was bigger among private school students for it reached 81% in elementary school, 84% in middle school, compared to 42% and 48% among public school students, respectively[147]. This is mainly attributed to the fact that students in private schools belong to well-to-do families that do not suffer from illiteracy as is the case with public schools in which students of poor families and from rural areas enroll.

The second stage of the study conducted by the Higher Planning Commission revealed that in the pre-school stage, 83.5% of children did not engage in distance learning (79.1% in urban areas and 94.6% in rural areas). This is mainly because several families were not aware that classes were offered on TV channels (43.7%), it was hard to make children at that age follow classes (22.1%), the ineffectiveness of classes (10.7%), or lack of electronic devices (5.5%)[148].

In higher education, most students own computers, tablets, and/or smart phones, especially in regulated access institutions. Percentage of participation in distance learning differed according to social status for the same reasons mentioned previously in the paper. According to a study conducted by the Mohamed V University in Rabat and which covered 8,355 students in both open access and regulated access institutions and 571 professors, 70% of students regularly followed digital content posted by professors, 26% rarely followed, and 4% never followed. the same study revealed that around 71% of students and 84% of professors were satisfied by the process of distance learning in different degrees while 29% of students and 16% of professors were not satisfied at all[149].

The study revealed that Moroccan universities are quite behind in terms of digitalization despite plans that have been in place for years. More than 70% of students and 72% of professors covered by the study said they never used distance learning technologies before, which made it harder for

143 Ibid.

144 Ibid.

145 Ibid.

146 Ibid.

147 Ibid.

148 Higher Planning Commission. "Social relationships in the Corona pandemic [Arabic]." Op. cit.

149 Mohamed al-Raji. June 5, 2020: https://www.hespress.com/societe/473713.html

them to cope with the new system after lockdown. In addition, 30% of students found the platforms created by universities difficult to use for distance learning[150.]

The study also shows that most professors depended on their personal efforts to manage the process of distance learning. The percentage of professors who admitted to benefiting from platforms created for distance learning did not exceed 24%[151] while 34% of them recorded video classes and 90% said they used institutional emails and platforms in addition to other tools that facilitate communications with students[152].

According to a university professor, relying on pre-recorded audio-visual material is defective based on all modern and contemporary pedagogies because these recordings are no longer classes. He argues that this method strips the class from an important aspect, which is interaction between professors and students since according to him, a class is formed in the classroom and not given through a screen[153].

Most Moroccans, families and students, saw that the process of distance learning could not achieve its goals and was not able to replace physical attendance of classes. This was confirmed by the Higher Planning Commission which revealed that seven out of ten families find channels used for distance learning in elementary, middle, and high school average or unsatisfactory and the same applies to 59% in higher education. Lack of interaction between students and professors is the main reason for lack of satisfaction among 39% of families with children in elementary school, 35% in middle school, 43% in high school, and 29% in higher education. Lack or shortage of electronic devices comes next with 23% for elementary schools, 28% for middle school, 24% for high school, and 16% in higher education[154].

The ministry, relevant syndicates, and parents' associations reached the same results with some differences in percentages of following digital classes[155]. These entities submitted memos to the ministry demanding that classes taken digitally be removed from final exams in all stages[156]. The ministry responded and only included physical classes given before the lockdown in the baccalauréat exams, which were estimated at 70-75% of curricula, and cancelling exams for all other levels while evaluating students based on their performance before March 16. The ministry justified this decision by stating that distance learning cannot compensate for physical attendance. According to the ministry, the decision also aims at making sure all students get equal chances and taking into consideration the disparities that would make distance learning inaccessible for some students and their families. Added to this is the necessity to maintain the quality and credibility of degrees students obtain from Moroccan institutions[157].

Fourth: The impact of the pandemic on education

It is obvious that the process of distance learning did not yield the desired results since it did not replace physical classes, hence did not guarantee the continuation of the educational process as it was meant to. In addition to having reinforced

[150] Ibid.

[151] Ibid.

[152] Ibid.

[153] *Al-Yaoum* 24. March, 2020: https://www.alyaoum24.com/1396000.html

[154] Higher Planning Commission. "Research on the impact of Coronavirus on the economic, social, and psychological condition of families [Arabic]."

[155] Intervention by the secretary general of the National Syndicate of Education at a digital seminar organized by the National Council for Human Rights under the title "Distance learning and the right to education [Arabic]." Op. cit.

[156] Statement by the National Health Syndicate to the minster of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research about the academic year 2019-2020, May 9, 2020

[157] An intervention by the National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research at the House of Councilors, May 12, 2020.

disparities that existed between students and educational institutions before the pandemic, lack of required devices or internet services to engage in distance learning negatively impacted the success of distance learning.

On other hand, students, parents, and teachers suffered from a lot of stress during that time for different reasons. Many of them were not ready for this transition to distance learning either because they did not have the devices and/or internet services or for lack of an adequate space since all family members stayed at home for four whole months during lockdown. This led all parties involved to lose focus and interest. This was confirmed by the study conducted by the Higher Planning Commission and which revealed that only half the students at elementary, middle, and high schools were interested in distance learning while 30% felt uneasy about the concept[158]. The second stage of the same study revealed that around 47% of students found it hard to understand digital material, 16% suffered from lack of focus, 18% got addicted to electronic devices, and 14.6% suffered from lack of physical activity[159]. Several observers believed that the ministry should've prepared teachers and students psychologically before applying distance learning. When the ministry became aware of the problem, it started broadcasting physical activity classes on one of the TV channels to ease the tension on students and teachers, yet this happened a long time after the process started. Added to this is the fact that most families live in small houses, therefore were not able to make use of those sports classes[160]. In the same vein, several Moroccan universities launched psychological support programs to help students and their parents get over the stress resulting from the lockdown on both the educational and familial levels. Some cases were diagnosed with depression and several students tried to commit suicide in addition to a remarkable increase in domestic violence[161].

Distance learning led to lack of interaction, hence depriving students of one of the most important aspects of physical classes. Several teachers and students complained of this problem. In addition, it is not possible in distance learning to focus on what teachers say and it is not possible for teachers to make sure students are focusing, which is the not the case with physical classrooms[162] . Several educational experts argued that one of the reasons that hindered the success of distance learning is the fact that it almost solely relied on technical aspects while overlooking the educational and social aspects[163].

In addition, several students and teachers stated that platforms and channels on which content was available were not enough and can only be seen as complementary material that cannot be the core of the educational process. This was confirmed by the study conducted by the Higher Planning Committee and which concluded that more than two thirds of students who engaged in distance learning did not believe that the content offered covered the entire curricula[164].

Conclusion

The most important lesson learnt from the experience of distance learning is the necessity to rethink the role of education as a tool through which human beings develop and which aims at enhancing their critical and analytical skills not spoon-feeding them with information. The

158 Higher Planning Commission. "Research on the impact of Coronavirus on the economic, social, and psychological condition of families [Arabic]."

159 Higher Planning Commission. "Social relationships in the Corona pandemic [Arabic]." Op. cit.

160 Higher Planning Commission, 2014 census: www.hcp.ma

161 "Distance learning: Shock and exclusion govern the behavior of students and families [Arabic." April, 19, 2020: https://milafattadla24.com/24466.html

162 Ibid.

163 Intervention by the secretary general of the National Syndicate of Education at a digital seminar organized by the National Council for Human Rights under the title "Distance learning and the right to education [Arabic]." Op. cit.

164 Higher Planning Commission. "Social relationships in the Corona pandemic [Arabic]." Op. cit.

crisis of education in Morocco is a structural one that is not linked to physical attendance or social learning but rather to adopted policies, which see education as an unproductive sector that the state should not invest in and that should be left to the private sector. This was clearly demonstrated in how the amount allocated to education was reduced in the modified 2020 budget. Also, the minister said at the parliament that he refuses that students leave private schools to go to public ones. This statement was in response to the dispute between several private schools and parents when the latter tried to transfer their children to public schools whether through refusing to hand them students' files or forcing them to pay tuition fees for the academic year 2020-2021 in one bulk, which outraged Moroccan families.

The privatization of education led to deepening already-existing disparities and reinforced the segregation between students from different social classes, which in turn compromises the prospect of social solidarity. Schools are expected to provide all students with equal opportunities and allow different students to coexist and succeed in one space regardless of their social or economic backgrounds. Only public schools are capable of making this happen and that is why the state needs to reinvest in public education and provide it with all the tools it needs to regain its role as the space were students can develop their skills and be prepared to take part in sustainable development. The state also needs to support scientific research whose importance was made even clearer following the spread of Coronavirus and the dire need for a vaccine as well as medial facilities and services to save citizens' lives. Countries that marginalize scientific research do not take part in the process of development but rather wait for other countries to do so and protect them from pandemics or any crisis they face.

Distance learning could not replace physical classes yet according to a large number of experts and students, it can still play a major role in the education process as a complementary tool that can be added to the original learning experience, but not be the entire experience. It can still be used under exceptional circumstances and during crises. In addition, it is also important to develop the process of distance learning so that local platforms can become equal to their foreign counterparts, hence enabling students and teachers to make the best of them. This will not be possible without providing involved parties with the equipment and services needed to engage in distance learning and to keep students interested in the learning process. Teachers and professors need to be trained to use digital platforms so that it can be gradually integrated into the learning process.

SECTION III
CONFLICT, WAR AND OCCUPATION

INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus in War Zones: A few Remarks

Sari Hanafi

Seven months and a half months after the spread of Coronavirus, ramifications are starting to reveal themselves on both individual and communal—political, social, and economic—levels as well as regarding our relationship with nature. The outbreak exposed the fragility of the state and the magnitude of inequality from which several groups suffered such as the poor, ethnic minorities, immigrants, and refuges. Observers emphasized that Coronavirus is here to stay or at least spread in waves and that we need to cope with it. Even though we admit that we cannot go back to "normal" and that it will not be "business as usual," speculations about the impact of the pandemic are still rife, especially about the impact of social distancing and the future of social movements in the aftermath of the crisis in light of the failure of authoritarian, populist, and neoliberal states in facing the ramifications of the virus. This paper will focus on speculations about war zones.

Three scenarios

There are three main scenarios related to three war-torn countries in the region: Syria, Iraq, and the Palestinian occupied territories, the latter bearing the brunt of both the occupation and an authoritarian government. This can be highlighted through the following points:

- The implementation of the occupation policies in Israel is expected, as was demonstrated in Abaher El Sakka's paper "Between the Palestinian Authority's social policies and Israel's occupation policies: Palestinians during the Corona pandemic," but these policies were always put into effect at times of emergency. It is true that pandemic ethics[1] are different from those of everyday life, yet the crisis witnessed the transformation of the triage ethos from a policy that prioritizes human lives to one based on economic calculations that focus on privileged groups. This is what Scott Schaffer[2] called "necro-ethics," which is a development of Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics." This concept, which is similar to that of the "ethics of expendability," led many people to die because they were not useful for society such as the elderly, poor blacks, and the marginalized. As a result, quarantine policies become contingent on criteria that do not take into consideration that the Corona pandemic is not just a medical crisis, but also a social and cultural one. In this regard, El Sakka focuses on exclusionist policies against Palestinian workers in Israel.
- In the Syrian case, the conflict is between the people and a regime that has been in power for almost half a century. Almost half the Syrian people are displaced, internally or externally, while the ones who remained are hardly capable of meeting their basic needs, especially in light of the sanctions against the Syrian regime, such as the Caesar Act.
- Coronavirus did not stop social movements at different parts of the world like protests against police brutality in the United States, yet it negatively affected those movements in other parts. The paper entitled "Iraqi protests and Coronavirus: The challenge of resolution and sustainability" highlights

[1] Alec Walen and Bashshar Haydar, "The Ethics of a Pandemic Are Not Those of a 'New Normal,'" *CapX*, May 12, 2020, https://capx.co/the-ethics-of-a-pandemic-are-not-those-of-a-new-normal/.

[2] Scott Schaffer, "Necroethics in the Time of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter," in *COVID-19: Global Pandemic, Societal Responses, Ideological Solutions*, ed. J. Michael Ryan, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 2020).

the impact of the outbreak on Iraq and also Lebanon. It is important to focus on how the virus affected protests that erupted in different parts of the world.

The transformation of social movements after Coronavirus

The spread of Coronavirus revealed how connected the entire world is and transformed the metaphor of a global village into reality. This, however, does not mean that globalization increased solidarity or showed a human face. In fact, several progressive powers and some leftist powers failed at addressing the setbacks of globalization. This point will be tackled in relation to the Arab region.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, together with most social scientists with the exception of orthodox economists, argues that to be from the left means to start with issues pertaining to further places than to the immediate environment[3]. For example, inequality is perceived as a global phenomenon that can be traced back to imperialism and the establishment of imperial entities. That is why, most sociologists call for redressing the structures of imperialism and occupation in order to redress the wrongs done to particular segments of society as a result. This means addressing exploitation patters on the national then the local level. Added to this is the fact that several leftist social movements are interested in participation in horizontal democracy.

In the Arab region, social movements that adopt a religious discourse have a different approach since they start with the local then move to the national, international, human… etc. These movements believe in communal work and family relations and that is why they focus on building schools in certain neighborhoods, helping locals find a place to live or get married, or starting a charity endowment. Their political participation becomes, therefore, a broader activity that is added to their daily efforts. This was discussed by Palestinian psychologist Mohammed Bamyeh in his latest book *Lifeworlds of Islam: The pragmatics of a religion*[4]. Regardless of the different agendas of those social movements and which include democratic transition, social justice, and fighting corruption, the difference between left and right, religious and secular, or local and international is gradually diminishing in the light of alliances that are currently formed in several Arab countries such as Tunisia and Sudan. These movements give rise to what Bamyeh[5] calls "participatory ethics," which play a vital role in creating spaces or opportunities of daily participation on the local, national, and international levels.

The effectiveness of social movements in the aftermath of the outbreak is centered around their ability to shift from the traditional approach that starts with the more distant then moves towards the local to an approach that adopts a back and forth movement on different levels. This means starting with the local, represented by community and family, then moving to the national and humanitarian as a whole. This can be done the other way round when starting with the humanitarian level is necessary owing to the dominance of national sentiments that render refugees, immigrants, and ethnic minorities as the "other." This brings back to mind the need to focus on the role of social movements in addressing serious ailments caused by the greedy capitalist economy. In many parts of the world, the Corona crisis led civil society organizations to change their role from relief, awareness, and lobbying decision makers to social solidarity. According to Geoffrey Pleyers[6], relief is not the same as solidarity since the latter is a social activity

[3] https://thefunambulist.net/philosophy/deleuze-what-is-it-to-be-from-the-left. For more information on the problems of the Arab left, see Sari Hanafi's "The crisis of the post-colonial left: Towards a post-authoritarian approach [Arabic]." *Al Jumhuria*, July 15, 2016: http://aljumhuriya.net/35345

[4] Mohammed A. Bamyeh, *Lifeworlds of Islam: The Pragmatics of a Religion*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Geoffrey Pleyers. "The Pandemic Is a Battlefield. Social Movements in the COVID-19 Lockdown," *Journal of Civil Society* 0, no. 0 (August 6, 2020): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2020.1794398.

that does not revolve around the rich donating money to the poor, but rather uniting in order to face the virus and the crisis resulting from it. This is particularly demonstrated in initiatives that are more intimate than those launched by civil society organizations in their regular relief work. Ali Abdel Wahab tackles solidarity initiatives launched in the Gaza Strip after the spread of Coronavirus like "Ihsan Voluntary Initiative" and "Think of Others." The social, local, and grassroots aspects of these initiatives and the solidarity role it plays did not stop them from turning into political activities. This was, for example, shown in initiatives that started with relief work in Egypt after the Cairo earthquake then later developed into movements that advocated democracy and social justice. This point was emphasized by Asef Byat in relation to the Arab region and Iran[7] even though he did not focus on the specificity of solidarity as a social action. Pleyers underlined a similar example in Mexico, in which the democratization process started following the 1985 earthquake[8].

Focusing on the role of solidarity in addressing the Coronavirus crisis does not underestimate the role of social movements as sources of new knowledge that stems from their activities on the ground as well as the theories put forward by their academics and intellectuals. Several writings from different parts of the Arab world tackle the critiques those movements offered on separation paradigms that prevailed in late modernity such as separation between economic, political, and social aspects as well as the separation between individual, society, and nature. Those writings revealed that environmental issues cannot be separated from prevalent economic policies and the economic system. Social movements revealed that neoliberal capitalism is not just a mode of production, but also a set of social structures that regulate the relationship between human beings and nature. These movements are active in several Arab countries even though their knowledge aspect is not that prominent. Ali Abdel Hadi El Maamouri argued that Iraqi protests that erupted in 2019 are facing major challenges in the aftermath of the Coronavirus, which is demonstrated in the fragmentation of demands and lack of leadership.

Karl Polanyi argues that each movement triggers a counter-movement so that social movements are faced with opposing discourses that they need to fight. Abaher El Sakka cites the example of the Palestinian Authority that started using a moralistic discourse to conceal its inability to face the ramifications of the virus. The same applied to the discourses adopted by Israel in the aftermath of the pandemic.

7 Asef Bayat, Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East (Stanford University Press, 2010).

8 Pleyers, Op. Cit.

1. Iraqi Protests and Coronavirus: The Challenge of Resolution and Sustainability[9]

Ali Abdel Hadi El Maamouri

Iraq has been witnessing protest waves since 2015, but in October 2019, protests took a different turn in terms of protesters' demands and the results of these protests including the resignation of the government and the start of a political vacuum that only ended through complex negotiations and the final appointment of Mustafa Al Kadhimi as prime minister. When Iraq recorded the first Coronavirus case, protests took another different turn that revealed how capable protesters were at organizing themselves and formulating their demands. Unemployment, and economic problems in general, played a major role in the October protests and the spread of the pandemic accentuated these problems, especially in the light of the drop in oil prices and the government's growing inability to keep its commitments such as payment of salaries.

This paper argues that Iraqi protests developed through the years from examples of protest or mobilization cycles to an example of the "action-identity paradigm" in October 2019 in the sense that they started focusing on changing the structure of state institutions and the knowledge concepts associated with them, hence engaging in a process of reshaping social and economic production. The concept of the "protest cycle" was coined by Sidney Tarrow to denote the rise and fall of social movements that are closely linked to each other. According to Tarrow, the protest cycle, which is also referred to as the "cycle of contention," involves a number of factors:

- The escalation of contention
- The geographical and social spread of contention
- The emergence of random initiatives and organized groups
- The emergence of new ideologies and new interpretations
- The diversity of potential actions

Each cycle goes through three main phases:

- The escalation phase, "a moment of madness" in which everything seems possible
- The peak phase, in which actions are remarkably radical
- The calm phase, which is divided into three possibilities:
  1. The creation of new organizations
  2. Turning collective action into a routine
  3. Responding, even if partially, to demands
  4. Withdrawal[10]

The action-identity paradigm proposed by this paper, and which completes the protest cycle, demonstrated that protests have reached the stage where radical change is required, which is extremely dangerous for the power dominating social and political production and is always followed by violent measures on the part of the regime to guarantee its survival. In order for this stage to bear fruit, it is important for protesters to

[9] This paper relies on several studies conducted by the researcher since 2016. It analyzes the history of protest movements in Iraq through field research, personal interviews with major players, and most important research on the subject. This paper, therefore, constitutes the continuation of previous studies on the subject as well as the continuation of the Iraqi protest movement. It highlights the links between different stages of this movement and the unique experience it represents.

[10] From *Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux* (Dictionary of Social Movements) by Olivier Fillieule, Lilian Mathieu, Cécile Péchu.

have an alternative to the status quo and to realize that lack of organization might eventually lead to a state of chaos that is no less dangerous than the one the protesters are trying to put an end to. Political actions, as conflicts between individuals or groups, whether organized or not, aim at undermining or supporting the power that rules over the political scene and public space. While the mechanisms used in each action differ based on the objective, a plan that determines the course of this action and determines its features is still indispensable[11].

Based on the above, the paper aims at answering the following questions:

- Were protests in Iraq a reaction to public policies that intensified inequality in the Iraqi society?
- Were protesters fully aware of problems of Iraq on the political and economic levels or were the protests an expression of extreme anger that led to lack of vision?
- What are the potential effects of Coronavirus on the economy and policies in Iraq? And were measures taken by the government effective in curbing the spread of the virus?
- Will the impact on Coronavirus on the economy increase protests in Iraq?

The paper will rely on observations and case studies within the framework of political psychology in order to analyze problems and look at possible solutions.

First: The development of protests in Iraq

The October 2019 protests were a continuation of several intermittent waves that took place between 2010 and 2014 and reached their peak in a wave that started in 2015 and is still ongoing despite changes in different factors such as demands, participants, and protest mechanisms. Looking at protests that have taken place in Iraq since 2003 shows that some of these protest waves ended shortly after they started, which was the case with protests in 2004 and 2005 and which stopped because of the deteriorating security situation and the escalation of sectarian violence. That is why examining protests that started in 2010 is more significant since by the time relative calm prevailed in Iraq, which made room for activists to start calling for political reform and civil liberties. This was interrupted by the fall of Mosul and other parts of Iraq to ISIS in June 2014.

1. Roots of the Iraqi protest movement

In 2010, different sets of demands started emerging, but they all shared common goals such as calling upon the government to perform its duties, public freedoms, the improvement of services, and job opportunities[12]. Protests in Baghdad differed according to the neighborhoods from which they erupted. For example, in poorer neighborhoods such as Bub Al Sham and Sadr City, protesters mainly called for the improvement of services[13]. In other cities such as Kut, Al Diwaniyah, and Basra, the first wave, commonly known as the "electricity uprising," started in June 2010, the second wave, called "Friday of fury," started in February 2011, and the third in July 2011[14]. Protests at the center of Baghdad focused on civil liberties and mainly took place in Al Mutanabi Street and Liberation Square, where the famous liberation monument that later became an epitome of protest is located[15]. These protests were mainly caused by

[11] Sadek Al Aswad. *Political Psychology: Foundations and dimensions* [Arabic]. Baghdad: University of Baghdad, 1990

[12] Ali Abdel Hadi El Maamouri. "A survey of social and political rights activists [Arabic]." Beirut: Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, American University in Beirut, 2018.

[13] Saad Salloum. "Beneath the Liberation Monument all that is Solid Vanishes into Air." Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung (accessed December 12, 2019): https://is.gd/vw0xWR

[14] Dividing the protest movement into stages is taken from "The psychology of protest in Iraq: The fading away of Islamism and the rise of nationalism [Arabic]." Baghdad: Sotour for Publishing and Distribution, 2017.

[15] Al Mutanabi street was created during the last years of Ottoman rule in Iraq. The street includes the Qushla, the Ottoman governor's headquarters, the old council of ministers, the old courthouse, and the old national mosque. The street was turned into a book market and came to symbolize Iraqi culture. Liberation Square is at the center of Baghdad. There is the famous monument by sculptor Jawad Salim, which was erected following the 1958 coup.

a series of decrees, including one that interpreted the article in the constitution about freedom of protest in a way that made it compulsory to obtain permission while the article states that protesters only need to notify the authorities[16]. One of the most known protests that took place before was the one caused by the dismissal of Iraqi poet Ahmed Abdel Hussein after an article he published in April 2009 about corruption in Iraq. The dismissal decision was retracted on the same day[17].

In the same vein, three local decrees triggered the protest wave that started in 2010. The beginning was a decree by the Babylon Governorate to ban the Babylon Folklore Festival. This was followed by banning a French circus from performing in Basra and closing night clubs and stores that sell alcoholic beverages in Baghdad. The protests seemed random at first then turned into an organized political action under the slogan "Baghdad won't be Kandahar"[18]. Another major protest that paved the way for further waves was the Valentine's Day Rally on February 14, 2011. Protesters issued a statement that called for the resignation of the governor of Baghdad for his poor performance and demanded reform and the elimination of corruption. The signatories of the statement called themselves The February 14 Youths[19].

2. The 2015 protest movement

Despite similarities as far as basics are concerned, the main difference between the 2011 and 2015 protests was the mobilization mechanism. The 2011 protests relied on conventional channels and personal communications while the 2015 protests relied on social networking websites[20].

a. **Demands:** The post-2003 political system was created along ethnic lines. While this system allegedly aimed at forming an inclusive government that guarantees equal representation of all ethnic groups in Iraq, it gave rise to a fragmented structure[21]. This new form of representation was based on a quota system in which alliances intersect both horizontally and vertically and in which ethnic and partisan affiliations become one. This meant that each ethnicity had a party that represents it and official positions were divided among those parties. This structure resulted in unproductive economic policies, whose setbacks were made clear after the drop in oil prices in 2014 that was accompanied by the deterioration of the private sector. In an attempt to make up for its inability to save the private sector and in order to create job opportunities, former governments expanded employment policies in an unplanned manner, which weakened state institutions and led to the emergence of a group of civil servants who only cared about keeping their privileges. At the same time, the cost of the war with ISIS was getting higher, which led to imposing austerity measures, hence increasing citizens' burdens with more taxes instead of reforming the defective spending policies in place. In fact, the government created more state institutions in order for each party/ethnicity to create jobs for members of its community while not touching the salaries and privileges of senior officials[22].

---

16 Iraq: Crackdown on Baghdad Protest, *Human Rights Watch*,20-7-2020: https://is.gd/fNNxNq

17 Interview with Ahmed Abdel Hussein, June 4, 2018.

18 Saad Salloum. Op.cit.

19 Ali Abdel Hadi El Maamouri. "Iraqi protests: Roots and players [Arabic]." Paper presented at Conference of Iraqi Protest Behavior: Individual and Communal Dynamics organized by the Iraqi Association of Political Psychology on June 22, 2019; and Saad Salloum. Op. cit.

20 Phone call with Fares Herram on June 8, 2018, former director of the Writers Union in Najaf, was one of the most prominent activists in the social movement until he became visiting professor in Beijing University in early 2018. He wrote the final statement for the Baghdad Protest Movement Conference (January 29, 2016) and the paper on the mechanisms of diversifying and expanding protests and which was released at the conference.

21 Hareth Hassan. "The dimensions of social protests in Iraq and information on the Shiite dispute [Arabic]." *Al Jazeera* website (accessed June 1, 2018): https://is.gd/8H9qxF

22 Ibid.

When the army was defeated by ISIS in Mosul on June 9, 2014 and had to retreat to the governorates of Saladin and Anbar, the Popular Mobilization Forces emerged as an alternative power. This was accompanied by widening gaps between political elites and the people as well as the start of the electricity crisis at a time of scorching heat. Protests erupted in Basra against the deterioration of services and power outages. Protesters clashed with security forces following the death of a teenager on July 16, 2015[23]. Protests erupted in Baghdad in solidarity and were supported by the Shiite leadership in Najaf. Protests were violently repressed at the beginning, but they kept growing. This forced then prime minister Haidar Al Abbadi to launch the first stage of reforms in an exceptional session held on August 9, 2015. These included abolishing the positions of vice presidents and prime minister's deputies and a set of financial and economic reforms[24]. The parliament voted on those reforms on August 11, 2015. This was followed by another set of reforms that aimed at reducing the number of ministries and abolishing appointment of officials without parliament approval[25]. At this stage, the concept of the "protest cycle" becomes clear since this time witnessed the rise and fall of protest waves that were linked to each other starting with the 2009 protests that paved the way for the 2011 protests, which were suppressed yet paved the way for the 2015 protests in which the same activists from previous protests participated.

Protests that started randomly in Basra against deterioration of services and power outages ignited the first spark for the 2015 protests. The first protest started in Baghdad in solidarity with Basra then developed to call for political reforms. The protests were joined by several social powers, on top of which was the Shiite leadership in Najaf. Those protests forced the state and political powers to absolve themselves of corruption and failure and led the parliament to unanimously approve reforms proposed by the prime minister. Protests started spreading geographically as protesters moved from Liberation Square to the gates of the Green Zone then invaded the Green Zone.

Invading the Green Zone was a very significant action since it has become a world that is isolated from its surroundings and stayed safe during sectarian clashes before 2009. It has also become a refuge for politicians who belonged to the opposition outside Iraq. The government's failure in performing its duties was linked to general hostility towards the Green Zone, especially that the selfishness and greed of its residents is believed to have caused the damage that triggered the protests. Getting into the Green Zone, therefore, became a symbol of undermining its dominance and its exploitation of the country's resources.

The majority of protesters belonged to the Sadrist Movement, which is represented in the government and the parliament. Sadrists, however, live in the poorest neighborhoods in Baghdad and are predominantly youths. That is why deteriorating living conditions are among the reasons that led to storming the Green Zone, always seen as invincible[26]. This action constituted the peak of protests and exposed the fragility of a state where the centers of decision-making are located outside conventional state institutions. It is noteworthy that by that time there were no warnings of storming the Green Zone as was the case when the protests started and when such an escalation was seen as compromising to the Shiite leadership in Najaf.

In the third stage of the cycle, the four scenarios seemed to have happened. Some demands were met, protests turned into a weekly routine, the numbers of protests started decreasing, and response to calls for protests was limited. On the other hand, the protest movement led to a new

[23] "Iraq: Protests turned into power struggle [Arabic]." Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015.

[24] For details see "Al Sumaria publishes the first reform batch voted on by the cabinet [Arabic]." *Al Sumaria TV* (May 25, 2018): https://is.gd/jesGNd

[25] "Al Abbadi proposes new reforms today [Arabic]." *Al-Hayat* (accessed May 25, 2019): https://is.gd/cx3x4y

[26] Hareth Hassan. "The fall of the Green Zone in Baghdad [Arabic]." *Assafir Al-Arabi* (accessed August 24, 2020): https://is.gd/Uw9iMQ

electoral alliance, which formed what protest movements' theorist Fares Kamal Nazmi called the "historic bloc"[27] . This alliance, called Marching Towards Reform, included the Communist Party, the Sadrist Movement, and independent civilians, and it got more seats than any other alliance in the 2018 election.

It is not possible to claim that there was a withdrawal. Protests stopped in Basra, Dhi Qar, Karbala, and other cities and continued, with smaller numbers, in Baghdad and Najaf. Main players in this wave were dispersed, especially that many of them withdrew following the alliance with the Sadrist Movement. A new reality was created as well as a new perception of politics. New leaderships emerged outside the conventional circles, which highlights the role of protests in shifting balances of power.

It is important to note the link between the protests in Iraq and protest movements across the Arab region, yet none of the main actors in Iraq mentions this link. Arab Spring protests particularly impacted western Iraq up to Nineveh Governorate in the north. Protests that took part in Iraq at the time had an ethnic character and followed into the footsteps of the Arab Spring in terms of demanding a regime change. The protests, commonly referred to as the "Sunni protests," ended when security forces suppressed them by force and the ISIS invasion too place. The failure of the protests at the time and drastic developments that followed led to a general tendency to dissociate them from the Arab Spring and to refer to them as an Iraqi local experience that is not linked to the Arab Spring even if it shared some of its protest mechanisms[28].

Second: Lack of vision in the protest movement

While it is possible to say that protests continued from 2015 until October 2019 as a collective action, many differences persisted whether in terms of vision, understanding Iraqi problems, and the ability to formulate demands as well as a difference between pre- and post-2019 protesters. While protests were linked to each other as part of the contention cycle, the action-identity paradigm is more applicable to the 2019 protests since they aimed at changing the structure of state institutions and targeted the groups that dominate the process of social and economic production. True, the 2019 protests turned into a routine, yet emphasis here will be placed on the content of those protests, the intellectual structure it gave rise to, and the change it affected.

The intellectual structure of protests

It is possible to determine the intellectual structure of the protests through tracing the slogans they used from the very beginning as well as what was written on social media. These reveal that the protests were based on a set of demands[29]:

- **Economic:** Protests called throughout for creating job opportunities then at a later stage called for promoting local production.
- **Political:** Protesters had different visions and objectives, yet it is possible to detect a radical pattern that tied political demands. Protesters accused all officials of corruption at first then moved to demanding the ouster of the regime in addition to large segments that wanted Iran out of the Iraqi political scene.
- **Cultural/Social:** These were also different from one group to another. Some called for putting an end to the identity conflict, which is manifested in sectarian clashes, and creating a pluralist society while others demanded freedom of expression and criticized dominant social norms and conservative religious values.

[27] See Fares Kamal Nazmi's "Communists, Sadrists, and the historic bloc option [Arabic]." *Al Hewar Al Motamaden* (accessed August 23, 2020): https://is.gd/tOdTuF

[28] For more details see Ali Abdel Hadi El Maamouri's "ISIS and Mosul: A background [Arabic]." Cairo: Arab Forum for Alternatives, 2014.

[29] These conclusions are based on field research in Liberation Square and on statements posted by activists on social networks and on Tuk-Tuk newspaper issued by protesters at Liberation Square.

The protests also focused on several figures in a way that appealed to popular imagination such as lieutenant general Abdel-Wahab Al Saadi, who was hailed as the honest man in a corrupt regime. In doing so, the people were obviously nostalgic to the image of the savior from the military. Several people who were killed during the protests also became symbols of the uprising. Several slogans revealed hostility to dual nationals among Iraqi officials, who were accused of failing to export the Western experience to Iraq, hence contributing to crises through which Iraq is going. Calls for dismissing all those officials were endowed with a national, populist character.

Interviews with leaders of the 2015 protests showed that there is a clear vision of the causes of these protests. Most of those leaders were literary and media figures who lived through the Baath era and many of them were arrested and persecuted before 2003, hence went through the experience of not being able to express their views freely or protest against the regime. That is possibly why their demands focused on reform and supporting civil society organizations. At the time when the government was preoccupied with fighting ISIS and channeling resources towards this war, protest leaders were able to grasp the source of all problems through which Iraq is going through: ineffective public policies as a result of struggles for power among different ethnic groups[30].

Contrary to this, the October 2019 protests were quite fragmented in terms of vision. Some protests focused on economic demands while others took a populist shape and there were no leaderships that can negotiate with the government. Those protests also witnessed violent clashes on almost daily basis between the protesters on one hand and security forces and militias on the other hand. Most protesters were young, which meant they grow up in Iraq after 2003, hence did not witness the era of suppression that came before and were not intimidated by security forces. They were also exposed to all sorts of information through an open media in which red lines almost vanished. Most of them were below 20 or in their early 20s and many of them did not continue their education[31]. Another thing that distinguished the 2019 protesters is that fact that many of them took part in the war against ISIS then went back to their towns and villages to find no jobs. They were not in demand in a labor market that is controlled by rentier economy and in which many relied on getting appointed at state institutions[32].

That is why the 2019 protests were more confrontational that the ones before and their demands were more radical. The government and its affiliated militias used force to suppress the protests and that led to the death and injury of hundreds of protesters, which is unprecedented in previous protests[33]. The confrontational nature of the 2019 protests was mainly attributed to the fact that most protesters came from marginalized social groups that did not have fair access to education and that suffered from a number of economic crises. These youths rebelled against all social institutions, including the clans in control in their regions. Their young age also made them more determined and radical and their demands were put forward under the slogan, "We want a homeland" that for them meant stability and work[34].

While the 2015 protests led to the emergence of new leaders who were initially active on the literary or media fronts, the 2019 protests gave rise to different figures that mainly belonged to

[30] The study is based on the two interviews done with Ahmed Abdel Hussein, one of the most prominent activists in the 2015 protests, and with Fares Herram.

[31] See Ali Abdel Hadi El Maamouri. "The October 2019 protests: A field survey of participating social groups in Baghdad, Najaf, and Nasiriyah [Arabic]." Paper presented at the workshop *Protest Movements and Complex Political Disputes in Iraq*. Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut, February 6, 2020.

[32] Ibid.

[33] For details on the repression of October protests by the Iraqi government see Hisham *El Hashimi's Iraq's October protests: Causes and repercussions* [Arabic]. Istanbul: Center of Making Policies for International and Strategic Studies, 2019.

[34] Ali Abdel Hadi El Maamouri. "The October 2019 protests: A field survey of participating social groups in Baghdad, Najaf, and Nasiriyah [Arabic]." Op. cit.

lower classes. The most prominent example is rickshaw drivers, who were always deprecated either because of their social background or the way they drive then later turned into revolutionary symbols. In fact, they became a red line and criticizing them was not allowed because they put their lives in danger, transferred the injured to hospitals, and stormed through clashes and fires fearlessly. This development signaled a shift in the cultural perception of revolutionary leaders. In the past, such leaders always came from the clergy, aristocratic families, clan heads, or individuals that have for long been engaged in the political scene. None of this applied to the rickshaw drivers who are always from lower classes. In short, the clarity of vision that characterized the 2015 protests was absent in 2019 as the anger of participating youths came at the expense of the lucidity of demands and the unity of protesters in addition to the absence of leaders who can negotiate with the government.

Third: Coronavirus and pubic policies in Iraq

The Iraqi government responded to Coronavirus several weeks after it started spreading through first closing the border with Iran, in which the number of cases was on the rise. The pandemic coincided with a serious political crisis. The government had just resigned and the process of choosing a new prime minister was faced with several challenges to the extent that two people were named before eventually agreeing on Mustafa Al Kadhimi. Meanwhile, protests went on nonstop.

When appointed, Kadhimi was faced with several problems for in addition to protests, there was the drop in oil prices in a rentier economy that almost solely relies on oil to fund its budget as well as a number of other crises that got worse during the restive era of former prime minister Adel Abdel Mahdi. Added to this was the pandemic. At the beginning, recorded cases were not many, but the delay in closing borders led to the emergence of the first case in Najaf, followed by many others. Measures to curb the disease were also not strictly observed and during the Lesser Bairam, people met in social gatherings and the curfew was constantly violated. Cases kept increasing and the governorates of Iraq started collapsing one after the other.

The government started dealing with the virus at the time of Adel Abdel Mahdi who formed a committee for that purpose (law no. 55 for the year 2020) in February 2020. The cabinet modified the mission of the committee on March 26, 2020 and it was named the Higher Committee for Heath and Public Safety to Counter Coronavirus. The committee met on March 30 and was presided over by Abdel Mahd[35]. One of the first decisions taken by the committee was imposing a nation-wide lockdown with the exception of Kurdistan. However, the curfew was not observed in many areas and the government had to issue stricter rules and arrest violators[36] When the government decided to make the lockdown partial, several governorates objected such as Najaf that insisted on complete lockdown and closed all state institutions except health and security facilities[37]. The work of the committee was met by many obstacles that included disputes with the Ministry of Health. The minister of health called for removing Hanan Al Fatlawi, the prime minister's advisor, from the committee because she was not on good terms with other members of the committee at a time when harmony is required to face such a delicate situation, as he put it[38].

The lockdown was detrimental to the Iraqi economy. Being a rentier economy made salaries and subsequent consumption the main lifeline

[35] "Prime Minister chairs first meeting of Higher Committee for Health and National Safety", Government of Iraq, 16-7-2020, https://is.gd/k0tVV8

[36] "Iraq: Lockdown violators will be arrested [Arabic]." *Al Arabiya* (accessed July 17, 2020): https://is.gd/U3DgwC

[37] "Najaf announces continuation of lockdown across the governorate [Arabic]." *Ain Al-Iraq News* (accessed July 17,2020): https://is.gd/VjrFHX

[38] "Health minister speaks of removing Hanan Al Fatlawi from committee [Arabic]." *Ultra Iraq Website* (accessed July 17, 2020): https://is.gd/V6YIMW

for the economy, which meant that a drop in consumption meant the collapse of the economy. The Iraqi economy is linked in all its activities to oil. If the price of an oil barrel drops by one dollar, Iraq loses between one and 1.4 billion US dollars[39]. The dispute the took place among OPEC members in April led to reducing production by around 10 million barrels per day[40]. Iraq's share of this drop was one million barrels. The 2020 budget, which is not yet ratified, fixed the price of the barrel at 56 dollars and set the deficit at 50 billion dollars. The fluctuation of oil prices was reflected on the deficit, which also kept fluctuating. The least harmful scenario was if the barrel is for 45 dollars, which means increasing the deficit to 63 billion and the worst was if the price drops to 30 dollars, which means a deficit of 81 billion.

How the government dealt with the crisis

On March 11, 2020, the Ministerial Economic Council discussed the means to handle the crisis of oil prices, avoid a deterioration in living standards, and curb the spread of Coronavirus. In the following session, the council discussed offering financial aid to low-income citizens that were affected by the lockdown[41].

The Higher Committee for Health and Public Safety took a number of measures including:

- Emergency aid to people harmed by the lockdown
- Postponing the payment of rent or installments for government-owned lands and houses and cancelling the late fines until July 31, 2020 and cancelling rent payments for government-owned commercial or industrial facilities as long as the crisis persists[42]

These measures included an austerity plan that could drag the Iraqi economy into unprecedented stagnation. Economic experts said that total lockdown between March 15 and April 19 led almost all economic activities to ground to a halt except those linked to basic needs such as food. Millions of people lost their jobs and were promised a monthly financial aid of not less that 30 thousand dinars (around 25 dollars). According to a statement by the minister of planning, more than 13 million people registered in this emergency grant then this number increased to 18 million, which means around half the population of Iraq. Meanwhile, through agreeing to decrease its exports of crude oil by 1.06 barrels daily, Iraq lost two thirds of its oil revenues that fund 95% of its budget. This development is expected to negatively impact investment, consumption, and prices[43].

Austerity measures are expected to destroy the remaining third of the economy. Reducing salaries is also expected to affect demand in the Iraqi market. It will affect the housing sector since less people would take housing loans or invest in housing. Housing is a significant sector in the Iraqi economy due to its close link with other sectors and any deterioration in it is expected to affect those other sectors. In addition, a decrease in individuals' incomes means less monetary interactions, hence an economic contraction[44].

Iraqis were exempted from paying rent in government-owned facilities, but this was not the case with the private sector. A survey conducted by the author revealed that some landlords exempted tenants from paying rent in the first two months of the crisis while others insisted that they pay and some reduced rent. Several tenants who spoke to the author said they were threatened with evacuation if they do not pay rent and noted

[39] Sultan Jassim Al Nasrawi. "Iraqi economy and the Corona pandemic: Scenarios for budget deficit paths [Arabic]." *School of Administration and Economy Website, Karbala University* (accessed July 14, 2020): https://is.gd/O2n28P

[40] OPEC and allies finalize record oil production cut after days of discussion, CNBC, 16-7-2020: https://is.gd/WsiKDu

[41] Curiously, the Ministerial Council for Economy does not provide any information on itself and does not have a website. The information here is from Hassan Latif Kazem's "Iraqi economy in the time of Corona (3): The crisis of economic management [Arabic]." *Iraqi Economists Network Website*: https://is.gd/ucR2tT

[42] Ibid

[43] Ibid

[44] Ali Abdel Hadi El Mamouri. "Serious housing crisis creeps up on Iraq", *AL-MONITOR*, 24-7-2020: https://is.gd/uUHZ96

that landlords do not take into consideration the fact that they have not been working for months because of the lockdown. Landlords, on the other hand, said they too have commitments, some personal and others official such as taxes and government fees[45].

Many hold the government accountable for the state of panic that mushroomed across the country since rumors have for a while been spreading about pay cuts, but nothing was confirmed, which leaves citizens in a constant state of anxiety. Since the beginning of the crisis, four different scenarios on pay cuts have been circulating. These scenarios left the door open for speculations as people are not sure whether only the salaries of senior officials will be reduced and if those officials include members of parliament, if the cut only applies to double salaries, and if the salaries paid to former Rafha Camp refugees and their families will be stooped. There are also rumors about a pension tax and about three drafts of the pay cut plan that were prepared by the government and are to be presented to the parliament[46].

In addition to the fact that the salary reduction plan needs to be approved by the parliament, lack of information made it hard to determine the exact number of people who get double salaries or the number of fake names on payrolls. This led the prime minister to issue a decree on June 7, 2020 instructing all ministries and state institutions to provide the ministry of planning with details on all employees, including titles and salaries, in addition to entering all employees whose papers are not yet completed into the system[47].

Ramifications of the crisis were first manifested on June 10, 2020 when pensioners discovered a 15% cut in their pension. As a result of strong reactions to this development and debates about the legality of imposing an income tax on pensions, the Financial Committee at the parliament decided to retract the decision and deducted amounts were returned to pensioners[48] .The prime minister's financial advisor stated that Iraq has been losing around 100 million dollars of its GDP on daily basis since the Corona outbreak and that these loses could increase if the virus keeps spreading and its impacts on the economy continue[49]. The economic crisis in Iraq, the budget deficits, and the government's inability to pay salaries will eventually lead to economic stagnation that would start from the housing sector until it reaches individual consumption, which might eventually lead to political instability in an already fragile country.

Health measures constituted a bigger problem. The government kept taking different decisions while large numbers of people did not abide by the rules, which led a remarkable increase in the number of cases. Added to that was the lack of adequate medical equipment and the severe impact on low-income groups. This led non-state actors to interfere to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Shiite endowments in Karbala[50] built several hospitals then collaborated with endowments in other parts of Iraq to build quarantine hospitals and provide medication[51]. Several armed groups, whose existence and role have always been a source of contention, started intervening to help Iraqis deal with the pandemic. For example, Saraya Al Salam, the militia linked

[45] The three paragraphs on rent are based on field investigations conducted by the researcher in April- May, 2020 in the neighborhoods of Ziyouna, Karada, and Karadat Maryam.

[46] Ali Abdel Hadi El Mamouri. "Serious housing crisis creeps up on Iraq." Op. cit.

[47] "Cabinet asks ministers to provide employees' names and salaries [Iraq]." *Baghdad Today* (accessed July 16, 2020): https://is.gd/vJKYwe

[48] "Iraqi prime minister retracts decision to reduce pensions [Arabic]." *Al Arabi Al Jadeed*: https://is.gd/4LiFQl

[49] "Corona repercussions cost Iraq 100 million dollars daily [Arabic]." *Anadolu Agency* (accessed July 18, 2020): https://is.gd/HhUsKO

[50] The role of Shiite endowments has been growing since 2003 as they became no longer confined to religious affairs and started intervening in the economy. For details see Ali Mazloum's "The Iranian experience and holy endowments in Iraq: Transition from the religious to the secular in Karbala [Arabic]." *Journal of Iranian Studies*, issue no. 7, June 2018.

[51] "Shiite endowments provide hospitals, centers, and intensive care units to treat Corona patients [Arabic]." *Website of the Holy Shrine of Imam Hussein* (accessed on July 22, 2020): https://is.gd/BH4C6y.

to Shiite cleric Moqtada Al Sadr, turned one of its facilities into a hospital to treat Corona patients and it was inaugurated by the prime minister[52]. The long legacy of failure to provide adequate medical services[53] coupled with the intervention of non-state actors are indications of how fragile the state is and how unable to perform it duties towards its citizens or towards building a better infrastructure, including healthcare and services.

Fourth: Coronavirus and the future of Iraqi protests

The question of whether protests in Iraq can continue during the pandemic with the same momentum poses itself. It is hard to reach a conclusion in this regard, but the number of protesters in the main squares of Baghdad, for example, did remarkably decrease after the lockdown as there were constant warnings of any forms of gathering. This, however, did not mean that Liberation Square was empty of protesters. In late February 2020, a protest took place and hundreds of protesters carried banners to the effect that the pandemic would not stop them from protesting[54]. In March, however, protesters issued a statement about the temporary suspension of protests because of the spread of the virus[55]. This decision, added to political disputes between protesters, led to the eventual withdrawal of most protesters from Liberation Square. Only a few remained and announced that they are against withdrawal[56].

On the other hand, the author observed protests that continued until August 2020 in parts of the city other than Liberation Square. For example, a protest took place at the gates of Iraqi Defense University for Military Studies because of not accepting protesters that wanted to enroll. Those protesters created a Facebook page that later became inactive[57]. University graduates staged a protest in front of the Green Zone and called upon the prime minister to invest in local skills and Iraqi Defense University for Military Studies to appoint them in the Ministry of Defense as part of the civilian staff. A group of protesters staged a sit-in at the street that links Al Hassanin Square and the suspension bridge[58]. Temporary teachers staged a sit-in at the gates of the Green Zone then security forces dispersed it on July 22, 2020[59]. Graduates of the School of Political Science staged a sit-in months ago in front of the Foreign Ministry and demanded to be appointed in the diplomatic corps.

Other protests were driven by different causes such as the reduction of the salaries paid to the Rafha Camp refugees[60]. Protests took part in

[52] "Hospital to treat Corona cases inaugurated in Iraq [Arabic]." *Al Sharq Al Awsat* (accessed July 22, 2020): https://is.gd/Q;DCbMh

[53] "Coronavirus exposes the Iraqi health system [Arabic]." *Al Arabi Al Jadeed* (accessed July 24, 2020): https://is.gd/T0rzKk

[54] "Baghdad: Thousands of protesters challenge Coronavirus in Liberation Square [Arabic]." *Anadolu Agency* (accessed July 22, 2020): https://is.gd/OAt2Db

[55] "Gatherings and protests temporarily suspended in Iraq because of Coronavirus [Arabic]." *Al Arabi Al Jadeed* (accessed July 22, 2020): https://is.gd/m0GPcJ

[56] "Protesters' withdrawal from Liberation Square: Between fear of Coronavirus and political disputes [Arabic]." *France 24 Website* (accessed July 22, 2020): https://is.gd/uOGjPp

[57] The last protest was in early July 2020.

[58] Field research conducted by the author

[59] "Rock throwing between protesters and security forces in Baghdad [Arabic]." *Al Hurrah* (July 23, 2020): https://is.gd/qCWKGO

[60] Rafha Camp: After the failure of protests that took place in Iraq following withdrawal from Kuwait in March 1991, several protesters ran away with their families towards the borders with Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government detained them in a desert camp in Rafha. Between 1992 and 1996, around 24,700 refugees in Rafha moved to different countries such as the United States, Iran, and several European countries while some returned to Iraq in 2003. See Sidi Weld Ahmed Salem's "Iraqi refugees in Saudi Arabia [Arabic]." *Al Jazeera* (accessed July 17, 2020): https://is.gd/4Dpj0k. In 2013, refugees at the Rafha camp were included in the law of political prisoners no. 4 for the year 2006. Based on this law, the refugees and their families, including those born there, started receiving salaries. In the past few years and as protests started erupting in several parts of Iraq, questions around the legality of those salaries were raised as part of an attempt to reduce spending, the cabinet decided to reduce the salaries, which led to protests by refugees who had already returned to Iraq. See Rawafed Al Tayar's "Payments for Refha refugees: Violating the law and undermining social justice [Arabic]." Al Furat Center for Studies (accessed on July 15, 2020): https://is.gd/CNc4fy

different parts of the country including Baghdad and protesters blocked the international freeway and prevented cars from entering Baghdad[61]. Security forces responded violently and fired live ammunition. Many protesters were injured, and others were severely beaten. These seem to be the only protests that were in response to economic decisions. No protests were staged when salaries were delayed, including those of medical staff, even though the salaries of some civil servants were delayed for more than 50 days. It is noteworthy that similar grievances caused a lot of anger at previous governments, which means that Iraqis are more satisfied with the performance of the government.

Complaints of the current government on social networking websites were also not many despite the fact that the prime minister retracted many decisions he made and is unable to effectively address several issues such as arresting Hizbullah Brigades that tried to bomb the American embassy and who were later released[62] in addition to using violence to suppress protests staged by temporary teachers. Some attributed this to the prime minister's "electronic army"[63] that silenced opposition while others argued that Iraqis understand the delicate situation through which the prime minister is going and the challenges he is facing. The image of Kadhimi as a liberal who opposes Iranian influence is also thought to appease angry youths. In all cases, Kadhimi's position was not harmed by non-economic protests and the violent suppression of the temporary teachers' protest passed without much ado whether in regular media outlets or social networks. Since people seem to be more patient this time with the government and have more hope in its ability to control armed groups and eliminate corruption, it is unlikely that protests will erupt soon or that there will be clashes with security forces.

However, the situation is still precarious and the least provocation is bound to cause an escalation in Liberation Square like what happened on July 26, 2020 when security forces clashed with the protesters who did not leave the square and three of them were killed. The Ministry of Interior claimed that criminal groups penetrated the protesters' ranks to clash with security forces[64]. Until the time of writing, there was no escalation, which indicates a development when compared to the time of Abdel Mahdi's government where the slightest confrontation between protesters and security forces would lead to violent escalations. Even the electricity problem did not trigger substantial protests even though all what Kadhimi did appease the people was give a speech[65]. In fact, any escalation on this front is bound to be taken advantage of by Kadhimi's rivals, which may lead to his resignation before holding early elections as he promised.

Conclusion

The paper examined the development of Iraqi protests and the different waves they went through. It focused on how those waves differed from each other whether in terms of groups that participated, the mechanisms used in the protests, and role the protests played in impacting government policies.

Even though one of the protest waves coincided with uprisings that erupted across the Arab region,

[61] "Rafha detainees and families of martyrs and political prisoners block the international freeway [Arabic]." *Al Sumaria TV Website* (accessed on July 24, 2020): https://is.gd/5BFSSF

[62] "Released Iraqi Hizbullah operatives flex their muscles in Baghdad [Arabic]." *Al Jazeera Website* (accessed on July 23, 2020): https://is.gd/C1sfBO

[63] This term emerged at the time of former prime minister Nuri Al Maliki then became common in Iraq as every major politician started having an "electronic army" that runs a number of pages on social networking websites to defend this politician and slander his enemies as well as spread rumors when necessary. See "Electronic armies: Terrorism against Iraqis [Arabic]." *Al Arabi Al Jadeed*: https://is.gd/OrjAma

[64] "Death of the third Iraqi protestor in two days in Baghdad night clashes [Arabic]." *Al Hurrah Website* (accessed July 28, 2020): https://is.gd/SWI2y7

[65] "Speech of prime minister Mustafa Al Kadhimi [Arabic]." *Prime Minister Website* (accessed July 28, 2020): https://is.gd/94tkbP

the domestic conditions of Iraq, the complex relationship between its social components, and the conflict between partisan policies and social demands, endowed the protests with a character that is specific to Iraq.

In all cases, protests played a major role in raising awareness and creating new concepts and forced political powers to change their discourse and adopt one that responds to the people's needs. This means that protests did achieve success which is expected to grow if the protest movement continues with the same pace.

Based on all of the above, it seems that the future of protests in Iraq is contingent upon a number of factors:

- ***Lockdown:*** Despite the fact that the lockdown was mostly lifted in August 2020, there were no calls for protesting on social networks. It is likely that small numbers will continue protesting in different squares, especially that the lockdown did not leave those squares empty anyway. This also depends on whether activists would call for staging protests for reasons that are unrelated to the pandemic.
- ***The economic factor:*** Several protests can erupt for economic reasons at this stage such as unemployment rates, pay cuts, public debts, and suspension of commercial activities as well as protests by those harmed by the reduction of Rafha Camp salaries even though the latter were violently suppressed and did not get much sympathy from the people before.
- ***The political factor:*** This is the most significant factor since most protests erupted in response to poor government performance and Kadhimi's appointment, together with Abdel Mahdi's resignation, was considered a success for protesters. The performance of the current government will, therefore, play a major part in determining whether more protests would erupt[66].

The success of Kadhimi's government, which is closely to linked to the future of protests in Iraq, relies on how this government would deal with a number of issues such as lack of resources, the growing influence of armed groups, and domestic and external pressures. Kadhimi's government also needs to be transparent so that the people could know what the government could do and when, including the possibility of holding early elections.

[66] Some argue that Adel Abdel Mahdi's resignation, which was ratified by the Iraqi parliament on December 1, 2020, was a response to lobbying by the Shiite leadership in Najaf rather than in response to protests. See "Abdel Mahdi's resignation would restore calm yet won't stop protests [Arabic]." *Deutsche Welle Website* (accessed July 23, 2020): https://is.gd/BfTNPDP

2. COVID-19 in Syria: Pandemic Response, Pubic Policy, and Socio-Economic Inequalities

Fadi Esber[67] *(Arabic Version Translated by Sonia Farid*[68]*)*

At the turn of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic was looming on the horizon, the nearly decade-long crisis had devastated Syria's economy, infrastructure, health and education systems, and, above all, its human capital, propelling it in the opposite direction of meeting any sustainable development objectives. By 2019, 5.7 million Syrians had left the country and another 6.2 millions were still internally displaced[69]. The extensive destruction of agricultural and industrial production capacities forced the country to become import-reliant to cover most of its needs. The prolonged crisis pushed more than 80% of the Syrian population into poverty and increased socio-economic inequalities drastically[70]. At the beginning of 2020, the national currency (the Syrian Pound) depreciated rapidly and inflation skyrocketed, threatening the livelihoods of the majority of Syrians. On the eve of COVID-19, only half of Syria's public hospitals were fully functioning and an estimated 70% of health workers had already left the country[71]. It is in this context of extreme socio-economic fragility that Syria registered its first case of COVID-19 on March 22, 2020.

This paper looks at how the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in areas currently under the control of the Government of Syria between late March and mid-August (2020)[72]. It relies on a chronological approach to lay out the multiplicity of dynamics under study. The paper starts by placing the pandemic crisis within the Syrian context of extreme socio-economic fragility resulting from several overlapping crises. The paper then examines how COVID-19 preventative measures exacerbated Syria's chronic socio-economic problems and, in turn, the manner in which Syria's extremely fragile situation shaped how the pandemic crisis played out. It also analyses the Syrian government's policy actions towards COVID-19 and their socio-economic ramifications. In this regard, the paper examines the impact of the nation-wide lockdown on the economy,

[67] Co-Founder Research Associate The Damascus History Foundation.

[68] Translator and Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University.

[69] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic," March, 2019, 5.

[70] Ibid, 6.

[71] World Health Organization. Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. (2020). HeRAMS annual report January – December 2019 public hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic. World Health Organization. Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean; OCHA, "Syria anniversary press release," 6 March, 2020.

[72] Today, there are three territorial areas of control under three distinct forms of administration that have emerged as a result of the conflict in Syria: the first, controlled by the Government of Syria, encompasses 65% of the country's area, all of its major urban centres, and the majority of the population; the second extends over 25% of territory and is controlled by the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (mainly US-backed Kurdish political factions and militias); the third covers some 10% of Syria's territory and is controlled by an amalgamation of the "Interim Government," supported by Turkish-backed armed opposition groups, and the "Salvation Government," supported by *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS)—a UN-designated terrorist organisation. The decision-making structures in the three aforementioned areas that have so far dealt with the pandemic crisis, their instruments, their operational methods, their regional and international connections, and the possible long-term implications of their actions are drastically different.

then proceeds to look at the economic crisis that coincided with the gradual reopening of the country, while paying special attention to the most economically vulnerable segments of society. It then looks at how the post-lockdown economic crisis impacted the attitude of both the government and the general population towards a second wave of COVID-19 cases that occurred in the summer, and the implications said attitude holds for the future of the pandemic crisis in Syria.

This paper argues that the early success in containing the spread of COVID-19 in Syria and the economic downturn that resulted from stringent lockdown measures, which exacerbated an already fragile socio-economic situation, created negative feedback that incentivised the Syrian government to shift its policy approach towards the pandemic crisis, first by fully reopening the country, and then by putting the very survival of the economy ahead of the grave public health risks emanating from a second, more aggressive, wave of COVID-19 infections. This paper also posits that the economic and financial crunch created by the lockdown measures during the first wave of the pandemic drastically reduced the population's ability to cope with future waves of COVID-19.

As the Syrian government's own 2019 report on sustainable development noted, the prolonged crisis conditions had affected 'the processes of gathering and producing statistical data and measuring indicators of development'[73]. Such limitations notwithstanding, the Syrian government, agencies of the United Nations, international institutions, and various thinks tanks have published a plethora of detailed reports on socio-economic and humanitarian conditions in Syria throughout the conflict; these reports are the primary source of data for this study. It must be noted, however, that published data on the impact of the pandemic crisis on the Syrian economy remain rather scarce at the moment. The second key source of information for this study is the author's presence in Syria throughout the period of study, which allowed him to observe how the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded first-hand[74]. News articles and analyses published in local and international media outlets also supplemented the research effort.

Syria on the eve of COVID-19

Even though 2019 witnessed a positive GDP growth rate of 7.9% for the first time since 2011—caused by a decrease in violence and substantial growth in the agricultural sector, the Syrian economy was by that year equivalent to 36% of its 2010 level (as measured by GDP)[75]. The accumulated loss of GDP had reached a staggering $420.9 billion by the end of 2019[76].

Losses were incurred in all sectors and a shadowy war-economy emerged that involved activities such as smuggling, internal fees on movement of goods, and currency speculation—added to long-existing corruption problems. The massive destruction in production capacities, in both the industrial and agricultural sectors, forced Syria to rely almost exclusively on imports to procure its basic needs, including wheat, staple foods, energy products, and pharmaceuticals; as a consequence, the country's trade deficit in 2019 was around $5.5 billion, down from a record $6.9 billion in 2018[77]. Restrictions on financial transactions and other forms of coercive measures imposed by the United States and the European Union since 2011 continue to put additional costs on the import of goods into Syria—including for the ostensibly exempted items such staple foods and medications—with the average Syrian almost always bearing the extra costs[78]. Lack of revenues pushed the Syrian government to rely on deficit financing, which saw the public debt

[73] Government of the Syrian Arab Republic (GoS), "The First National Report on Sustainable Development," 2019, 21.

[74] The author acknowledges statistical data on the spread of COVID-19 in Syria provided by Dr. Youssef Moussali M.D.

[75] The Syrian Centre for Policy Research, "Impact of Syrian Conflict Report, 2016-2019," May, 2020, 35.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Syria imported $6.3 billion in goods last year," *Aliqtisadi*, 17 February, 2020, aliqtisadi.com/1680147-سورية-مستوردات-قيمة-انخفاض/

[78] Alloush, Basma, "Will More Syria Sanctions Hurt the Very Civilians They Aim to Protect?," *War on the Rocks*, 10 June, 2020, warontherocks.com/2020/06/will-more-syria-sanctions-hurt-the-very-civilians-they-aim-to-protect/

reach a historic 7 trillion Syrian pounds in 2019[79]. According to official data, the unemployment rate reached 30% in 2018; some observes, however, claim that the real figure was higher[80].

At the turn of 2020, as more than eight in ten Syrians were reportedly living below the poverty line, an unprecedented economic and financial shock hit the country[81]. After the financial crisis in neighbouring Lebanon erupted in October 2019, the Syrian Pound (SP) began to depreciate rapidly. As stringent capital controls were introduced in Lebanon, Syrians lost access to more than $40 billion deposited in Lebanese banks[82]. A daily flow of $4 million in remittances from Lebanon into Syria was also interrupted[83]. With the Lebanese banking system out of the picture, Syrian importers turned to the Syrian market for much needed US dollars—and so did Lebanese exchange firms[84]. The high demand for US dollars in the Syrian market coupled with the loss of access to dollar liquidity from Lebanon, saw the Syrian Pound depreciate from SP 640 to USD 1 in October 2019, to SP 1230 to USD 1 in January 2020[85]. And since most goods found in Syria are either imported or produced locally using imported inputs, the rapid depreciation of the national currency caused a massive inflationary wave[86]. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) in January 2020 was double its February 2019 level; by that point, the average prices of goods in Syria were 17 times their 2010 level, while food and beverage prices increased 20 times[87].

The rapid depreciation of the national currency and the correspondent rise in prices caused widespread uncertainty, pushed more Syrians into poverty, and exacerbated existing socio-economic inequalities. Eight million Syrians were without reliable access to food by March 2020, a 20% increase in one year—and a testament to the severity of the economic crunch that followed the crisis in Lebanon[88]. The Syrian government responded to the situation by introducing a salary-increase for public sector employees, which make up half the employed workforce in the country. Following the raise, the average public sector monthly wage became SP 60,000, or six times its 2010 value, while prices had risen 20-fold in the correspondent period. In February 2020, the government started selling quotas of subsidised rice and sugar to Syrian households, in addition to the continued sale of subsidised daily bread rations. These limited measures, coming on the eve of the pandemic, were insufficient to mitigate the worsening economic conditions for the majority of the population.

The nine years of conflict also took a terrible toll on Syria's health sector. At the turn of 2020, there were 113 public hospitals in areas under the government's control: 50% (57 hospitals) were fully functioning, 25% (28) were partially functioning, and 25% (28) were non-functioning[89]. The World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that 'as a

79 Ghisn, Ziad, "Syria and the revenue battle: debt financing the deficit," *Al-Akhbar*, 18 July, 2020, al-akhbar.com/Syria/291633.

80 Ghisn, Ziad, "The Central Bureau for Statistics declares: one million employed in three years," *The Damascus Centre for Research and Studies* (DCRS), 27 April, 2020, dcrs.sy/سنوات-ثلاث-في-مشتغل-مليون-يغرّد-للإحصاء-المركزي-المكتب

81 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic," March, 2019, 6.

82 Kan'an, Ali, "Lebanon is facing an imminent financial crisis: negative impacts on the Syrian economy," *The General Workers Union of Syria*, February, 2020, 13.

83 Ibid, 18.

84 Ibid.

85 It must be noted that this paper refers to the market rate (also known as the parallel market rate) rather than the fixed Central Bank rate. The market rate is a better indicator of the true value of currency and is employed by the majority of businesses in Syria to price goods.

86 The Syrian Pound was valued at SP 45 to USD 1 before the conflict started in 2011.

87 Turkmani, Rim, and Mehchy, Zaki. New Consumer Price Index Estimates for Syria Reveal Further Economic Deterioration and Alarming Levels of Humanitarian Need. Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2020.

88 OCHA, "Syria anniversary press release," 6 March, 2020.

89 World Health Organization. Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. (2020). HeRAMS annual report January – December 2019 public hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic. World Health Organization. Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean.

result of disrupted healthcare delivery and non-functionally of hospitals', limited provision of health services was observed across Syria, even within functional hospitals[90]. Even more worrying was the UN estimate that up to 70% of the health workforce had left the country by March 2020[91]. Public spending on the health sector dropped from SP 35 billion in 2010 ($700 million) to SP 16.5 billion ($66 million) in 2015[92]. The Syrian pharmaceutical industry's coverage of local needs dropped from 93% in 2010 to 70% in 2019—the vulnerabilities of this sector would exacerbate the impact of the pandemic crisis, an issue that will be discussed later in this paper[93].

COVID-19 arrives in Syria: initial policy response and socio-economic ramifications

When COVID-19 started spreading in Syria's immediate neighbourhood—Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan—in late February, both the government and the people were occupied with the recent currency fluctuations and the resulting inflation. In March, however, everyone began to pay more attention to the now imminent threat of COVID-19. Rumours started to circulate that the pandemic was already spreading in Syria, while state media began to broadcast public service announcements on the importance of personal hygiene. In the week before the first COVID-19 case was registered on March 22, the decision was taken to close the borders with Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan; flights in and out of Syria were suspended over the following days. The government also closed all venues that usually witness crowding (e.g., restaurants, cafes, cinemas, etc.). On March 22, bazars, shops, retail stores, and all other forms of economic activities were shut down; only pharmacies, grocery stores, and banks were allowed to remain open. Three days later, a nation-wide 12-hour curfew was introduced and public transpiration was halted. Public services would continue to operate at a 40% capacity and with a shorter working day, except for usually congested venues, such as the department of motor vehicles and the cadastral services, which were closed down.

With the country on lockdown, the government initiated a set of policy measures to deal with the looming public health crisis. The council of ministers allocated an SP 100 billion fund ($100 million in market value at the time) to combat COVID-19, giving the Ministry of Health an open credit-line. A moratorium was placed on exporting staple foods, such as dairy products, beans, and eggs, in addition to face masks, chlorine solutions (disinfectants), and other hygiene products. On the other hand, the government lifted import restrictions introduced earlier in the year to stem currency depreciation, allowing companies to import unlimited quantities of medical alcohol and flour. The government worked to resupply markets, as demand for food spiked during the lockdown, and shortages in staple foods and other essential goods were largely avoided; prices, however, surged due to increased demand and a 25% decrease in the value of the Syrian pound vis-a-vis the US dollar precipitated by the lockdown. On the socio-economic front, the Central Bank of Syria (CBS) ordered banks to exempt their customers from loan payments for two months, and the government removed all fines and penalties on delayed tax payments. The Ministry of Social Affairs placed a moratorium on contract terminations in the private sector; no provisions, however, were made to compensate businesses for losses incurred during the lockdown period. The government also launched an aid program for workers impacted by the lockdown measures, especially those employed in the informal sector and daily-wage earners, to which a quarter of a million Syrians (some 10% of the employed workforce) applied within two weeks—demonstrating the dire impact of the lockdown measures[94].

[90] Ibid.

[91] OCHA, "Syria anniversary press release," 6 March, 2020.

[92] GoS, "The First National Report on Sustainable Development," 2019, 27.

[93] Ghisn, Ziad, "How economic sanctions negatively affect the health sector in Syria: a case study of the pharmaceutical industry," *The London School of Economics*, 16 April, 2020, blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2020/04/16/how-economic-sanctions-negatively-affect-the-health-sector-in-syria-a-case-study-of-the-pharmaceutical-industry/

[94] "Some 250,000 registered for unemployment grants," *Aliqtisadi*, 29 April, 2020, aliqtisadi.com/1758941-العمل-عن-التعطل-منحة/

By the end of April, Syria had registered 43 cases of COVID-19, with the majority of infections concentrated in the capital Damascus and its rural areas. The once-feared pressure on the health sector did not occur—the few cases that needed hospitalisation were transferred to a hospital in rural Damascus dedicated to treating COVID-19 patients. Subsequently, the government gradually eased lockdown measures during the last week of April, which coincided with the start of the Holy Month of Ramadan (an important season for many businesses)—the 12-hour curfew, however, remained in place until the end of May. The government also started to organise flights to bring back Syrians stranded abroad. The country, more or less, breathed a collective sigh of relief, as the nightmare scenario of a wide-scale spread of COVID-19 was ostensibly averted.

Syria after the lockdown: an unmitigated economic catastrophe

On May 4, the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, met with the COVID-19 ministerial task force. Although the economic fallout of the lockdown measures was not yet fully apparent, Assad's speech carried a stark forecast about the socio-economic ramifications of the pandemic crisis. He noted that the government had to choose the lesser of two evils, either a lockdown that damaged the economy or a passive approach that would have entailed a spread of the disease—the government chose the former. But now, he warned, that while contracting COVID-19 was only a possibility, 'hunger and poverty' were becoming a certainty for Syrians[95]. His words echoed those of some policy-makers around the world at the time, who argued that the cure (lockdown measures) cannot become worse than the disease. Consequently, the government continued the gradual reopening of the economy, as the infamous COVID-19 curve in Syria remained largely flat, with little over 50 domestic cases registered by the first week of May—seven weeks after the first case was registered.

Following the partial reopening of the economy, the Syrian Pound began an unprecedented depreciation, both in terms of its extent and its velocity. The market exchange rate dropped from SP 1300 to USD 1 in early May to SP 3200 to USD 1 on June 7, before levelling off at around SP 2500 to USD 1 throughout June and July. The absence of reliable data makes it difficult to establish a correlation between COVID-19 preventive measures and the currency shock; however, available information allow for a number of informed guesses. First, as the Syrian economy was reopened, businesses needed to resupply, which lead to more demand for imported goods and, therefore, higher demand for hard currency. Second, the looming threat of the CAESAR Act—a US legislation that promised to add harsher coercive measures atop the ones already imposed on the Syrian government and economy by the United States (and the European Union) since 2011—increased the sense of uncertainty and drove up the cost of imports (i.e. the cost of circumventing sanctions), as more banks, companies, insurers and shipping companies refused to engage in any Syria-related business, even for exempted goods such as food and medications[96]. Third, the US dollar became a safe haven for some well-off citizens in a time of uncertainty and rampant inflation. Finally, the significant role that currency speculators played in such volatile fluctuations cannot be discounted.

In the import-reliant Syrian economy, the purchasing power of the national currency had, since long, become linked to its value vis-a-vis the US dollar. Therefore, the inflationary wave that followed the post-lockdown round of currency depreciation saw prices of all goods, including basic food and hygiene items, skyrocket to unprecedented highs; the Consumer Price Index was now 40 to 45 times its 2010 level, while at the start of 2020 it was only 20 times[97].

---

[95] "President al-Assad holds meeting with government team for confronting Coronavirus to discuss latest developments," *SANA*, 4 May, 2020, sana.sy/en/?p=191017

[96] Alloush, Basma, "Will More Syria Sanctions Hurt the Very Civilians They Aim to Protect?," *War on the Rocks*, 10 June, 2020, warontherocks.com/2020/06/will-more-syria-sanctions-hurt-the-very-civilians-they-aim-to-protect/

[97] Ghisn, Ziad, "Lockdown experience: bullying, poverty, and accumulated wealth," *Al-Akhbar*, 25 July, 2020, al-akhbar.com/Syria/291955/ثروات-ومراكمة-وفقر-ر-تتم-ي-الصح-الحجر-تجربة

The impact of the new economic shock on the population was catastrophic. Official figures indicate that each employed Syrian currently supports five dependants[98]. According to the Syrian General Workers Union, a food basket of 8 items that guarantees each worker 2400 calories per day, currently costs SP 59,000[99]. This means that a worker needs to earn SP 295,000 a month to provide enough food for himself and his dependants; if the cost of other basic needs, such as rent and transpiration are added, the figure jumps to SP 490,000[100]. The average monthly public sector salary in Syria, however, is SP 60,000—private sector wages mostly equal or, in some cases, are only slightly above those of the public sector. The rapid depreciation of the Syrian Pound and the corresponding decline in its purchasing power prompted the World Food Program (WFP) to declare in late June that 9.3 million Syrians had become food insecure—an increase of 1.4 million in the first six months of 2020 and the highest number ever recorded[101].Yet it is economically and financially impossible for the government to raise public sector wages to match actual living costs—at least not without causing hyperinflation and collapsing the national currency.

Although exact numbers are not available, but according to the Syrian Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, some 250,000 Syrians applied for unemployment benefits—which amounts to some 10% of the pre-COVID-19 employed workforce[102]. While data are not available, first-hand observation of the Syrian labour market shows that workers in the informal sector and daily wage earners suffered heavily from the lockdown measures—with a large, but unspecified number losing employment. Another economically vulnerable group that was impacted by the post-lockdown slump is Syrian farmers and (seasonal) agricultural workers. Rising inflation pushed the cost of production inputs upwards, leading farmers to mark up prices, which caused a drop in demand for some of their products—most profits, in any case, go to the middlemen rather than the farmers themselves. Furthermore, farmers, like all Syrians, also have to cope with exploding living costs. Such disruption in the agricultural sector will worsen the food security situation in Syria.

As for the private sector, and after the economy was reopened, many businesses were hoping not only to get back to work, but to make up losses incurred during the lockdown period. The massive inflationary wave, however, caused a sharp decrease in consumer demand, which lead many businesses to shut down and lay off workers—swelling the ranks of the economically vulnerable. All in all, towards the end of June, Syria seemed to have entered a period of stagflation, characterised by rising inflation, high unemployment, and economic stagnation. The emerging negative trends rendered the Syrian economy, already battered by conflict, more fragile and more vulnerable in the face of future waves of the pandemic—and, for that matter, any other crisis.

Policy making in quicksands: from pandemic to recession

The economic fallout of COVID-19 is a global phenomenon. Even the most developed economies in the world fell into some form of recession this year, their respective GDPs have contracted, and their governments had to resort to complex policy measures to cope with the emerging situation. In Syria, the economic ramifications of COVID-19 preventative measures were compounded by already-existing chronic economic and financial problems. The fragile socio-economic setting in Syria amplified the ramifications of the pandemic response and was, in turn, made worse by it. Furthermore, crisis dynamics, both existing and emerging, limited the policy options available for the Syrian government, which found itself facing a dangerous economic situation in early June.

98 Mahmoud, Ishtar, "Wages today should not be less than SP 490,000," *Kassioun*, 29 June, 2020, kassioun.org/economic/item/65042-2010-490

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

101 The World Food Program, "Syria Country Brief," 8 July, 2020.

102 "Some 250,000 registered for unemployment grants," *Aliqtisadi*, 29 April, 2020, aliqtisadi.com/1758941-منحة-التعطل-عن-العمل/

A week into the reopening, the minister of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection, Atef Naddaf, was sacked due to his poor performance during the lockdown. And by the end of the second week of June, as the Syrian Pound hit a historic low, the prime minister, Imad Khamis, was removed from office. The first policy priority for the Syrian government after the lockdown was to provide the most basic needs for citizens and mitigate the impact of rampant inflation. This meant the continued provision of a subsidised food basket composed of bread, rice, sugar, tea, and cooking oil to each Syrian household—in addition to a quota of subsidised gasoline, diesel, and butane gas (cooking gas). Public sector venues were selling other goods at below-market prices. The government also set up farmers-markets across the country to help producers deliver fruits and vegetables directly to consumers, in order to bypass middlemen and reduce prices. However, the public sector's ability to cover basic needs and mitigate the dire livelihood situation described in the previous section remained, at best, limited (if not lacking).

Apart from short-term mitigation efforts, the government resorted to monetary policy tools to curb rising inflation. The Central Bank of Syria (CBS) decided to curtail the money supply in the market by issuing a moratorium on all credit facilities, in order to shore up the national currency. This contractionary policy, however, is a double-edged sword, because it could deepen the ongoing recession. On the flip side, the government is facing growing demands to increase public sector wages (which employs more than 50% of the workforce) in order to solve the livelihood problem and weak consumer demand[103]. A move to increase salaries on such a scale, however, would contradict the CBS's contractionary policy and could worsen inflation. And in case the government decides to increase wages, it will need to do so through deficit spending, which has increased exponentially in recent years as public revenues dwindled due to widespread destruction and sanctions—the latter have effectively cut off Syria from global financial markets and institutions. The public debt in Syria had reached a record SP 7 trillion by 2019, while the deficit accounted for 37% of the 2020 public budget[104]. This growing reliance on deficit spending risks future inflationary waves that might compound the country's existing economic troubles.

The second wave of COVID-19 in the context of an economic recession

Amidst the overlapping economic and financial crises, COVID-19 came back into the picture. On June 6, a lorry driver coming from Jordan tested positive for the virus, and his hometown of Ras al-Ma'ara (rural Damascus) was isolated. On June 17, a woman tested positive for the virus after she had passed away at a Damascus hospital, and her hometown of Judaidat al-Fadel (rural Damascus) was also isolated by the government. From then-on, infections gathered up pace, heralding a so-called second wave of the pandemic. According to official figures, Syria had registered 2628 cases and 106 deaths by August 29. The Ministry of Health, nevertheless, acknowledged its limited testing capacity and the fact that the real number of infections might be higher. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the daily number of cases across the country was in hundreds throughout August, with 100 to 150 deaths a day in Damascus alone. Almost all public hospitals in Damascus hit their capacity in the first two weeks of August; patients requiring oxygen to help them breath, but not a ventilator, were being turned away from hospitals due to lack of beds and told to seek home treatment with rented oxygen canisters. The number of cases with mild symptoms cannot be ascertained, but is likely in the thousands.

Despite the spike in hospital admissions and the immense pressure on the medical staff—more than 60 Syrian physicians passed away in July and August—government officials have repeatedly asserted that there will not be another full

[103] "The Minister of Economy: salaries must be increased," *Al-Watan*, 15 July, 2020, alwatanonline.com/وزير-الاقتصاد-في-مكاشفات-يجب-زيادة-ا/

[104] Ghisn, Ziad, "Syria and the revenue battle: debt financing the deficit," *Al-Akhbar*, 18 July, 2020, al-akhbar.com/Syria/291633.

lockdown because the damage to the economy will be intolerable. And indeed, not even localised or partial lockdown measures were undertaken. In accordance with this attitude, nation-wide middle and high school exams took place in early July, parliamentary elections were held in mid-July, and the school year started in mid-September. Furthermore, the government, in cooperation with the private sector, organised six shopping festivals in the second half of July—with very large crowds present—to sell goods to the public at reduced prices before the Eid al-Adha holiday with the aim of mitigating the impact of inflation. All types of economic activities are proceeding normally throughout Syria at the moment of writing.

The economic crunch on the back of the first wave of the pandemic not only altered the government's attitude, as noted above, but also strained the ability of Syrians to deal with the second more aggressive wave of the pandemic. Turned away from public hospitals, patients were seldom able to seek care at private hospitals due to their immense costs. If a patient lacks appropriate insurance, a single day of treatment at a private hospital for COVID-19—with a ventilator—can cost up to SP 500,000. To put this figure and upcoming ones in perspective, it must be remembered that the average monthly wage in Syria is SP 60,000. Home treatment for patients requiring oxygen to assist them is also very costly. Given the high demand for oxygen, suppliers resorted to price gouging, with the price of one canister ranging between SP 250,000 and SP 400,000. Other supplier rented out canisters for SP 3,000 a day, provided the customer put up an SP 125,000 deposit—a canister requires at least one refill a day, adding another SP 3,000 to the overall bill. There are also additional costs of medication, medical consultations, and nursing services.

Conclusion

This paper was produced over a period of four months; its many drafts were written as the pandemic crisis and its ramifications unfolded in Syria. When the first draft was concluded in late July, Syria was in the midst of the economic shock described above, and the second wave of infections was only just starting. With the second draft submitted in late August, the country was suffering from a dangerous spike in COVID-19 cases and its public health system had hit its capacity; the economic crisis, on the other hand, was hampering both the government's and the people's ability to cope with the pandemic. As the second draft of the paper estimated, the Syrian government did not reimpose any lockdown measures, putting the very survival of the economy ahead of pubic health concerns. For the majority of the population too, the deteriorating livelihood situation trumped pandemic concerns—as it rightly should have, in this author's opinion. The final draft of the paper was prepared for submission in September, when the spread pandemic had more or less receded—again, based on anecdotal and observational evidence—while a new wave of economic tribulations was ripping through an already exhausted Syria. In early September, Syria started to suffer from suffocating fuel shortages, which have lead to more strict rationing of subsidised quotas and endless queues gas stations—the energy crisis is still ongoing at the moment of writing. The government also slashed the daily quota of subsidised bread in order to cope with mounting costs, to the dismay of Syrian households. It is very likely that both the Syrian government and people will continue to have to face such difficult choices as long as the pandemic and the chronic economic crises continue to overlap in the coming months.

This paper is also part of a wider project on the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 across the Arab World. Research showed similar patterns emerging in the economies of many Arab countries under study. Like Syria, almost all of them will suffer a degree of economic contraction due to lockdown measures. In Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, countries that are relatively stable (at least compared to Syria), the lockdown precipitated a drop in demand to the detriment of the services and industrial sectors, leading to a rise in unemployment. In Lebanon, Iraq, and Sudan, countries in which political and economic upheaval coincided with the pandemic crisis, informal sector workers suffered the most from the lockdown measures, which had cost them their jobs and their livelihoods. These dynamics, and many others, greatly expanded socio-economic

inequalities, which are further exacerbated by the lack in proper social protection policies on part of the state. Many Arab countries were forced to slash subsidies, at the worst time possible, due to the economic fallout of the pandemic crisis.

Syria has experienced many of the dynamics emerging in Arab countries during the pandemic crisis; their negative impact on Syria, however, was made much worse by already existing socio-economic fragility and overlapping crises—as this paper attempted to demonstrate. The widespread destruction across economic sectors after a decade of conflict, the fallout from the Lebanon financial crisis, and the external coercive measures imposed by the US and the EU (the latest instalment of which was the CAESAR Act), only amplified the economic ramifications of COVID-19 and the ensuing response measures.

The Syria context, however, not only exacerbated the pandemic crisis, but has also denied Syria the tools available to other Arab countries in facing its financial and economic fallout. Syria, for once, is denied access to international financial institution or networks; it cannot receive any significant funds from abroad (even if they are directed to the private sector), let alone borrow from any international institutions. Therefore, deficit spending will be a primary tool for the government; such a policy, however, risks more inflation in the future, which will, in turn, exacerbate the livelihood situation for the majority of Syrians. Inflation, on the other hand, pushed the Central Bank to momentarily limit the money supply, in order to shore up the national currency (and help reduce prices), which slowed down an economy that is already in a recession. The Syrian government is trying to invest in reviving the country's productive capacities in order to reduce reliance on imports, but its investments, owing to its limited financial capabilities and the need to focus on mitigation efforts, fall quite short of what is actually needed.
When the regional and international contexts are taken into account, the pandemic entails additional risks for Syria. The prime example in this regards is that Syrian expatriates might lose their jobs due to economic recessions unfolding across the world and will, therefore, be unable to send remittances, which are an important factor in the livelihood of thousands of Syrian households. Another key factor to consider here is geopolitics; the crisis in Syria is still very much ongoing, with a multiplicity of regional and international actors involved. Any negative developments in this regard will only compound the plethora of overlapping crises described in this paper.

All in all, Syria will have to sail through very troubled waters in the weeks and months ahead. For the people, they have become unstuck between the anvil of COVID-19 and the hammer of a deteriorating livelihood situation. For the government, every policy solution to a problem seems to be an admissions ticket to another one. In a complex setting like Syria, the pandemic is only one of many factors shaping socio-economic outcomes. COVID-19, nevertheless, has so far proved to be a game-changer, in the sense that it has amplified the fragile socio-economic situation and disrupted policy-making processes, creating, therefore, new realities that would have been unimaginable otherwise.

3. Between the Palestinian Authority's Social Policies and Israel's Occupation Policies: Palestinians during the Corona Pandemic

Abaher El Sakka[105]

This paper examines the impact of Coronavirus on the Palestinian people as they grapple with the social policies of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the occupation policies of the Israeli occupation through focusing on three main points:

- **First:** The paper tackles the role policies adopted by the Palestinian Authority played in accentuating inequality among Palestinians. These include issuing laws that enable senior officials to get more privileges and attempts at making up for the failure of its social and economic policies through resorting to security-oriented measures. Added to that are the measures taken by the PA to face the pandemic and the accompanying patriarchal discourse that held people accountable for the spread of the virus while overlooking the effect on the lockdown on their livelihoods. The paper will also examine how distance learning contributed to highlighting inequality in the Palestinian society and how the pandemic exposed the fragility of the healthcare system.
- **Second:** The paper examines the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups such as wage workers and small vendors and initiatives launched by the private sector and the PA to mitigate the financial crises. This part also tackles the demonization of Palestinian workers who work in Israeli settlements in the West Bank and how they are automatically treated as carriers of the virus, hence a threat to society.
- **Third:** The paper will look into the policies of the Israeli occupation during the pandemic and will focus on those who live under Israeli authority like in Jerusalem, workers, and prisoners. This section will also focus on how the Israeli occupation took advantage of the pandemic to annex 30% of the West Bank, continue the demolition of houses, and arrest more Palestinians.

The study adopts several methodologies including participant observation and analysis of data, laws and statistics.

Introduction

Writing about an ongoing issue involves a lot of challenges since the author is unable to look at all the ramifications of the issue subject of the study. The author, therefore, focused on the different aspects of the topic until the time of writing. There is no doubt that the Corona pandemic can be analyzed based on Émile Durkheim's theories as a social phenomenon that constitutes part of the complex crisis through which the Palestinian society is going. This crisis is linked to the three main points mentioned above.

The spread and impact of the virus

The first Coronavirus cases were recorded in February 2020 in Bethlehem after several Korean tourists tested positive following their return to their countries. Bethlehem was placed under

[105] Associate Professor of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Birzeit University.

lockdown and so were other neighboring cities Beit Jala and Beit Sahour. This was followed by the declaration of a state of emergency. Until the time of writing this paper, the number of deaths reached 317 and the total number of cases is around 48,000 (43,000 in the West Bank, 2,600 in the Gaza Strip, and 11,000 in occupied Jerusalem and its suburbs). The number of recovering cases is estimated at 35,000. The number deaths in the Palestinian diaspora reached 6,100. A substantial number of cases is concentrated south of the West Bank, particularly between Hebron and Bethlehem[106].

Declaring a state of emergency

On March 5, 2020, the Palestinian Authority declared a state of emergency on the West Bank. Based on PA president Mahmoud Abbas's speech that prime minister Mohammad Shtayyeh gave on his behalf, the state of emergency was to last for 30 days and is subject to renewal. It was, in fact, renewed three times amid a heated debate about its constitutionality in the absence of the Palestinian Legislative Council whose activities were suspended owing to factional divisions. The authorities in the Gaza Strip did not declare a state of emergency and everything went normal there with the exception of establishing facilities for quarantine and a few recorded cases. This continued till August 2020 when the virus started spreading in the strip. Then a lockdown was imposed for two weeks and public institutions suspended their activities.

In order to make up for the failure of its social and healthcare policies since its creation in 1994, the Palestinian Authority adopted a security-oriented approach in dealing with the pandemic. Palestinians in the West Bank generally complied with the lockdown even if in different degrees. There were regions where lockdown was strictly imposed such as Ramallah. As for areas outside the security reach of the Palestinian Authority such as Kafr Aqab, life went on normally to a great extent. Residents of areas under PA control observed the lockdown because of mistrust in the healthcare system in case they get the virus. Added to that is the fact that curfews are not new to Palestinians who are used to isolation and have been through experiences when they had to store food for emergencies.

Palestinian healthcare policies

Four entities are involved in the healthcare system in Palestine: the Palestinian Ministry of Health, which is affiliated to the PA, The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), non-governmental organizations, and private sector institutions. Healthcare is offered through 735 centers, 587 in the West Bank and 152 in the Gaza Strip, and 63% of them is run by the Ministry of Health[107]. There is one health center for every 4,599 citizens in the West Bank and one for 12,376 in the Gaza Strip. The total number of hospitals in Palestine is 81. This gap between the West Bank and Gaza is because of the population density in the latter as well as the 14-year-long Israeli blockade. Added to that are the ramifications of the disputes between Fatah and Hamas. Statistics reveal lack of planning as far as hospitals are involved and the discrepancy between different regions[108] through not taking into consideration how demographics play a major role in healthcare, the spread of diseases, discrimination, deprivation, and access to services. Around 42% of the healthcare sector is funded by the Palestinian people and the PA funds 38%[109]. The number of families covered by health insurance is 190,000 which reveals how fragile healthcare policies are. Only 11% of the Palestinian budget is allocated to healthcare while 26% is allocated to security, 20%

[106] Statistics by the Palestinian Ministry of Health (accessed April 24, 2020): https://corona.ps

[107] Palestinian Ministry of Health, 2017 annual report (accessed August 23, 2020): http://www.moh.gov.ps/portal/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/MOH-Annual-Report-2017-Final-9-9-2018.pdf

[108] Palestinian Ministry of Health, 2018 annual report (accessed August 15, 2020): https//:www.moh.gov.ps/portal/category%/D%8A%7D%84%9D%8A%3D%8AE%D%8A%8D%8A%7D%8B%/1D%8A%7D%8AD%D%8B%5D%8A%7D%8A%6D8%9A%D%8A%7D%8AA/

[109] Samir Abdallah. "Gaps in the healthcare system [Arabic]." Ramallah: Palestinian Economic Policy Research Institute- MAS, 2018.

to education, and 8% to social development[110]. A year ago, the PA proposed a social protection law that triggered a massive wave of protests as people said the law only benefits businessmen and does not meet the most basic of needs. As a result, the PA decided to reformulate the law and present later for ratification.

Managing the Coronavirus crisis

Despite the fact that the sources of the PA budget are diverse, including taxes, local revenues, and foreign aid, it does not have full control over it because of subordination to the Israeli occupation and policies of donor countries. In fact, the occupation controls around 60% of the PA's financial resources[111].

Based on the statistics of the Ministry of Health[112] tests were done to 184,885 people since March 6, 2020 and until the time of writing, 23,204 were quarantined. The ministry targets having 500 people tested per day, yet this is contingent upon developments and the possible suspension of cooperation between the PA and the Israeli occupation. Reports show a shortage in different types of medical supplies such as ventilators and ICU equipment, which reflects the fragile status of the healthcare sector even before the crisis. According to a report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs (OCHA), there is a shortage in daily protection supplies such face masks and sanitizers. The PA owns only 20 ventilators, 22 PCR detection systems, and 55 oxygen concentrators[113]. The PA asked people not to request a test unless they mingled with someone who tested positive. In late September 2020, the PA accused occupation forces of destroying 100,000 tests by not allowing them into the labs and leaving them without protection[114].

Most cases were asked to self-isolate at home not only because medical centers cannot admit all cases, but also because those centers have come to be stigmatized as sources of disease. Also, medical centers used for quarantine in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip turned into repressive spaces, which brings to mind Erving Goffman's theory about mental asylums' attempts at institutionalizing patients by force[115]. In addition, medical centers were too crowded to receive more patients. Several protests were staged against hospitals in Jericho and Rafah for not abiding by quarantine rules.

On the administrative level, the PA imposed a night curfew, restricted movement between different governorates, imposed lockdown from Thursday night till Sunday morning, banned gatherings, and imposed a fine on people who did not wear face masks or did not observe social distancing. Most stores and government facilities were closed and only banks were left open. From observation, it is obvious that most people did abide by the rules. This is not only attributed to people's fear for their lives and safety but also lack of trust in the medical system. During the first wave, there were relatively few cases, but that was reversed with the second wave. Many believe that this was due to the relaxation of restrictions and return to social gatherings such as weddings and funerals.

---

[110] Aman Palestine 2019 report no. 15 (accessed August 15, 2020): https://www.amanpalestine.org/cached_uploads/download/2020/02/01/%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-1580554365.pdf

[111] Palestinian Ministry of Health, 2018 annual report. Op. cit.

[112] Ministry of Health statistics (accessed April 24, 2020): https://corona.ps

[113] "COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report 13 (1 – 14 July 2020)." United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs (OCHA) (accessed August 12, 2020): https://www.ochaopt.org/content/covid-19-emergency-situation-report-13

[114] Minister of Health Mai Kieleh said the Israeli authorities destroyed 100,000 PCR tests through obstructing the entry of samples from Palestine to Jordan in coordination with the UN. *Al Hadath Newspaper* (accessed September 24, 2020): https://www.alhadath.ps/article/128948/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%A5%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81-100%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%81-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%A9%D8%A8%D9%80%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7

[115] Evring Goffman, *Asiles. Etudes sur la condition sociale des malades mentaux*. Paris : Collection Le sens commun, Minuit 1986.

Protests were staged against lockdown measures in several cities including Hebron, the biggest city in the West Bank. People also protested against lack of consistency in imposing restrictions for the lockdown was strictly observed in Ramallah while this was not the case in other cities. After the protests, the government eased up restrictions through resuming transportation services and commercial activities. The authorities found it hard at times to impose restrictions, especially in areas outside the PA's control, also called Area C, such as Kafr Aqab in which life went on normally. This was also the case in some parts of Hebron as well as the northern parts of the West Bank. The virus also spread in several refugee camps such as Balata near Nablus and Jalazone and Amaari near Ramallah which are densely populated, especially in poorer areas, hence increasing the risk of catching the virus as well as makes observing restrictions much harder.

In the Gaza Strip, 13,202 people were tested and there are 338 patients in six quarantine hospitals. The number of cases in the strip remained relatively the same since few people come in or go out. The Rafah Crossing that links Gaza to Egypt remained closed all the time except in cases of emergency and for a very limited number of people, particularly returnees. On April 27, 2020, the Hamas administration allowed restaurants, hotels, and tourist facilities to open while calling upon people to observe social distancing. Later, mosques, marketplaces, wedding halls, and playgrounds reopened. The Erez crossing between Gaza and Israel is closed most of the time and only 80 people are allowed to cross per week[116]. In early August, it got worse and the authorities had to im pose lockdown by force. This was accompanied by power outages that lasted for several hours each time, which made the situation harder for the people.

Economic impact

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the Palestinian economy is expected to lose around 2.5 billion US dollars and the GDP is expected to drop by 14%. According to PCBS, the losses of the agriculture and fishing sectors are estimated at 200 million dollars, industries 362 million, construction 220 million, and services 1175 million. This means that the pandemic affected all sectors of the Palestinian economy. This led to an unprecedented rise in unemployment rates that reached 45% in the Gaza Strip and 40% in the West Bank. This is attributed to the closure of stores, schools and nurseries, universities, and some factories and facilities in addition to a drop in tax revenues and the impact of pandemic on trade with China. In addition, around 150,000 wage workers and drivers lost their jobs.

The pandemic had a grave impact on owners of small facilities, who constitute 86% of the total number of facilities in Palestine. In an attempt to mitigate this impact, the PA allowed those facilities to resume by a 50% capacity and also allowed workshops to open on particular days of the week while retail stores were opened on Fridays only. Agricultural activities were affected, which was demonstrated in the prices of fodder, fertilizers, and pesticides and the drop in demand due to the decline of purchasing power, the closure of local markets, and the suspension of exporting. The same applied to animal products. The Ministry of Social Development expected that 100,000 families would become poor by April 2020 and in the Gaza Strip, The Ministry of Labor expected that around 38,000 workers out of the registered 130,000 would need humanitarian aid owing to the deterioration of their social and economic conditions[117].

Social impact

Many interviewees[118] noted a remarkable increase in cases of domestic violence with all members of the family staying in small spaces for a long time and the impoverishment of many families in the aftermath of the pandemic. Several reports revealed that residents of Area C, which is controlled by occupation forces, is suffering

[116] "COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report 13 (1 – 14 July 2020)." Op. cit.

[117] "COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report 13 (1 – 14 July 2020)." Op. cit.

[118] Interviews conducted by the author between April 15 and July 25, 2020 in Ramallah. It was not possible then to go out of the city.

from dire conditions because of their proximity to Israeli settlements and their isolation from other Palestinian areas. Social customs have generally changed, especially gatherings.

Education

Educational institutions were closed in early March 2020. According to statistics, around 1.43 million children from all the Palestinian territories lack access to distance learning. In poor and isolated areas, 360,000 children do not have internet access and 3,037 schools have to be cleaned and sanitized and there aren't enough funds to renovate utilities and the sewage systems in these schools. Disparities between different regions were particularly highlighted in the condition of schools in marginalized areas. Universities moved to distance learning, which accentuated inequality and widened the gap between classes since living conditions, the number of family members, and access to internet are all factors that determine the possibility of benefiting from distance learning. Other problems are expected to emerge such as students' inability to keep paying tuition fees and the PA defaulting on its due payment to Palestinian universities.

The adoption of a moralistic discourse

Added to the measures imposed to curb the spread of the virus, the authorities in Palestine adopted a different discourse. The PA held regular press conferences that were broadcast on TV and in which different officials addressed the people such as government spokesman Ibrahim Melhem, prime minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, and health minister Mai Keileh. Those press conferences included updates on the number of cases and new measures taken by the government to deal with the pandemic. The PA used a moralistic and patriarchal discourse in those briefings for it presented itself as an institution that knows what is in the people's best interest, which is obvious in the introduction to every briefing: "Our priority is protecting you, so help us help you." Melhem used an extremely patronizing tone in one of the briefings as he argued that the virus is spreading because of "people's lack of awareness" and used statements like "help us make you aware," "help us protect you from your recklessness," and "we've always helped you and now it's time you assume responsibility with us." In several of his statements, Melhem addressed particular groups such as children or elderly women as a means of currying favor with the people. He also praised the government for its "wisdom" in dealing with the crises and its efficiency which equals that of the most developed of countries. He also praised representatives of clans for volunteering to help the authorities in imposing safety measures[119]. Dawoud El Zeer, a dignitary from south of the West Bank said he is willing to help the government exercise its authority and stated that different clans across Palestine agreed to take part in this initiative. El Zeer added that people are divided into three categories: those who are careless, those who do not believe the virus exists, and those who just want to go against the government.

A similar discourse was adopted by Abbas in his televised speech on June 24, 2020 when he said that he is not only addressing the people as president but also as a father and a brother then, quoting a saying by the prophet, said that each ruler is responsible for the people he rules. Like Melhem, Abbas said that the whole world was impressed by the efficiency of the PA in dealing with the pandemic, hence totally overlooking the serious defects of the Palestinian healthcare system and lack of social protection. There was also no mention of the crippling financial crisis the West Bank is going through as Israel stopped transferring tax revenues to the PA, which led to a 50% cut in salaries. Added to that is the fact that more than 40% of PA employees receive monthly salaries that are less USD 580, which means they live under poverty live[120]. In the Gaza Strip, the Hamas administration's approach was not any different, which was demonstrated in the banner posted behind the government spokesmen in a press briefing and which read, "We stop your recklessness to protect you".

[119] Report by *Al Jazeera*, July 7, 2020 (accessed September 14, 2020): https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2020/7/11.

[120] Statement by the Minister of Finance, March 10, 2019: https://nn.ps/news/Palestine/2019/03/10/209284

While exercising authority has not been uncommon since the start of the pandemic, the problem in Palestine is that such discourse is not accompanied by compensations for vulnerable groups or actual measures on the ground to protect the people. This discourse, therefore, only became a tool in both administrations to absolve themselves of their responsibilities and to hold people accountable for any damage.

The situation is not any better in the private sector since the majority of Palestinians work in small private businesses that suspended their activities when the virus started spreading. These include small factories and workshops and all forms of businesses that employ small workers and craftsmen, many of whom are expected to be categorized as poor in the near future. Because the government was unable to take any constructive measures to face the crisis, lockdown was the only tool it could use. Through doing this, plus using the patronizing discourse and emotionally manipulating people, the government tries to cover up its fragility and its inability to address the ramifications of the crisis.

As part of its security-oriented approach, the PA imposed restrictions on movement, erected several barriers, divided the West Bank into militarized zones, and stopped passersby on random basis. Based on people's testimonies, favoritism was manifested even during the crisis since these measures were not applied to all people equally and security forces chose who to let pass and who to detain. Many interviewees see that the PA took advantage of the pandemic tighten its grip on public space and attempt to regain its legitimacy through a set of strict measures that allegedly give it more strength and more control over the people. The state of emergency also benefited the government in the way it stopped protests by several groups such as trade unions, doctors, and teachers as well as protests against corruption, internal divisions, and the new social protection law. In addition, the government took advantage of the pandemic to curb personal freedoms including internet access and several journalists were arrested under the pretext of spreading chaos and violating the state of emergency. Ten members of the Youths Against Corruption movement were arrested for illegal assembly then released following public pressure. Police forces tried to violently disperse a protest staged at the Balata refugee camp and killed Fatah's representative there. There were also several calls on social media to protest against the government, fines banks imposed on bouncing checks, and penalties on loan payment defaults. Other protests were staged against private schools for stopping the salaries of staff. In fact, Palestinians accused the PA of profiteering from the crisis.

Many interviewees[121] argued that many of the measures the PA took aimed at protecting the interests of the private sector as well as some commercial and industrial businesses that pledge allegiance to senior officials. One the interviewees said that the government closed particular businesses while allowing others to operate normally, which led to the eruption of several protests[122]. Trade unions staged a protests against the policies of banks supported by the PA and which, according to them, aim at humiliating the people through imposing hefty fines on bouncing checks while not taking into consideration that many people either stopped receiving their salaries..

The pandemic exposed lack of coordination among government ranks. For example, on April 7, 2020, government spokesman Ibrahim Melhem said lockdown will be extended for a few more days while several governors announced that their governorates are exempted from the decision such as Ramallah, Hebron, and Nablus. Many believed that the decision to resume economic activities in some parts of the West Bank is linked to lobbying by chambers of commerce and the private sector that wanted economic activities to resume. This confusion made the government announce that all governors' statements are nullified and confirmed the continuation of lockdown.

[121] Interviews conducted by the author in Ramallah, June 12, 2010.

[122] "Healthcare departments go on a strike [Arabic]." Maan (accessed April 28, 2020).

It is noteworthy that the pandemic did not in any away ease the tension between Fatah and Hamas. On the contrary, the two factions kept incriminating each other in relation to dealing with the pandemic. For example, Hamas accused Fatah of not offering the people enough support while Fatah accused Hamas of secretly coordinating with Israel to receive medical training. Sources close to the PA posted on April 12, 2020 news that Hamas had some of its doctors trained at the Erez crossing the separates the strip from the Israel. In the same vein, news website close to Hamas wrote that the PA had its doctors trained by Israeli doctors in Al Istiqlal University in Jericho.

Relief initiatives

The spread of Coronavirus saw the emergence of several non-governmental initiatives, whether by civil society or the private sector, to support people in facing its ramifications. These initiatives constitute a continuation of a long legacy of social solidarity, which has always been a means of resistance for the Palestinian people. However, developments in the Palestinian cause and internal divisions, coupled with governments' constant attempts at controlling public space and marginalizing community work led to the gradual decline of such initiatives. The pandemic, however, revived this type of solidarity work.

Several civil society groups launched initiatives that offered financial and in-kind aid to families. Initiatives launched in the Gaza Strip include One Body, an offshoot of the Ihsan Voluntary initiative, and Think of Others. These initiatives distributed 500 food packages among families in need and 800 medical kits across the strip. Maan Development Center prepared quarantine facilities in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Development. The initiative, which cost 81,000 US dollars, included purchasing beddings, detergents, and medical kits in addition to food coupons. Similar initiatives were launched by civil society associations such as the National Islamic Commission for Development and Social Solidarity (Takaful) and Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees. An initiative called Produce your Food, Protect your Family was also launched in the Gaza Strip[123].

In the West Bank several civil society groups distributed food packages, medical kits, sanitizers and money while charity organizations sanitized the streets and also distributed food. Several municipalities, such as Ramallah, distributed seedlings and trees among households to encourage families to start gardening during lockdown. Many families responded to this initiative and resorted to gardening as a means of achieving relative food security as a step towards doing away with subordination to Israel.

The private sector also launched several initiatives including Wakfet Izz Fund, which is run by Palestinian businessmen and includes 30 of Palestine's most prominent business owners and members of chambers of commerce under the slogan "The people protect the homeland." However, the fact that the fund is run by private sector led many Palestinians to abstain from donating to it[124]. The fund's chairman explained its main objectives: "Such giving and bestowal will contribute in providing the necessities for a decent life for our brothers and sisters whom were mainly affected in these circumstances, and specifically the families who could barely provide their main needs before this pandemic, and other small and daily and seasonal workers that have done their utmost every single day just to provide what their families needed." The fund announced offering 250 dollars to each worker who lost his/her income. The fund managed to collect 17 million dollars in donations, but its original objective was at least 30 million[125]. Donations were mainly collected from 138 companies and businessmen and are considered modest compared to what was expected.

[123] Ali Abdel Wahab. "Relief campaigns and initiatives in the Gaza Strip during the pandemic [Arabic]." Institute for Palestinian Studies (accessed September 21, 2020): https://www.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/1650093

[124] Asaad Ahmed. "People protect the homeland: Wakfet Izz Fund [Arabic]." Institute for Palestinian Studies (accessed May 18, 2020): https://www.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/1650092

[125] Ibid

The PA received external aid in the form of grants, loans, and logistic assistance whether from the Arab region or the European Union. The World Bank also announced granting 30 million dollars to all those harmed by the pandemic across the Palestinian territories. This aid is expected to help around 90 thousand families[126].

The biopolitics of the Israeli occupation

Since occupying the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1976, Israel has been relying on cheap labor from the Palestinian territories. When the pandemic started, Israel besieged the governorate of Bethlehem to stop Palestinian workers from going to work in Israel. However, due to pressure by Israeli business owners, construction workers, estimated at 65,000, were allowed to enter Israel. However, Israel forced those workers to stay in Israel and restricted their movement provided that employers provide them with housing and the adequate health precautions. Israeli authorities issued permits for 55,000 workers and, based on different sources, this was done in coordination with the PA. The number of Palestinian workers in Israel and West Bank settlements was 133,300 at the end of 2019 and they constitute 14% of the total workers in Palestine and 19% of workers in the West Bank. Around 23,000 of them work in illegal settlements while 11,000 work inside Israel and their average daily wage is 254 shekels, compared to 243 in 2018, while 71% have work permits, 21% work without permits and have to spend long times in Israel[127].

When the pandemic started, Israeli authorities left a sick Palestinian worker at the Beit Sira crossing. The 29-year-old worker, Malek Ghanem, comes from the town of Sarra west of Nablus. According to him, the Israeli hospital refused to take him, and the military police took him to the crossing. After that, Israeli authorities asked all workers to quarantine for 14 days. Prime minister Mohammad Shtayyeh said workers had three days to find a place to stay in Israel. Workers who do not have permits enter Israel illegally and suffer from worse conditions and more exploitation. According to the head of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, Israel did not return workers without permit back to the Palestinian territories and, in fact, made it easier for them to cross through leaving unsupervised checkpoints at the separation wall so that work would not be interrupted in Israel. Upon coming back, the government demonized those workers and stressed that it did not have any cases until they got back from Israel. The PA also accused Israel of not offering Palestinian workers adequate healthcare, erected checkpoints to have them examined, and formed emergency committees to make sure the virus does not spread. Palestinian security forces confiscated the permits of many workers.

The PA also demonized Arab-Israelis and bans them from going to the West Bank even though it only controls very few areas and does not have control over external borders or borders with territories under Israeli control. This shows that the PA is always keen on manifesting an illusory power. This was particularly demonstrated in how reluctant the PA was in repatriating Palestinians from abroad and only doing that at a much later time following a series of protests.

In addition to exploiting Palestinian workers, Israeli authorities took advantage of the pandemic to expand settlements in the West Bank so that it can go ahead with the annexation plan agreed upon with US president Donald Trump. At the start of the crisis, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that the annexation map will be ratified soon. This map includes 30% of the West Bank including all settlements and the Jordan Valley, based on "the deal of the century." Occupation forces started annexing land and demolishing houses in Area C and evicted eight buildings owned by Palestinians under the pretext that the owners did not have permits[128]. Seven

[126] World Bank statement, July 28, 2020, *Wafa News*: https://www.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/6781

[127] "Preliminary results for workers' tests [Arabic]." Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (accessed July 15, 2020): http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/postar.aspx?lang=ar&ItemID=3747

[128] "COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report 13 (1 – 14 July 2020)." Op. cit.

of these buildings were given to Palestinians in humanitarian aid including a mobile home near Jericho in which a family of eight lived. Annexation plans particularly target areas located behind the separation wall such as Kafr Aqab, Shuafat refugee camp, and Qalandiya, which are not under Palestinian control and are formally Israeli, but they are located on the West Bank side of the wall. Israeli authorities were forced to provide residents of these areas with healthcare following a lawsuit filed by a Palestinian rights organization[129].

Assaults by Israeli settles against Palestinians have increased with the pandemic by almost 80% by mid-April 2020, based on OCHA reports[130]. Around 85 assaults were reported between March 5 and April 17, 2020. Assaults by settlers against Palestinians have been on the rise even before the pandemic. In 2017, assaults against Palestinian people and property took place three days a week and in 2018, they increased to five days a week. In 2018, 358 assaults were reported, 219 of which targeted property and 79 resulted in injuries. In 2019, 341 assaults were reported, 266 of which damaged property and 75 led to injuries.

Israel tightened security around checkpoints (593 checkpoints in the West Bank) citing concerns about the spread of Coronavirus. Israeli authorities imposed a series of measures that restrict the movement of Palestinians and make it extremely hard for them to go back to their hometowns. Israel also started constructing a network of highways to be used by Palestinians. Those roads are controlled by toll stations that increased from 73 to 108 between April 2019 and May 2020 so that the movement of Palestinians can be closely monitored. Several field reports revealed that occupation forces suspended most valid permits in Jenin, Tulkarm, Qalqilya, and Salfit, whose contribution to Palestinian agriculture vital.

Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails have been a concern since the start of the pandemic. Based on Red Cross statistics, since 1967 there have been around one million Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, which means that one quarter of the Palestinian people went through the detention experience. On April 1, Israeli authorities released Nour El Din Sarsour and he tested positive right after. According to the Commission for Detainees Affairs, Sarsour mingled with his fellow-inmates before his release, which puts them all at risk. Several rights organizations accused Israel of not taking the necessary measures to protect the rest of the prisoners and cited several examples of Palestinian prisoners coming in contact with Israeli doctors or wardens that later tested positive. Based on a statement by the director of the Palestinian Society Prisoner's Club Qadoura Fares four prisoners tested positive in the Megiddo Prison and two died. In addition, Israeli prison authorities confiscated sanitizers, did not sanitize cells, stopped providing prisoners with cleaning supplies, and banned family visits even though Israeli prisons place glass barriers between prisoners and visitors. There are 700 prisoners who suffer from different diseases, 200 of whom have chronic diseases, which makes them more vulnerable. However, Israeli authorities keep overlooking the danger and imposing more repressive measures.

Conclusion

The pandemic exposed the fragility of healthcare systems in several countries around the world. While this was the case in Palestine, the situation was made worse by the fact the government used repressive measures and adopted a patriarchal discourse to cover up its inability to provide the people with adequate medical services. The government even took advantage of the crisis to clamp down on all forms of opposition and hold the people responsible for the spread of the virus. The pandemic particularly affected vulnerable social groups in Palestine and impoverished large numbers of families despite efforts by civil society organizations. Israel also took advantage of the pandemic to go ahead with its annexation plans and impose more restrictions on the movement of Palestinians.

[129] Report by the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel (Adalah) (accessed July 27, 2020): https://www.adalah.org/en

[130] "COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report 13 (1 – 14 July 2020)." Op. cit.

The pandemic revealed the necessity of reforming the Palestinian healthcare system so that it stops fully depending on momentary external relief. This requires drafting a social solidarity law following a dialogue between relevant parties such as ministries, trade unions, civil society organizations, and the private sector in order to make sure that medical services would cover as many segments of society as possible. The pandemic also underlined the role social solidarity and voluntary work can play in facing crises, which also demonstrates the importance of keeping that legacy, which constitutes a major part of Palestinian history.

SECTION IV

CITIZENSHIP AND HUMAN RIGHTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

INTRODUCTION

Rethinking Social Transformation: Inequality in the Arab Region during the Corona Pandemic

Asmaa Noweira

The global crisis that resulted from the spread of Coronavirus went beyond health-related ramifications as the restrictions imposed by governments to curb the spread of the pandemic and the state of emergency declared in several countries could have an impact on human rights due to the control it gives to executive powers. In this context, the director of the World Health Organization (WHO) said in opening remarks at the media briefing on Covid-19 on March 11, 2020 that "All countries must strike a fine balance between protecting health, minimizing economic and social disruption, and respecting human rights"[1]. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that "human dignity and rights need to be front and centre in that effort, not an afterthought"[2]. The world, including the most democratic countries, was faced with a dilemma. Human life was naturally given the priority, yet that balance between life-saving restrictions and their social and economic ramifications on one hand and the protection of human rights on the other hand was not easy to maintain.

Measures taken to curb the spread of the virus directly impacted personal and public freedoms. These included freedom of movement, assembly, and protest as well as freedom to practice religious rituals as people were forced to stay at home when lockdown or curfew was imposed. This situation had a negative impact on social and economic rights such as the right to education, work, and healthcare in addition to the psychological impact of isolation and social distancing. This particularly applied to marginalized groups whose lives were drastically affected and for whom it was harder to cope with the new developments.

The response to restrictions ranged between acceptance owing to awareness of the gravity of the situation on one hand and rejection and resistance on the other hand, which differed from one social group to another and was the subject of heated debates in different parts of the world. Like other crises and natural disasters, Coronavirus also revealed the role civil society can play even though many governments took measures to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on fragile groups such as women and immigrants. However, these measures were not sufficient to stop the rise of marginalization.

Coronavirus, like all crises, shed light on social inequality whether in the Arab region or across the world since the pandemic did not affect all people in the same way. Different social groups are not equally vulnerable and the impact of restrictions on them is never the same. The impact of the pandemic was particularly felt in poor countries with fragile economies. The crisis also exposed several cases of racism and xenophobia.

While papers in this section tackle different countries, it becomes obvious that marginalized and fragile groups are almost always the same:

[1] https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020

[2] https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25668&LangID=E

women, informal workers, people with disabilities, and immigrants. Restrictions imposed during the pandemic left large numbers from those groups without an income, hence rendering them unable to meet their basic needs. This is the case with tea and food sellers and people with disabilities in Sudan, as demonstrated in Azza Mustafa's paper "A humanitarian crisis and disastrous ramifications: The impact of Coronavirus on vulnerable/marginalized groups in Sudan." Since the 1990s, Sudan has been suffering from an economic blockade, which negatively affected public services, including healthcare, hence led to shortage in medical equipment and supplies with the outbreak of the virus. Like other countries in the region, many women work in the informal sector, have no social protection, and are underpaid. Mustafa tackles the case of tea and food sellers in Khartoum and the effect the pandemic had on their social and economic conditions. Tea and food selling is among the marginal jobs that emerged in the 1980s as many families fled war-torn parts of the country and settled around the capital Khartoum. This job required neither skills nor training yet was unstable and women who worked in it did not have any form of social protection. Women constitute a large portion of the informal sector in Sudan and they were also the most affected by civil conflicts in the regions from which they came. Most of these women came from South Kordofan, Darfur, and Blue Nile (88.6%) and are between 18 and 45 years old (87%).

Restrictions imposed after the pandemic affected tea and food sellers in Sudan. Many of them violated the lockdown because they were in dire need of money, yet the fines they had to pay doubled the financial burden. Civil society organizations tried to help those women through offering in-kind assistance on one hand and coordinating with the Ministry of Labor and Social Development to pay them monthly amounts on the other hand. While this was not sufficient to reverse the impact of the lockdown, it highlighted the critical role played by civil society to fill the gaps left by the state. The suffering of women in Sudan is intensified when poverty is coupled with disability. Despite the fact that the law protects people with disabilities, women with disabilities are exposed to double marginalization and the pandemic did not only affect them economically but also psychologically.

The suffering of women intensifies when they belong to more than one marginalized group. This is demonstrated in the case of female migrant workers in Lebanon, who usually come from African and Asian countries. Sawsan Abdulrahim and Farah Salka tackle the challenges faced by female migrant women who not only lost their jobs but were also discriminated against on racial basis. Abdulrahim and Salka rely in their study on the theories of feminist political economics and the concept of racial capitalism to highlight how those women are victims of a global system that exploits marginalized groups. Female migrant workers in Lebanon already suffered from racism, lack of social protection, and inadequate working conditions and the pandemic made their situation worse. Hundreds of those workers were dismissed from their jobs and left by their employers outside the embassies of their countries while others were evicted from their houses for not being able to pay rent.

Like many other countries in the Middle East, Lebanon adopts policies that do not make the integration of immigrants possible, mainly through the Kafala (sponsorship) system that places workers under the mercy of employers. This means that the state abandons its responsibility towards migrant labor and its involvement does not exceed bureaucratic procedures such as issuing work and residency permits. The conditions in which they work, therefore, become contingent upon the personal choices of the employer. The number of female migrant workers in Lebanon is estimated at 25,000, most of whom come from Ethiopia, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka, all countries that suffered from poverty, war, climate change, and inequality. As is the case in several Arab countries that adopt the sponsorship system, workers in Lebanon are not given the right to take legal measures against their employers in case of exploitation and are constantly exposed to discriminatory practices. That is why they are unable to protect themselves at times of crises.

When the WHO declared Coronavirus a pandemic in early March 2020, migrant workers, both men and women, had already been suffering because of the financial crisis that hit Lebanon and had a detrimental impact on the purchasing power of several segments of the Lebanese society. When the conditions of female migrant workers worsened, civil society organizations started calling for the protection of the rights of migrant workers and the elimination of the sponsorship system in addition to financial and in-kind assistance to workers who lost their jobs and/or houses.

In Egypt, the pandemic had a drastic impact on small farmers, who constitute 95% of the total number of farmers in the country yet only own 58.1% of agricultural land. Small farmers are not covered by social protection or health insurance and have limited access to sources of funding and markets. There are also no insurance funds that protect the crops from climate changes or fluctuations in the prices of agricultural inputs. After the pandemic, the rise in the cost of production and the drop in crop yield led to a decrease in profit, which affected their living conditions. Small farmers in Egypt tried to cope with the ramifications of the pandemic through a number of mechanisms such as establishing village cooperatives which achieve integration within agricultural communities, sharing living space as a means of solidarity and cooperation, and diversifying their sources of income through working in other jobs outside the agriculture sector.

In addition to the direct social and economic impacts of the pandemic, it also gave rise to a general state of uncertainty as the entire world seemed unable to deal with the crisis. According to French philosopher Edgar Morin, the pandemic should teach us to live with that state of uncertainty as the core of human existence[3]. The pandemic also brought to our attention the necessity of reconsidering the dominant social and economic system and of addressing the issue of inequality that has become more pressing than ever. What makes this urgent is the fact that social and economic impacts of the pandemic are expected to be long-term, which has become a major concern for economists and politicians alike.

If life does not go back to normal, research in the social sciences should adopt different approach that looks into the real causes of marginalization through examining different local contexts. It is also important to design new policies that adopt different problem-solving mechanisms and reconsider the relationship between state and society. This should be a joint effort not only by social scientists but also civil society activists, political elites, academicians, and average citizens. The World Health Organization, World Bank, and International Monetary Funds should no longer be the only entities in charge of addressing the Coronavirus crisis. This is because it is a crisis that affected humanity as a whole, hence requires more than technical and partial solutions that are to a great extent subject to political rivalry and economic interests.

[3] https://bit.ly/3irtjsV

1. Notes from Tunisia and the Arab Gulf: Toward an Ethnography of the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Larbi Sadiki and Layla Saleh[4]
(Arabic Version Translated by Sonia Farid[5]*)*

Introduction

If life will never be the same after COVID, then research practice, too, is ripe for change. COVID-19 has deepened inequalities between and within Arab countries. This article presents a different take on the pandemic. We offer here suggestions about how to begin investigating this global phenomenon, through its game-changing effects on various localized contexts. This is turn can become a stepping-stone for brainstorming and devising problem-solving policies and interventions that are inclusive and communal, involving researchers, civil society activists, political elites, academic experts, and ordinary citizenry. The aim is to mobilize academics and activists alike to develop and crystallize problem-solving as theory and practice—instead of does leaving the epidemic to the purview of WHO, IMF, and World Bank technocrats. This crisis afflicting all of humankind requires more than technical, partial, almost ad-hoc solutions filtered through political rivalries and calculated interests (e.g. Trump's re-election) or dependencies (e.g. Tunisian-French tourism trade). Instead, reflexivity capitalizing on the mutuality of theory and practice, comes into play for devising strategies and solutions. COVID's effects will likely reverberate (economically, politically, socially, psycho-developmentally) across the world for years to come.

The article first conceptualizes the universality and specificities of lived Covid experiences through Arendt's "human condition." Next, it suggests worldwide crises in capitalism/globalization, political freedoms, and knowledge capacities and infrastructure as three foci for investigating inequalities exacerbated by COVID in the Arab world. Engaging in a heuristic exercise, the empirical section dwells on how these focal points play out in two different 'frames' from the Arab world: Tunisia and the Gulf countries,. Then, the article argues for a COVID-era reflexivity inspired by Arendt, Habermas, Foucault and Beck's "risk society." Finally, we propose an "ethnographic sensibility" as the launching pad for a shift in research and thought-practice to mitigate socio-political inequalities and nudge civic engagement.

The "COVID Condition"

Arendt's The Human Condition[6] helps us consider this pandemic with its global reach, likely set in motion by some of the ills of modern life: capitalist greed, environmental negligence, biological weapons, international power contests between states and rival economies (e.g. China and the US). How do we approach this universal plague while parsing the specificities of local experiences (Arendt's "plurality"), beyond the recognition that not all state, societies and individuals are equally equipped to handle disease and as economic disaster? In thinking about the inequalities in socio-economic dignity, political freedoms, and access to knowledge exposed or deepened by the pandemic, it is apropos to tease out both the

[4] Larbi and Layla: Associate Professors, International Affairs Program, College of Arts and Sciences, Qatar University.

[5] Translator and Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University

[6] Arendt, Hannah, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]) *The Human Condition, Second Edition*.

commonalities and contextualized realities of this latest dramatic turn of the "human condition." Arendt helps us understand the shared experiences and intersecting layers of modern life, *vita activa*, and some of the pathologies and contradictions of modernity. The natural, the human made ("artifice") and the social-political worlds (where politics is speech rather than violence) intersect in her concepts of labor, work, and action, respectively. Human being, nature, and object come together perpetually in myriad "condition"-ing. Nothing in human existence is not affected by other humans and their activities: "human existence is conditioned existence, it would be impossible without things …..[which are its] conditioners"[7]. These things have in turn been constructed and "fabricated" through human encounters with nature and biology, the living and non-living. And yet for Arendt "the conditions of human existence…never condition us absolutely[8]. There always exists room for agency, even, we suggest, in the face of overwhelming structural crises. If COVID-19 has become for now and the foreseeable future a manifestation of the 21st century "human condition," we can, and should, seek to understand both the extent and limits of its "conditioning" as it unfolds. This, without succumbing to paralysis (of economies, polities, societies, activisms, civic engagements, value systems) in either theory or practice.

Global COVID Crises

The astonishing spread of COVID-19 revealed a downside to the much-celebrated mobility of globalization. Not far behind have been debates on how coronavirus has hurt capitalism, and which markets, businesses, and economic practices are salvageable. Comparisons are commonplace (the 2008-9 recession, the Great Depression). Some argue that COVID-19 has shown the unreliability of employment, irresponsible lending practices given climbing household debt, and the dangers of weakened public sectors[9]. Crumbling healthcare infrastructure not just in Tunisia but also in established OECD democracies (e.g. the UK and even the US) come to mind. The World Bank has predicted a 5.2% contraction in economic growth across the world, with nosediving per capita income followed by dramatically declining investment, an "erosion of human capital" because of time missed at work and in school, and major disruptions in international trade and supply chains[10]. Already under strain, developing countries will suffer more than the rest, according to the World Bank. Rising joblessness and poverty heightens inequality. Political freedoms, too, have taken a hit, as full and equal citizenship become more precarious. International groups are monitoring rollbacks in human rights and democracy set in motion as governments respond to COVID-19 by policing movement and expression[11]. Individual and institutional advocates of democracy stress that authoritarian states and even some some governments who came to power in democratic elections, abuse emergency powers, curb free speech, and circumvent the rule of law[12]. At the level of knowledge, no global system exists to deal with the pandemic. Technocratic, ad-hoc expertise and interventions by global governance bodies from the WHO to the UNDP to Bretton-Woods institutions are far from systematic, their directives filtered through the partisan or campaign leanings of policymakers and in some cases decentralized

7 *Arendt, The Human Condition,* 9

8 *Arendt, The Human Condition*, 11

9 Mazzucato, Mariana, "Coronavirus and capitalism: How will the virus change the way the world works?" *World Economic Forum*, April 2, 2020, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid19-business-economics-society-economics-change

10 World Bank. 2020. "The Global Economic Outlook During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Changed World." 8 June. https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/06/08/the-global-economic-outlook-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-changed-world

11 International IDEA. 2020. "The Global Monitor of COVID-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights-A one-stop tool to hold governments to account." 7 July. https://www.idea.int/news-media/events/global-monitor-covid-19%C2%B4s-impact-democracy-and-human-rights-one-stop-tool-hold

12 National Endowment for Democracy. 2020. "A Call to Defend Democracy." 25 June. https://www.ned.org/call-to-defend-democracy/.

authority (e.g. US federalist fragmentation where COVID measures vary by state). States are chipping into whatever is available in the expertise of knowledge. The repertoire of science, medicine, and Research and Development generally is quasi-missing from many developing countries. These gaps and deficiencies in the realm of knowledge must be identified as a starting point for COVID-era problem-solving. The next section tentatively surveys inequalities and the state of civic engagement in frames from Tunisia and Gulf, with special reference to these interrelated crises of global capitalism, democracy and civic freedoms, and knowledge capacities.

Snapshots from THE GULF

Rentier economies in the Gulf are far from immune to declining global demand for oil and subsequently, plummeting oil prices. The IMF predicts a 7.6% contraction in the growth rate for Gulf economies[13], prompting the convening of GCC states to discuss oil production strategies[14]. Gulf states, with their high social spending on nationals (in the demographic minority) feel the economic COVID strain. Yet it is non-citizen migrant workers--and their families who depend on their remittances--that feel the hardest pinch. The economic and the social-cultural intersect: new austerity measures seem to dovetail with rising discrimination against immigrants[15].The rising tide of racism expressed by Western politicians (e.g. Boris Johnson) appears to be mirrored in often more explicit racism, against the Palestinians and Syrians in Lebanon, or against migrants in Kuwait, as in the actress Hayat al-Fahd's comments about flinging foreigners into the desert reminded us[16]. Rumored plans to cut migrant workers from 70% to 30% of the Kuwaiti workforce, and ending contracts for half of both the 920 thousand Indian and 520 thousand Egyptian workers, respectively, have reportedly forced 100 thousand to leave what some consider their "second homeland[17]." Racism converges with national and regional politics, too. Kuwaiti officials warned against escalating hate speech casting blame on migrants for corona's spread, particularly in social media, against Egyptians for instance, a phenomenon with possible implications for foreign policy (Egypt and Kuwait) and domestic/regional conflicts (Sissi and other Arab states vs. Muslim Brotherhood)[18]. In Kuwait, at least local news has reported how amidst strict lockdown measures, government officials disclosed that 250,000 "informal" (kafalah-less) workers had lost their jobs and were living below the poverty line, atop the 167,000 newly unemployed who now would be required to leave the country[19], in a kafalah system where residency is tied to the employer. This pattern is common across Kuwait, the UAE and Qatar, and Saudi Arabia as domestic workers complain of not being paid on time; thousands have been sent back to South Asian countries such as Nepal[20].As part of its new austerity plan, Saudi Arabia may require 1.2 million foreign workers to leave the country this year while "tripling" its new value-added tax and freezing housing allowances for public sector employees[21].

---

13 Ellison, Tom. 2020. Al-Tard min 'Al-Watan al-Thani'...Tada'iat Corona 'ala al-Mughtaribin fil Kuwait. DW, July 25, 2020, https://bit.ly/32ZYmGT

14 Mubashar. 18 July, 2020. *Duwal al-Khalij Tunaqish Athar Ja'ihat Corona 'ala al-Sina'ah al-Bitroliyyah, Al-Ithnain*, July 18, 2020, bit.ly/2P1qFML

15 Al-Najjar, Ghanim. 2020. *Siraa' al-'Unsuriyyah fi Zaman Corona*. Aljarida, 22 June. https://www.aljarida.com/articles/1592756049728471800/

16 Al-Saleh, Ali. 2020. *Hal Taqdi Korona 'ala 'Unsuriyyat al-Gharb wa Tuqidhuhu? AlQuds Arabi*, 17 April. https://bit.ly/3jQfEwe

17 Ellison, 2020, *Al-Tard*

18 Al-Arab. 10 April 2020. Al-Kuwait Tuwajih Waba'ain: Corona wa Karahiyyat al-Wafidin. https://bit.ly/30ZEaT0

19 Al-Hattab, Khalid, 'Tafnishat' bil-Alaf Yawmiyyan: Rub' Malyoon 'Amil Tahta Khatt al-Faqr, Alqabas, April 9, 2020, https://bit.ly/2X2KYhw

20 Jaffery, Rabiya. 2020. "Gulf Migrant Workers Fear for their Post-Pandemic Future." *Qantara*, 18 May. https://en.qantara.de/content/coronavirus-and-the-kafala-system-gulf-migrant-workers-fear-for-their-post-pandemic-future?nopaging=1

21 Al-Sherbini, Ramadan. 2020. "COVID-19: Gulf Expats Forced to Leave for Home as Pandemic Impacts Jobs." Gulf News, 18 June. https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/covid-19-gulf-expats-forced-to-leave-for-home-as-pandemic-impacts-jobs-1.72112920

While COVID-19 is a global problem, measures to fight its spread and effects, whether economic (employment, wages, etc.) or medical (enforced social distancing) around the world either applied equally or unequally. An "expatriate exodus" of the 35 million-strong workforce is already in the works[22]. Qatar has announced a 30% cut in money spent on expatriates, which translates into cuts in wages and benefits as well as layoffs, for example[23]. Hence, the difference of non-citizenship, unprotected by laws in some instances. which will likely be detrimental to Gulf economies themselves in the long run. It remains that the Gulf that faces a dire shortage of local human capital resources and knowledge capacity—for instance, 85% of UAE doctors and nurses and 78% of those in Saudi Arabia may be expatriates, threatening the entire healthcare sector as migrants and expatriates bear the brunt of austerity measures[24]. Moreover, human rights groups voice concern about "abuse": inadequate medical treatment, poor living conditions, unequal access to information, and miserable deportation centers where those detained do not have the benefit of social distancing, for the millions of migrant workers in the Gulf, among whom infection rates are high[25]. Still, contradictions abound in the Gulf. One manifestation of the "return of the state" has been the creeping intrusions on people's privacy in new technologies reminiscent of Foucault's "biopower"[26], as through health-tracking apps across the Gulf states. Issues of data protection in Qatar's EHTERAZ app, for instance[27], have highlighted the fine line between state-mandated anti-corona measures and international norms and standards of digital privacy[28], or being used for "mass surveillance" in Bahrain and Kuwait[29]. At the same time, with such shrinking civic space has emerged another trend of volunteering across the Gulf: aid for other Arab countries[30], handing out food baskets among the quarantined in Saudi Arabia[31], the Red Crescent and Civil Defense in Kuwait[32], or by female ministers and women volunteers in mask factories, hospitals, and other community sites[33]. Clearly, tensions exist

[22] Barbuscia, Davide and Marwa Rashad. 2020. "What's the point of staying?: Gulf faces expatriate exodus." 7 May. Reuters https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-gulf-jobs/whats-the-point-of-staying-gulf-faces-expatriate-exodus-idUSKBN22J1WL

[23] Foxman, Simone. 2020. "Expats working for Qatar government face pay cuts and lay-offs." 11 June, *Aljazeera and Bloomberg*. https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/expats-working-qatar-government-face-pay-cuts-lay-offs-200611131300913.html

[24] Telci, Ismail Numan. 2020. "The Implications of COVID-19 in the Gulf: Challenges and Constraints." Doha Institute. https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/The-Implications-of-Covid-19-in-the-Gulf-Challenges-and-Constraints.aspx

[25] Amnesty International. 30 April 2020. "COVID-19 Makes Gulf Countries' Abuse of Migrant Workers Impossible to Ignore." https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/04/covid19-makes-gulf-countries-abuse-of-migrant-workers-impossible-to-ignore/

[26] Foucault, Michel, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), *The History of Sexuality, Volume* 1: An Introduction (trans. Robert Hurley).

[27] Aljazeera. "Qatar makes COVID-19 app mandatory, experts question efficiency." Aljazeera, 26 May. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/qatar-covid-19-app-mandatory-experts-question-efficiency-200524015021 30.html

[28] Amnesty International. 2020b. "Qatar: Contact tracing app security flaw exposed sensitive personal details of more than one million." Amnesty International, 26 May. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/05/qatar-covid19-contact-tracing-app-security-flaw/

[29] Statt, Nick. 2020. "Gulf States Using COVID-19 contact tracing apps as mass surveillance tools, report says." *The Verge*, 16 June, https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/16/21293363/covid-19-contact-tracing-bahrain-kuwait-mass-surveillance-tools-privacy-invasion

[30] Gulf Times. "Gulf Charity Provides Aid for Various Countries to Fight Covid-19." 21 April 2020. https://www.gulf-times.com/story/661328/Qatar-Charity-provides-aid-for-various-countries-to-fight-Covid-19 [Accessed 27 July 2020].

[31] Fareed, Salah. 2020. "Saudi volunteers using their cars and hearts to give back during Ramadan under coronavirus lockdown." The National, 20 May. https://www.thenational.ae/world/gcc/saudi-volunteers-using-their-cars-and-hearts-to-give-back-during-ramadan-under-coronavirus-lockdown-1.1022414 [Accessed 27 July 2020].

[32] *Kuwait Times*. "People in Kuwait Volunteer in Times of Distress." 24 March, 2020. https://www.msn.com/en-ae/news/coronavirus/people-in-kuwait-volunteer-in-time-of-distress/ar-BB11DMAJ?li=BBqrVLO [Accessed 27 July 2020].

[33] Ghassan Alkhoja and Maryam Abdullah. May 19, 2020. "Women are Leading the Fight Against Coronavirus in Kuwait." World Bank Blogs, https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/women-are-leading-fight-against-coronavirus-kuwait [Accessed 27 July 2020].

between these op-down restrictions of mobility and state trespassing into "private" digital space and burgeoning volunteering tendencies. What civic values do volunteers tap into (responsibility, trust, solidarity, etc.) as they give their time and effort towards various causes, and how have such values been strengthened, activated, or developed in corona times? Such understudied questions and dynamics call for further exploration.

TUNISIA

Economic problems: high unemployment (15% nationally but double that in some regions), high public debt (over 70%), and a devalued dinar have afflicted the Arab world's first democratizing country even before COVID-19 struck. "Multiple marginalization"[34] of southern and interior regions and their populations has not diminished but increased in the last ten years, a kind of paradoxical socio-economic regression in sharp contrast with the impressive democratic institutional gains (the 2014 constitution, free and fair elections, peaceful alternation of power), etc. Like other countries, lockdown measures have set the economy back considerably. Remittances are expected to fall by 12%, foreign direct investment by 82%, low oil prices (atop travel restrictions) have stalled the vital tourism sector, even as the government has delayed taxes and offered loans to small businesses[35]. Poor healthcare infrastructure, particularly in underserved marginalized regions, set in motion expansive healthcare procurement (funded by a Central Bank loan) by the Health Ministry to reach for instance, 2,000 ICU beds[36]. Rushing to plug gaps in its budget and deal with a projected -4.3% growth rate, Tunisia secured a $745 million loan payment from the IMF[37]. This in addition to other COVID-19 international loans that leaves estimated at 1.4 billion[38]. Relatively successful government responses that have limited the spread of coronavirus have hurt some more than others. Lockdown and limits on movement between governorates has accosted the informal economy (estimated at 32.2% of employment), disrupting industry as more than 1 million risk job loss and poverty--all disproportionately hurting southern and interior regions[39] . Tunisia's formal political institutions and dynamics, which have over the last ten years charted a sort of new regional standard for democratization, are now rife with instability and fragmentation. Parliament was quick to grant the new head of government, Elias al-Fakfakh, unprecedented decree powers in April for a 60-day period. This activation of a constitutionally-mandated, swifter mode of policymaking was a voluntary handover of legislative powers to the executive branch, possibly problematic for the country's nascent democracy[40]. Slightly before the pandemic, calls for consensus-building among Tunisia's political elites considered the repercussions of polarization, rising populism, and un-budging regional inequalities for political instability and democracy itself in Tunisia[41]. Fakfhfakh's exploding conflict of interest/corruption scandal has done little to alleviate unease. His subsequent

[34] Sadiki, Larbi. 2019. "Regional development in Tunisia: The consequences of multiple marginalization." Brookings Policy Paper, https://www.brookings.edu/research/regional-development-in-tunisia-the-consequences-of-multiple-marginalization/ [Accessed 27 July 2020].

[35] OECD. 2020. COVID-19 Crisis Response in MENA countries. https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-mena-countries-4b366396/ [Accessed 27 July 2020].

[36] Ibid.

[37] IMF. 2020. "Tunisia: Request for Purchase Under the Rapid Financing Instrument." 14 April, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2020/04/14/Tunisia-Request-for-Purchase-Under-the-Rapid-Financing-Instrument-Press-Release-Staff-Report-49327 [Accessed 28 July 2020].

[38] Dridi, Manel. 2020. "Coronavirus and Tunisia's Regional Economic Inequalities." Carnegie Middle East Center, April 29, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/81686 [Accessed 28 July 2020].

[39] Ibid.

[40] Cimini, Giulia. 2020. "COVID-19 and Tunisian Democracy: High Risks Ahead." Istituto Affari Internazionali, https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/covid-19-and-tunisian-democracy-high-risks-ahead [Accessed 27 July 2020].

[41] International Crisis Group. 2020. "Avoiding a Populist Surge in Tunisia," 4 March. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/b73-tunisie-eviter-les-surencheres-populistes [Accessed 28 July 2020].

resignation and President Saied's naming of interior minister Hichem Mechichi (about whom there was no initial political consensus) to form a new government amid a fragmented party scene, did not inspire confidence in the smooth unfolding of this latest transitional process[42] .

Despite this discord[43], a key trend to identify in Tunisia is the persistence of its moral flame despite the pandemic, the return of the state, and aggravated socio-economic inequalities and trenchant hirman (deprivation) in the South, the interior, and even marginalized geographies in the capital Tunis and other Sahel (privileged coastal) areas. Tunisia is certainly resource-poor, but its democratic blaze is alive, providing some "democratic check" on the country's transition. Protestors, motivated largely by socio-economic demands, have persevered. Dozens of protests have rocked the country as lockdown measured were relaxed in May: demanding jobs in phosphate-rich Gafsa, objecting to salary cuts, appealing for jobs for the unemployed of more than ten years, and insisting on implementation of the 2017 Kamour agreement in southern Tataouine[44]. Youth from Tansiqiyyat al-Kamour protest, halting oil production, until, they say, the government holds up its end of the bargain: the remaining jobs and regional development fund promised them by the Chahed government. Parallel to this "unruly" activity have emerged a number of volunteering initiatives in Tunisia. Some see themselves as complementing government efforts to fight the virus and its economic toll, as in the Dar Ben Gacem hotel's initiative distributing Ramadan meals to the needy in Tunis's Medina through cooperation with the voluntary sector (Tunisian Red Cross) and local authorities (for lists of families in want)[45] . Students refurbishing medical equipment, others making masks, and youth developing an application for virus detection are some Tunisian examples of a broader Arab-wide drive to pandemic-era voluntarism[46]. This brand of action from below calls for an emphasis away from state-level measures and policies. Ethnographies are needed to grasp how citizenship is panning out in diverse contexts by examining, for instance, voluntary action and values underpinning citizenship among both haves and have-notes.

Reflexivity: Theory and Practice

The reflexivity we call for here in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, then, is a two-fold concept. First, it involves research practice. At the intellectual dimension, it is concerned with meaning-making and geared towards problem-solving. Second, reflexivity brings research and researchers into the inside of COVID-19, challenging technocratic ownership and dominance (e.g. by the WHO or the IMF). Going inside the pandemic as thought-practice is motivated by the question of how to unearth and identify the problematics stemming from COVID-19. We have hinted at some possible directions: crises in capitalism, political freedoms, and knowledge. Research then becomes a medium, a forum, an ethos of reflexivity, trying to examine issues concerning polity, society, language, demography, etc. Such an orientation empowers researchers to be active problem-solvers, practitioners of the critical enterprise. Based on the above, for us, the stress on the reflexive take built into research becomes directed at sensitizing and mobilizing researchers as "ethnographers" of the pandemic.

[42] Bghouri, Neji, 2020. *Hal Yamur al-Mchicihi bi Aghlabiyyah barlamaniyyah am bisawarikh al-ra'is al-dusturiyyah*? Nawaat, 27 July. https://bit.ly/3g6fSNb [Accessed 28 July 2020].

[43] Sadiki, Larbi and Layla Saleh. 2020. "Tunisia's Political Discord: Crisis of Democratisation?" 29 July, Afro-Middle East Centre, https://www.amec.org.za/tunisia/item/1673-tunisia-s-political-discord-crisis-of-democratisation.html.

[44] Kazemi, Elham. 2020. "Demonstrations Spike in Tunisia Despite COVID-19 Pandemic." ACLED. https://acleddata.com/2020/06/29/demonstrations-spike-in-tunisia-despite-covid-19-pandemic/ [Accessed 28 July 2020].

[45] ReliefWeb. 2020. "Tunisian Red Crescent Collaborated with Dar Ben Gacem to Feed the Needy." 29 May, https://reliefweb.int/report/tunisia/tunisian-red-crescent-collaborated-dar-ben-gacem-feed-needy [Accessed 28 July 2020].

[46] Bouadli, Imene. 2020. "In the face of the pandemic, a blossoming of Arab creative initiatives." The Arab Weekly, 26 April. https://thearabweekly.com/face-pandemic-blossoming-arab-creative-initiatives [Accessed 28 July 2020].

Critical writers and scholars have offered trenchant deconstructions of modern life. Like Foucault, Arendt is concerned about the encroachment of public into private, where "the two realms… flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself"[47] . Society, where public and private become indiscernible, "impos[es] innumerable and various rules… to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement"[48]. Arendt decries the disappearance of the private realm not only in economics as policy, but also in positivist, behavioralist social science that "aim[s] to reduce man as a whole…to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal"[49]. While materially, for instance, Gulf states seem to have the tools of medics and brainpower money can buy to weather the pandemic, the health angle alone focused on equipment is not enough. The problem lies in governmentality of people, life, and migrants in the GCC and other Arab states. Foucault's concept of biopower alerts us to "discipline" that regulates and makes people "docile." There is a need for multi-disciplinarity: tools once important in reading of the Middle East and the region's politics, such as conventional forces and figures of security-dressing, quarantine, control, and force are rendered almost ineffective or limited in understanding the pandemic. Instead, a new type of power is at play, that of knowing and knowledge. Sovereignty itself almost makes no sense: the return to the state is harking back to traditional modes of state power and control, from tracing bodies and people (through apps) to policing them via lockdowns. Even, that is, when states cannot deliver the goods to fight the pandemic. All other forms and tools and of control and power from bureaucracy and tribe to school, media, and high tech become subjected to state power. Foucault's suggestion that power is the control over life as well as death: the "right of death and power over life"[50] is more than fitting in the pandemic context.

This kind of critique of (knowledge) practices that control people and societies are to an extent found in Arendt's work. Together, society's norms and social scientists' experiments, statistics, and laws refashion human behavior towards thoughtless sameness. They snuff out the "paradoxical plurality of unique beings" that is the "basic condition of though and speech," the realm of politics (as opposite violence) and by extension true freedom[51]. We interpret here a reflexivity in Arendt's and Foucault's work, to make the world " what the world is always meant to be, a home for men during their life on earth"[52] . In thinking about COVID, we suggest inserting researchers (not just mere technocrats, along the lines of Arendt's social science) into the heart of the pandemic. We need not mindless "conditioning" of society, but thoughtful, creative problem-solving of those very conditions-- an un-conditioning, perhaps. Doing so entails aspiring to and realizing the "freedom" of the political in "action" underpinned by morality away from the disastrous "belie[f] that we deal with ends and means in the political realm[53]." Arendt hints at an optimism so long as the possibility of "thought" exists, that is, "wherever men live under the conditions of political freedom[54]". Freedom from what? If Arendt's complete freedom from "necessity" (i.e. the material claims of making a living), classical Greek-style, is impossible, we might reinterpret this very freedom as freedom from want. That is, deprivation *(hirman)*, marginalization, lives bereft of dignity.

Here is where Beck's and Habermas's more explicit reflexivity helps bridge the gap from philosophical ruminations to problem-solving. In our case, the processual, not entirely predictable woes wrought by COVID. Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens' concept of "risk society" strikes a chord as we seek to both make meaning out of the pandemic and

47 *Arendt, The Human Condition*, 33

48 *Arendt, The Human Condition*, 40.

49 *Arendt, The Human Condition*, 45.

50 *Foucault, The History of Sexuality*, 133.

51 *Arendt, The Human Condition*, 175-6.

52 *Arendt, The Human Condition*, 173.

53 *Arendt, The Human Condition*, 220.

54 *Arendt, The Human Condition*, 324.

search for ways to alleviate COVID destruction. Risk society is characterised by "distributional conflicts over 'bads'" (and not "goods"), in contests over "how the risks accompanying goods production… can be distributed, prevented, controlled and legitimized[55]". The epidemic can (and should) prompt what Beck calls "reflexive modernization," or the "possibility of a creative (self-)destruction[56]" In this case, this kind of reflexivity entails rethinking persistent problems of postcolonial Arab polities and economies. Theory can meet practice, we suggest, what Beck points to as "public, political and scientific reflection[57]" to undo existing socio-political dynamics, against inequality, via and towards greater civic engagement, inclusion, environmental conscientiousness, etc. Pandemics are a new type of man-made risk flowing from the hazards of modernity: "scientified," mechanized, medicated/sanitized, modernized, disciplined, even as humany still copes with environmental degradation. The open-ended process and ethos which practitioners (political, activist, entrepreneurial) and academics (scholars) engage can be animated by a Habermasian stance of dialogic reflexivity. Habermas's communicative action[58] is by nature pluralist, participatory, intersubjective, agential, dispersed, and inclusive. It allows for involving a panoply of inputs to widen participation in debates relevant to public life, at the level of formal policy-making (e.g. legislation) or informal advocacy and communal action (e.g. civil society groups). From this type of communicative rationality, much-needed dialogue in an Arab world can be multi-directional, in interlocking engagements between the local (Arab national), regional (intra-Arab) and national. This dialogic, reflexive sensibility of an "Arab risk society[59]" can go as much for research as it does for policymakers.

Toward an Ethnography of the Pandemic

Political and media elites across the globe seem to have adopted martial language in this "war on corona"—to much critique by those wary of militarizing public space and public policy. Comparisons with wartime may be instructive in another sense, however. As the COVID-19 epidemic becomes the dominant frame through which to view economic, political, social, and even cultural life, researchers may benefit from those who research "war as experience[60]". Here is where ethnography, including "engaged ethnography[61]". comes in Ethnography as critical and interpretive research practice (i.e., NOT positivist) is imbued with constant ethical engagements (dilemmas, decisions), as research(er) meets world and vice versa, making it a necessarily "improvisational" enterprise[62]. Social scientists with a reflexive, problem-solving ethic can take a leaf out of those who study war ethnographically. Belying the tendency to approach "war as an 'event' that suspends social processes," for instance, Lubkemann's study of war and displacement in Mozambique instead broaches war as "transformative social condition" inclusive of, but not fixed solely on, violence[63]. Instead, he views war as the hammering out and

[55] *Beck, Ulrich, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash. 1992. Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p.6.

[56] Ibid, p. 2.

[57] Ibid, p. 6

[58] Habermas, JÜRgen. 1984. The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. I, Reason and the Rationalization of Society. Boston: Beacon Press.

[59] Sadiki, Larbi and Layla Saleh. 2020. "Reflexive Politics and Arab 'Risk Society'? COVID-19 and Issues of Public Health. *Orient: German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture of the Middle East* 61(3): 6-20.

[60] Sylvester, Christine C. 2013. *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis*. London: Routledge.

[61] Mathers, Andrew and Mario Novelli. 2007. "Researching Resistance to Neoliberal Globalization: Engaged Ethnography as Solidarity and Praxis." *Globalizations* 4(2): 229-249.

[62] Cerwonka, Allaine and Liisa H. Malkki. 2007. *Improvising Theory: Process and Temporality in Ethnographic Fieldwork*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 3-10.

[63] Lubkemann, Stephen C. 2008. *Culture in Chaos: An Anthropology of the Social Condition in War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 1.

unfolding of "everyday social life," not necessarily a totalizing force that extinguishes human agency[64]. COVID may have put our individual and collective lives on hold, but the socio-political dynamics it has set in motion must be explored in their own right, in any convincing search for solutions. Researchers cannot be perpetually wait for life to "return to normal" (flights, wages and bonuses, in-person conferences and political summits, capital for entrepreneurial projects, a resurgence in consumer demands, policy for the long list of pre-corona legislative bills). People--citizens, activists, politicians, the marginalized--still exercise agency, make decisions, engage in Arendt's "action and speech" that is the stuff of politics, even in the Covid era. How has the public space "liberated" by Arab Spring protestors shrunk, reconquered by the military and security forces imposing lockdown curfews, as the state makes a comeback?[65] In what ways has civic space contracted as public health is securitized through the "governmentality" rules of Foucault's[66] biopolitics: tracking devices, age categorizations of "vulnerable" populations, police checkpoints, temperature checks at the door of every public and private building?

Political scientists, too, have begun to stretch the scope of examinations of war. With examples from Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, El Salvador and Peru, Elisabeth Wood suggests, placing "social networks" at the center of war analysis, allowing for exploring a range of experiences from mobilization to socialization to shifts in identities, economies, and gender relations[67]. Similarly, we may speak of the sociality of pandemic life, examining the travails of earning livelihoods, political participation, power contests between state and society, mobilization in pursuit of civil rights, curtailment of political freedoms, crisis-era "emergency-law" type legislation, and the stocks of values invoked, developed, learned, or receding in such processes. These are not dynamics, patterns of behavior, or orientations toward political life that can be measured simply through universalized statistical metrics (SDG benchmarks) scripted in pre-pandemic life. Unemployment rates may not reveal the mushrooming obstacles to finding jobs in an era of social distancing and limited public transportation. Voter turnout rates may not tell us why citizens are spurning political elites who demand adherence to lockdown measures while ignoring their own promises (e.g. 2017 Kamour Agreement with Chahed government in Tunisia). More fine-grained data collection (or co-generation) will in turn shed light on political orientations, attitudes, values, and attendant behavior, ruly (voting) or unruly (protests, sit-ins). Government data on money spent on corona cash transfers (the number of families reached through Tunisia's newly digitized government assistance app) will not give a satisfying enough account of how hirman may have deepened in corona times, with the closure of small businesses, and the disappearance of disposable income. Publicly announced austerity measures in the Gulf states, or accounts of the expulsion of thousands of workers back to Tunisia (or Egypt, Jordan, Nepal, etc.) are a starting-point. Yet such indicators alone may not provide a thorough account of why more Tunisians opt for the perilous harqah journey on death-boats rather than spend a life lounging, work-less, futureless, in Tataouine's numerous cafes. An ethnography of the pandemic can enable researchers to get a firmer grasp not only of local and/or national socio-political changes, but also the interconnections between Arab states (e.g. Kuwait or Qatar and Tunisia), their economies, societies, and even political expectations and behavior. Ethnographies of the pandemic might also extend to elite actors. Exploring international loan negotiations ethnographically would surely provide fresh insight on the negotiating practices, persuasive skills (or their lack), power asymmetries,

[64] Ibid, 14-15.

[65] Sadiki, Larbi and Layla Salehb. 2020. "The Arab world between a formidable virus and a repressive state." 6 April. OpenDemocracy, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/arab-world-between-formidable-virus-and-repressive-state/

[66] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.

[67] Wood, Elisabeth Jean. 2008. "The Social Processes of Civil War: The Wartime Transformation of Social Networks." *Annual Review of Political Science* 11: 539-61.

historical burdens, informal-personal ties, investment motivations, and the human inner-workings that lubricate global-regional-national networks of the global capitalist economy and its international financial institutions. Knowledge is of course power--including the power to envision alternatives to exploitative lending practices that keep postcolonial states and societies such as Tunisia (or Egypt, Morocco, Jordan) in the shackles of dependency. Hence, compassionately, ethically informed ethnographic research practices may open the window to creative, synergistic thinking aimed at problem-solving. Researcher, citizen/resident, and political elites can pool their repertoires of experiences, observations, analyses, and suggestions that can become kernels for more effective policies and popular initiatives to mitigate inequalities exacerbated by COVID: improving health infrastructure, negotiating better loans with IFIs, navigating travel restrictions, magnifying civil society advocacy, inclusive legislating, etc.

One World, Many Pandemics

An "ethnography of the pandemic" does not stop at investigating the many sites, power relations, behaviors, and orientations of various actors and institutions in Arab states and societies. Medical science itself and attendant scientific doctrines of rich states, we suggest here, are a brand of ideology that keeps poor states and peoples in their place. They too can and should be approached ethnographically in pandemic times. An acknowledgement of the uneven socio-economic impact of COVID-19 across the globe is important[68]. But we cannot stop there. The financial, scientific, and healthcare institutions of global governance are entangled in designing, and implementing policies of maldistribution (austerity measures, decreased social spending, foreign investment conditions, etc.) in poor states. We can speak then not just of "two pandemics" manifesting differently, sometimes counter-intuitively in infection and death rates[69], but of "many pandemics" across and within countries, Arab or otherwise. Recognition of the "multiple dimensions of inequality" in the Global South[70] is promising. So are entreaties to more international "openness" and "collaboration" in scientific knowledge and data[71]. An ethnographic circle can begin to unearth the full range of pandemic problems, including the unravelling of knowledge economies[72]. This must be based on real data and an understanding of the multiple realities, the different ontologies, of local-national-regional-global pandemic life. We may need multiple epistemologies, as researchers engage in reflexive work to gain some kind of ownership over studying the pandemic. For poor, developing or Southern countries, this also means interrogating the practices and directives (with their neoliberal leanings) of economic-scientific management of COVID-19 and crisis economies. As the "global scientific community" of WHO experts charts directions of future pandemic research[73], we must ask, how global is global? How representative are its officials, how familiar with the realities and exigencies of life in Tunisia's Kasserine or migrant camps in Kuwait?

The pandemic 'risk' cannot be generalized:

[68] World Bank. 2020b. "Poverty and Distributional Impacts of COVID-19: Potential Channels of Impact and Mitigating Policies." 16 April, 2020. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/poverty-and-distributional-impacts-of-covid-19-potential-channels-of-impact-and-mitigating-policies [Accessed 28 July 2020].

[69] Schellekens, Philip and Diego Sourrouille. 2020. "COVID-19 Mortality in Rich and Poor Countries: A Tale of Two Pandemics?" World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper 9260. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33844 [Accessed 28 July 2020].

[70] GRIP Secretariat. 2020. "#1 Miniseries: COVID-19 and global dimensions of inequality." https://gripinequality.org/2020/03/miniseries-covid-19-and-global-dimensions-of-inequality/ [Accessed 28 July 2020].

[71] UNCTAD. 2020. Mukhisa Kityui. "Why the global science community must come and stay together beyond the coronavirus pandemic." https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2357 [Accessed 28 July 2020].

[72] McKee, Martin and David Stuckler. 2020. "If the world fails to protect the economy, COVID-19 will damage health not just now but also in the future." Nature Medicine 26, 640-642, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0863-y.

[73] WHO. 2020. "Global scientific community unites to track progress on COVID-19 R &D, identifies new research priorities and critical gaps." https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/global-scientific-community-unites-to-track-progress-on-covid-19-r-d-identifies-new-research-priorities-and-critical-gaps [Accessed 28 July 2020].

specificities and 'silent killers' of marginalization, authoritarianism, sexism, racism, colonialism continue to impact lives. Ethnographic approaches to the pandemic can begin to discover both immediate and long-term impacts and transformations in global capitalism, democratic freedoms, civic engagement, and knowledge capacities and practices in Tunisia, the Gulf, and other Arab states and societies. It is up to ethnographers of the pandemic to zero in on the extent to which the risk of the many pandemics are locally threatening despite gains from globalization. They can explore how the risk to freedoms deployed through a governmentality hell bent on tipping the balance power towards states may not give the much-vaunted trade-off between saving already over- controlled lives and curtailing freedoms.

References

Al-Arab. 10 April 2020. *Al-Kuwait Tuwajih Waba'ain: Corona wa Karahiyyat al-Wafidin*. https://bit.ly/30ZEaT0[Accessed 27 July 2020].

Al-Hattab, Khalid. 2020. *'Tafnishat' bil-Alaf Yawmiyyan: Rub' Malyoon 'Amil Tahta Khatt al-Faqr*. 9 April. https://bit.ly/2X2KYhw [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Aljazeera. "Qatar makes COVID-19 app mandatory, experts question efficiency." Aljazeera, 26 May. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/qatar-covid-19-app-mandatory-experts-question-efficiency-200524201502130.html [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Ghassan Alkhoja and Maryam Abdullah. May 19, 2020. "Women are Leading the Fight Against Coronavirus in Kuwait." World Bank Blogs, https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/women-are-leading-fight-against-coronavirus-kuwait [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Al-Najjar, Ghanim. 2020. *Siraa' al-'Unsuriyyah fi Zaman Corona*. Aljarida, 22 June. https://www.aljarida.com/articles/1592756049728471800/ [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Al-Saleh, Ali. 2020. *Hal Taqdi Korona 'ala 'Unsuriyyat al-Gharb wa Tuqidhuhu*? AlQuds Arabi, 17 April. https://bit.ly/3jQfEwe [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Al-Sherbini, Ramadan. 2020. "COVID-19: Gulf Expats Forced to Leave for Home as Pandemic Impacts Jobs." *Gulf News*, 18 June. https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/covid-19-gulf-expats-forced-to-leave-for-home-as-pandemic-impacts-jobs-1.72112920 [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Amnesty International. 30 April 2020. "COVID-19 Makes Gulf Countries' Abuse of Migrant Workers Impossible to Ignore." https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/04/covid19-makes-gulf-countries-abuse-of-migrant-workers-impossible-to-ignore/ [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Amnesty International. 2020b. "Qatar: Contact tracing app security flaw exposed sensitive personal details of more than one million." Amnesty International, 26 May. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/05/qatar-covid19-contact-tracing-app-security-flaw/ [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Arendt, Hannah. 1998 [1958]. *The Human Condition, Second Edition*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Barbuscia, Davide and Marwa Rashad. 2020. "What's the point of staying?: Gulf faces expatriate exodus." 7 May. *Reuters* https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-gulf-jobs/whats-the-point-of-staying-gulf-faces-expatriate-exodus-idUSKBN22J1WL [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Bghouri, Neji, 2020. *Hal Yamur al-Mchicihi bi Aghlabiyyah barlamaniyyah am bisawarikh al-ra'is al-dusturiyyah*? Nawaat, 27 July. https://bit.ly/3g6fSNb [Accessed 28 July 2020].

Cox, Robert @. 1981. "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory." *Millennium* 10(2): 126-155.

HABERMAS, JÜRGEN, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. I, Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

BECK, ULRICH, ANTHONY GIDDENS AND SCOTT LASH, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

Cerwonka, Allaine and Liisa H. Malkki. 2007. *Improvising Theory: Process and Temporality in Ethnographic Fieldwork*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Cimini, Giulia. 2020. "COVID-19 and Tunisian Democracy: High Risks Ahead." Istituto Affari Internazionali, https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/covid-19-and-tunisian-democracy-high-risks-ahead [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Bouadli, Imene. 2020. "In the face of the pandemic, a blossoming of Arab creative initiatives." *The Arab Weekly,* 26 April. https://thearabweekly.com/face-pandemic-blossoming-arab-creative-initiatives [Accessed 28 July 2020].

Dridi, Manel. 2020. "Coronavirus and Tunisia's Regional Economic Inequalities." Carnegie Middle East Center, April 29, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/81686 [Accessed 28 July 2020].

Ellison, Tom. 2020. *Al-Tard min 'Al-Watan al-Thani'...Tada'iat Corona 'ala al-Mughtaribin fil Kuwait*. DW, 25 July. https://bit.ly/32ZYmGT[Accessed 27 July 2020].

Fareed, Salah. 2020. "Saudi volunteers using their cars and hearts to give back during Ramadan under coronavirus lockdown." *The National, 20 May*. https://www.thenational.ae/world/gcc/saudi-volunteers-using-their-cars-and-hearts-to-give-back-during-ramadan-under-coronavirus-lockdown-1.1022414 [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Foxman, Simone. 2020. "Expats working for Qatar government face pay cuts and lay-offs." 11 June, *Aljazeera and Bloomberg*. https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/expats-working-qatar-government-face-pay-cuts-lay-offs-200611131300913.html [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1: An Introduction (trans. Robert Hurley). New York: Pantheon Books.

Gulf Times. *"Gulf Charity Provides Aid for Various Countries to Fight Covid-19."* 21 April 2020. https://www.gulf-times.com/story/661328/Qatar-Charity-provides-aid-for-various-countries-to-fight-Covid-19 [Accessed 27 July 2020].

GRIP Secretariat. 2020. "#1 Miniseries: COVID-19 and global dimensions of inequality." https://gripinequality.org/2020/03/miniseries-covid-19-and-global-dimensions-of-inequality/ [Accessed 28 July 2020].

IMF. 2020. "Tunisia: Request for Purchase Under the Rapid Financing Instrument." 14 April, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2020/04/14/Tunisia-Request-for-Purchase-Under-the-Rapid-Financing-Instrument-Press-Release-Staff-Report-49327 [Accessed 28 July 2020].

International Crisis Group. 2020. "Avoiding a Populist Surge in Tunisia," 4 March. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/b73-tunisie-eviter-les-surencheres-populistes [Accessed 28 July 2020].

International IDEA. 2020. "The Global Monitor of COVID-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights-A one-stop tool to hold governments to account." 7 July. https://www.idea.int/news-media/events/global-monitor-covid-19%C2%B4s-impact-democracy-and-human-rights-one-stop-tool-hold [Accesed 26 July 2020].

Jaffery, Rabiya. 2020. "Gulf Migrant Workers Fear for their Post-Pandemic Future." Qantara, 18 May. https://en.qantara.de/content/coronavirus-and-the-kafala-system-gulf-migrant-workers-fear-for-their-post-pandemic-future?nopaging=1 [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Kazemi, Elham. 2020. "Demonstrations Spike in Tunisia Despite COVID-19 Pandemic." ACLED. https://acleddata.com/2020/06/29/demonstrations-spike-in-tunisia-despite-covid-19-pandemic/ [Accessed 28 July 2020].

Kuwait Times. "People in Kuwait Volunteer in Times of Distress." 24 March, 2020. https://www.msn.com/en-ae/news/coronavirus/people-in-kuwait-volunteer-in-time-of-distress/ar-BB11DMAJ?li=BBqrVLO [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Lubkemann, Stephen C. 2008. Culture in Chaos: An Anthropology of the Social Condition in War. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mazzucato, Mariana. 2020. "Coronavirus and capitalism: How will the virus change the way the world works?" *World Economic Forum*, 2 April. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid19-business-economics-society-economics-change [Accessed 26 July 2020].

McKee, Martin and David Stuckler. 2020. "If the world failes to protect the economy, COVID-19 will damage health not just now but also in the future." Nature Medicine 26, 640-642, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0863-y.

Mubashar. 18 July, 2020. *Duwal al-Khalij Tunaqish Athar Ja'ihat Corona 'ala al-Sina'ah al-Bitroliyyah*, Al-Ithnain. bit.ly/2P1qFML [Accessed 27 July 2020].

National Endowment for Democracy. 2020. "A Call to Defend Democracy." 25 June. https://www.ned.org/call-to-defend-democracy/ [Accessed 26 July 2020].

OECD. 2020. COVID-19 Crisis Response in MENA countries. https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-mena-countries-4b366396/ [Accessed 27 July 2020].

ReliefWeb. 2020. "Tunisian Red Crescent Collaborated with Dar Ben Gacem to Feed the Needy." 29 May, https://reliefweb.int/report/tunisia/tunisian-red-crescent-collaborated-dar-ben-gacem-feed-needy [Accessed 28 July 2020].

Sadiki, Larbi. 2019. "Regional development in Tunisia: The consequences of multiple marginalization." Brookings Policy Paper, https://www.brookings.edu/research/regional-development-in-tunisia-the-consequences-of-multiple-marginalization/ [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Sadiki, Larbi and Layla Saleh. 2020a. "*Reflexive Politics and Arab 'Risk Society*'? COVID-19 and Issues of Public Health. Orient: German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture of the Middle East 61(3): 6-20.

Sadiki, Larbi and Layla Salehb. 2020. "The Arab world between a formidable virus and a repressive state." 6 April. OpenDemocracy, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/arab-world-between-formidable-virus-and-repressive-state/

Sadiki, Larbi and Layla Saleh. 2020c. "Tunisia's Political Discord: Crisis of Democratisation?" 29 July, Afro-Middle East Centre, https://www.amec.org.za/tunisia/item/1673-tunisia-s-political-discord-crisis-of-democratisation.html.

Schellekens, Philip and Diego Sourrouille. 2020. "COVID-19 Mortality in Rich and Poor Countries: A Tale of Two Pandemics?" World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper 9260. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33844 [Accessed 28 July 2020].

Statt, Nick. 2020. "Gulf States Using COVID-19 contact tracing apps as mass surveillance tools, report says." *The Verge*, 16 June, https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/16/21293363/covid-19-contact-tracing-bahrain-kuwait-mass-surveillance-tools-privacy-invasion [Accessed 27 July 2020].

Sylvester, Christine C. 2013. *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis*. London: Routledge.

Telci, Ismail Numan. 2020. "The Implications of COVID-19 in the Gulf: Challenges and Constraints." Doha Institute. https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/The-Implications-of-Covid-19-in-the-Gulf-Challenges-and-Constraints.aspx [Accessed 27 July 2020].

UNCTAD. 2020. Mukhisa Kityui. "Why the global science community must come and stay together beyond the coronavirus pandemic." https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2357 [Accessed 28 July 2020].

WHO. 2020. "Global scientific community unites to track progress on COVID-19 R &D, identifies new research priorities and critical gaps." https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/global-scientific-community-unites-to-track-progress-on-covid-19-r-d-identifies-new-research-priorities-and-critical-gaps [Accessed 28 July 2020].

Wood, Elisabeth Jean. 2008. "The Social Processes of Civil War: The Wartime Transformation of Social Networks." Annual Review of Political Science 11: 539-61.

World Bank. 2020. "The Global Economic Outlook During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Changed World." 8 June. https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/06/08/the-global-economic-outlook-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-changed-world [Accessed 26 July 2020].

World Bank. 2020b. "Poverty and Distributional Impacts of COVID-19: Potential Channels of Impact and Mitigating Policies." 16 April, 2020. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/poverty-and-distributional-impacts-of-covid-19-potential-channels-of-impact-and-mitigating-policies [Accessed 28 July 2020].

2. Racial Capitalism and the Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant Women Workers in Lebanon

Sawsan Abdulrahim[74] *and Farah Salka*

Much has been written about the economic and racial inequalities exposed by COVID-19 and the gendered dynamics of the pandemic, owing to the large proportion of women and persons of color who provide care work. In Lebanon, the pandemic hit at a time when many social groups were already struggling to cope with economic collapse and the sudden devaluation of their income and loss of savings. Women migrant workers have always experienced intersecting vulnerabilities given an inequitable global political economy and a system of racial capitalism that gives life to Kafala as a policy. COVID-19 control measures met with an economic downward spiral that has further magnified the vulnerabilities of MFDWs and exposed their fragile position in an unequal global economy. In this paper, we describe pathways through which the pandemic and economic collapse have conspired to further constrain their autonomy and heighten their health and economic vulnerability. We also discuss how the interaction between COVID-19 and underlying vulnerabilities may impact freelancers (who enjoy a degree of autonomy) and live-in domestic workers differently. The paper is a think piece that will incorporate a review of feminist political economy and racial capitalism. The arguments specific to how COVID-19 and the economic crisis impacted women migrant workers are sharpened through discussions between the co-authors who are involved in research and activism on the rights of migrants.

Pandemics, like wars and natural disasters, do not affect all people equally but exert a disproportionate impact on those already affected by poverty, racial exclusion, and limited healthcare access. Shortly following the spread of COVID-19 in late March and April, 2020, evidence began to emerge on inequities in the impact of the deadly virus on various social groups. The disproportionate vulnerability to the infection and its more severe medical complications were not only determined by age and medical risk but by pre-existing inequities along socioeconomic and racial/ethnic lines.[75] Moreover, essential and care workers in racially-stratified high-income countries – who are disproportionately Black, Brown, and immigrant due to long-standing structural discrimination and labor market segregation – were more likely than Whites to experience the negative economic consequences of the lockdown.[76] Migrant workers in particular were among the most impacted by COVID-19 worldwide as a result of sudden loss of wages and lack of protections that are typically offered to citizens.

As with racialized and economically excluded immigrant groups, women's vulnerabilities are magnified during times of crisis due to entrenched gender inequities that intersect with other forms of exclusion. Thus, it was expected that the consequences of COVID-19 would be gendered and impact women disproportionately

[74] Dr. Sawsan is from American University of Beirut, Ms. Farah is from Anti-Racism Movement.

[75] Afifi, R., Novak, N., Gilbert, P., Pauly, B., Abdulrahim, S., Rashid, SF., Ortega, F., Ferrand, RA. (2020). 'Most at risk' for COVID 19? The imperative to expand the definition from biological to social factors for equity. Preventive Medicine.

[76] van Dorn, A., Cooney, RE, Sabin, ML. (2020). COVID-19 exacerbating inequalities in the US. Lancet, 395(10232), 1243-1244. Hu, Y. (2020). Intersecting ethnic and native-migrant inequalities in the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. Research in Social Stratification and Mobility, 68. Doi: 10.1016/j.rssm.2020.100528.

given their overrepresentation in care work and other precarious forms of employment that do not offer a social safety net.[77] Women carry the "triple burden" of productive, reproductive, and community labor, a heavy burden that silences them and strips them of political power during times of crisis.[78] Following the COVID-19 lockdown in India, images were broadcast of the mass exodus of migrant workers, many of whom are women domestic and care workers, who were thrust on the streets of cities and forced to walk on foot to get back to their villages; these images exposed class, caste, and gender vulnerabilities that existed long before the pandemic.[79]

The Indian scene saw parallels in Lebanon following the spread of COVID-19 and lockdown where hundreds of women migrant workers found themselves thrown at the doorsteps of their embassies either because they were abandoned by employers or evicted by landlords. The abandonment of migrant workers at the whim of employers has always taken place in Lebanon. However, with the closure of the airport due to COVID-19, the phenomenon became increasingly visible and attracted local and international media.[80] In this paper, we discuss the impact of recent multiple crises in Lebanon on migrant workers in the country who provide domestic and care services and highlight their vulnerability as women and racialized non-citizens. Whilst COVID-19 impacted the most robust economies worldwide, the pandemic's consequences on migrant women workers in Lebanon have been severe as they overlaid both an economic collapse and long-standing vulnerabilities that impeded women's ability to adapt. The fateful Beirut Port explosion on August 4, 2020 had disastrous consequences on everyone who lived and worked in the surrounding areas but particularly on non-citizens.

Acknowledging the compounded negative impact of the explosion, this paper examines the heightened vulnerability of domestic and care workers in Lebanon in the face of the double crisis of COVID-19 and economic collapse. This vulnerability is prompted by multi-level determinants – the workers' precarious position in an unequal global political economy and a local labor policy context that is shaped by racial capitalism and manifests through Kafala (or the sponsorship system). Drawing on the day-to-day experiences of the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM: https://www.armlebanon.org/) in mitigating the impact of the crisis, we describe how the workers experienced further restrictions on their autonomy and came under heightened health and economic vulnerability. We also describe how ARM and women from the community of migrant workers joined efforts to provide solidarity and support to those impacted by the double crisis. The paper begins with a review of the feminist political economy as a framework that exposes global inequities and Kafala as a local labor policy that is sustained by a system of racial capitalism.

Feminist Political Economy and Women's Migration

Political economy examines the relationship between political systems and economic policies. Dominant political economic models have focused on the free market idea and argued that state restrictions are not necessary as individuals act on their own economic self-interests and guide policies

[77] Al-Ali, N. (2020). Covid-19 and feminism in the Global South: Challenges, initiatives and dilemmas. European Journal of Women's Studies. Doi: 10.1177/1350506820943617

[78] McLaren, HJ, Wong, KR, Nguyen, KN, Mahamadachchi, KND. (2020). Covid-19 and women's triple burden: Vignettes from Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Vietnam and Australia. Social Sciences, 9(5), 87.

[79] Roy, A. (2020). The pandemic is a portal. The Journal of Pax Christi Australia, 45(2). Retrieved from: https://www.paxchristi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Disarming-Times-Vol-45-No-2-1.pdf

[80] Ayoub, L. (2020). XXX. Retrieved from: https://www.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=6890&fbclid=IwAR1NftwAmvDauzqFC1ar9Z0tscmB0pvbnA0v1xU_e8ceVkjp7bFcV2bpeT0

Cheeseman, A. (2020). 'Thrown away like garbage': the plight of foreign workers in crisis-hit Lebanon. The Telegraph. Retrieved from: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/thrown-away-like-garbage-plight-foreign-workers-crisis-hit-lebanon/

that serve the interests of society as a whole.[81] In this case, self-interests guide individual choices which coalesce into a coherent social system, through what Adam Smith called the invisible hand of the market. Feminist scholars have critiqued neoliberal political economic models that theorize based on false assumptions of rational choice and ignore the gendered dimensions of economic processes.[82] A feminist political economy framework advances that individual choices are constrained by economic structures that are gendered and that interact with local institutions and global systems to maintain unequal relations between men and women within countries and transnationally. Thus, feminist political economy researchers have always called for incorporating gender as an analytical category in understanding the impact of economic restructuring in the Global North and structural adjustment programs on nations in the Global South.

As a scholarly field that focuses on linking economic decisions with the provisioning of human needs and wellbeing, feminist political economy scholarship has focused on the household and women's invisible labor both inside and outside the private sphere. In the introduction to New Frontiers in Feminist Political Economy, Rai and Waylen exposed weaknesses in traditional economic theories that have disregarded reproductive labor, such as care and domestic work, despite its significant contributions to the accumulation of capital.[83] Feminist scholarship on gender and labor migration in particular has underscored the interconnectedness between productive and reproductive work that migrant women contribute to the global economy and the segmentation of this work by gender, class, racialization, and citizenship status.[84] Pressures to reduce the cost of reproductive work in high-income countries resulted in the recruitment of migrant women from poor countries to provide domestic and care work cheaply whether in the private homes of employers or in public medical and social care institutions.[85] In addition to considering the push and pull factors that drive the migration of women to provide reproductive work for pay (economic restructuring and withdrawal of state support in origin countries and the expansion of the informal care economy in destination countries), Rachel Silvey brought to light the gendered politics of migration and the complex constructions of migrant women as excluded from citizenship.[86]

For some time, writings on women migrant workers in the Arab region and Lebanon specifically have focused primarily on vulnerability and abuse with little theoretical contribution to the field of gender and migration. This trend has been reversed with recent writings that have contributed important nuance to the gendered political economy of migration in the Gulf region,[87] and other works that highlighted migrant workers' agency and organizing efforts in Lebanon.[88] Almost every single academic paper,

81 Rothschild, E. (1994). Adam Smith and the Invisible Hand. The American Economic Review, 84(2), 319-322.

82 Waylen, G. (1997). Gender, feminism, and political economy. New Political Economy, 2 (2), 205-220.

83 Rai, SM. and Waylen, G. (2014). Feminist political economy: looking back, looking forward. In SM Rai and G Waylen (Eds.). New Frontiers in Feminist Political Economy. London: Routledge.

84 Roseman, SR, Barber, PG, Neis, B. (2015). Towards a feminist political economy framework for analyzing employment-related geographic mobility. Studies in Political Economy, 95(1), 175-203.

85 Shutes, I. and Anderson, B. (2014). Introduction. In B. Anderson and I. Shutes, Migration and Care Labour: Theory, Policy and Politics. Palgrave Macmillian.

86 Silvey, R. (2004). Transnational domestication: state power and Indonesian migrant women in Saudi Arabia. Political Geography, 23, 245-264.

87 Silvey, R. & Parreñas, RS. (2020). Thinking policy through migrant domestic workers' itineraries. American Behavioral Scientist, 64(6), 859-877.

Parreñas, RS., Silvey, R., Hwang, MC., Choi, CA. (2019). Serial labor migration: precarity and itinerancy among Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers. International Migration Review, 53(4), 1230-1258.

88 Kobaissy, F. (2015). Organizing the unorganized: migrant domestic workers union organizing in Lebanon. MA Thesis.

Mansour-Ille, D. & Hendow, M. (2018). From exclusion to resistance: migrant domestic workers and the evolution of agency in Lebanon. Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies, 16(4), 449-469.

NGO report, or policy document on migrant workers in Lebanon and the region evoke Kafala, the framework that governs labor migration, and calls for either abolishing or reforming it.

Kafala, Racial Capitalism, and COVID-19

The Arab region is one of both emigration and immigration and a destination to millions of male and female workers from East and South Asia and Africa.[89] Policies in almost all Arab countries are designed to keep migration as short-term as feasible and are governed by a strong stance against the settlement and integration of migrants. Kafala, or sponsorship, is a system of customary practices that govern the recruitment and hiring of migrant workers into the region through binding each worker in the country of origin to a specific sponsor-employer in the country of destination in a short-term contract.[90] By doing so, Kafala removes the responsibility of managing the migrant labor force from the state and places it in the hands of individual citizens. In most countries in the region, including Lebanon, state institutions merely provide bureaucratic services in the form of issuing work and residency permits, and minimal if any labor protections. This situation has meant that the migrant worker's access to rights is not guaranteed but is purely dependent on the moral values of the employer.[91]

Almost all migrant domestic and care workers in the region have obtained initial employment through the Kafala system. In Lebanon, there are around 250,000 women workers with the largest proportion coming from Ethiopia, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. As in the case of most Arab countries, these workers are excluded from protections under the Lebanese labor law and deprived of seeking legal recourse if subjected to exploitative working conditions. Kafala continues to receive ample attention in the Lebanese media and by international and local organizations and has come to dominate the discourse on the rights of migrant workers. The policy is oftentimes presented as the root cause of pervasive labor exploitation and abuse to which migrant workers are subjected; as a natural response, abolishing Kafala is oftentimes presented as the solution to the subjugation and oppression many migrant workers experience, whether in Lebanon or Gulf countries.[92]

Whilst abolishing Kafala ought to remain a primary goal in social justice efforts, Kafala is not a policy but a system that manifests an inequitable global economic system that drives the migration of poor women of color and usurps their labor in exchange for low wages. Kafala, the informal system of recruiting and hiring workers, is a mechanism and not a cause; it is made viable and sustained because it responds to both economic needs and racial ideologies about who should provide care to whom and at what cost. In Lebanon, racial ideologies manifest through normative beliefs and socially acceptable practices related to recruitment, hiring, and work conditions given that the overwhelming majority of domestic and care workers are Asian and African women. At the micro-level, Kafala is maintained through balancing out the financial interests of employers, recruitment agencies, and migrant workers who constitute the weakest link in this relationship. At the global level, Kafala is an outcome of inequalities of gender, race, nationality, and migration status, and an outcome of structural violence.[93] Thus, Kafala is not a

[89] Fargues, P. (2006). International migration in the Arab region: trends and policies. United Nations Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in the Arab Region. Retrieved from: http://apps.eui.eu/Personal/fargues/Documents/ESCWA_2006_%20P09_Fargues.pdf

[90] ILO (2016). Intertwined: A Study of Employers of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon. International Labour Organization.

[91] Abdulrahim, S. & Abdul Malak, Y. (2012). The Health of Female Migrant Workers in the Arab Region. In (Eds) Giacaman, R., Jabbour, S., Khawaja, M. & Nuwayhid, I. Public Health in the Arab World. Cambridge University Press.

[92] Ayoub (2019).

[93] Gardner, AM. (2010). Engulfed: Indian guest workers, Bahraini citizens and the structural violence of the Kafala system. In N. De Genova and NM Peutz (Eds). The deportation regime: sovereignty, space, and the freedom of movement. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

fundamental cause of migrant exploitation but a manifestation of racial capitalism, a term initially proposed by Cedric Robinson in Black Marxism: The Making of a Black Radical Tradition to describe how racism permeates social structures that emerge from capitalism.[94] Racial capitalism is the process of profiting from the labor of another person who is of a different racial identity and where the labor relationship is characterized by severe inequality. In the case of Lebanon, the labor that women migrant workers provide has become integral to Lebanese families and the Lebanese social structure as a whole. The expropriation of this labor at the lowest cost and the racialized exploitation of those who provide it are mutually constitutive.

Racial capitalism is a fundamental cause of social inequities.[95] Link and Phelan theorized that in the face of a newly introduced risk, COVID-19 in the present case, a fundamental cause is a pre-existing and unchanging social condition that shapes vulnerability to the risk and one's ability to mobilize resources to reduce its impact.[96] Racism is a fundamental cause of social inequities largely due to inequities in access to tangible resources, power, freedom, and social connections by racially differentiated groups.[97] By extension, we advance that racial capitalism shapes the social position of women migrant workers in Lebanon and determines their ability to access flexible resources that they can utilize to protect themselves when a new threat arises.

The Impact of the Double Crisis on Migrant Workers in Lebanon

Women migrant workers in Lebanon come from countries that have been historically impacted by poverty, war, climate change, and inequities – e.g., Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. In Lebanon, these workers undergo a process of racialization that intersects with a capitalist need to reduce the cost of reproductive work. When COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in early March 2020, migrant workers, both men and women, have already been reeling from an economic crisis that wrought the dramatic devaluation of the Lebanese pound against the U.S. dollar. Lebanon's economic crisis has been building for years but surfaced during the Fall of 2020 and prompted the October 17 Revolution. To be clear, the economic breakdown had terrible effects on Lebanese youth, women, the retired, poor, and middle class who lost their life savings and purchasing power as well as on male migrant workers.[98] The remainder of this paper, however, focuses on the impact of COVID-19 and economic breakdown on women who migrated to Lebanon to provide domestic and care work and whose vulnerability was intensified due to entrenched gender, racial, and non-citizenship status inequalities. We address how women's position limited their ability to realize COVID-19 control measures and the mechanisms through which the double crisis heightened their health and economic vulnerability.

Inability to Socially-Distance due to Limited Autonomy

The limited autonomy live-in domestic workers enjoy in their employers' homes affects various aspects of their work and personal lives, such as setting their work schedule, choosing when to rest or eat, and determining who to socialize with. Hiring a live-in migrant domestic worker in Lebanon is a life-style commodity that, until recently, has been afforded to a large segment of the population given its low cost. In addition

[94] Melamed. J. (2015). Racial capitalism. Critical Ethnic Studies, 1(1), 76-85.

[95] Lester Pirtle, WN. (2020). Racial capitalism: a fundamental cause of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic inequities in the United States. Health Education and Behavior. Doi:10/1177/1090198120922942

[96] Link, BG. & Phelan, JC. (2010). Social conditions as fundamental causes of health inequalities. In CE. Bird, P. Conrad, AM. Fremont, & S. Timmermans (Eds). Handbook of Medical Sociology. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

[97] Phelan, JC. & Link, BG. (2015). Is racism a fundamental cause of inequalities in health? Annual Review of Sociology, 41, 311-330. Doi: 10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112305.

[98] Kranz, M. (2020). Poverty set to deepen with Lebanon's economic crisis. Aljazeera. Retrieved from: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/poverty-set-deepen-lebanons-economic-crisis-200101093225897.html

to the recruitment fees, a family could hire a full-time worker for as little as $150 in monthly wages and, in some cases, could get away with offering her a living space that does not ensure privacy. A study commissioned by the International Labour Organization showed that 30% of domestic workers in Lebanon sleep in the employers' living room, children's bedroom, kitchen, or balcony.[99] Many live-in workers cannot distance themselves (physically or socially) from their employers which means that their COVID-19 risk is determined not only by their own actions but by the actions of the employer and her family members. Under lockdown, it is likely that migrant workers' mobility actually increased as they continued to go outside the house and run errands for homebound family members. Affluent Lebanese who inhabit spatially segregated urban spaces rely on essential workers, such as the domestic worker or concierge, to conduct needed activities like shopping and walking the pet that require contact in the local neighborhood.[100] Finally, live-in workers' freedom and mobility were further constrained by the increasing amount of housework resulting from the presence of family members at home all day.

In contrast to live-in workers, freelancers live on their own, primarily in apartments shared with other women from their country of origin, and can decide to stop working for an exploitative employer or in a risky environment. The autonomy afforded by the freelancing arrangement is offset by the higher risk of infection due to exposure related to use of public transportation to get to work and having to interact with a higher number of employers, as a freelancer typically has a few employers that she works for according to a set weekly schedule. Moreover, because freelancers share housing with other freelancers who also work for multiple employers, the risk of exposure to infection can be multiplied. Working from home and forsaking public transportation were luxuries that the majority of immigrant essential workers around the world could not afford. A study conducted in New York City found that having an essential job associated with continuous use of public transportation during lockdown, which associated with high rates of COVID-19 infection.[101] Although community transmission of COVID-19 in Lebanon remained low until July of 2020, the occupational position of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon which limits their decision-making on issues related to social distancing and mobility was a determinant of their increased vulnerability to the infection.

Health Vulnerability

The impact of the pandemic was magnified by the devaluation of migrant women's status in Lebanon through a racialization process. We define race as a socially constructed category, not a biological matter of fact, and racialization as a process through which individuals are categorized racially in an unequal social structural arrangement. Lack of access to healthcare, which has been identified as a determinant of COVID-19 risk among racialized migrant workers,[102] worked synergistically to magnify the risk of migrant workers in Lebanon. The Ministry of Labor and General Security require employers to furnish proof of insurance for the worker in order to approve the hiring request. Oftentimes, the employer purchases this insurance from a recruitment agency and is fully aware that it covers accidents and unexpected illness but not health benefits such as screening tests, medication, or maternity services. In reality, this insurance protects the employer, not the worker, as it pays for the cost of returning a terminally ill or deceased worker to her country of origin; in normal circumstances, the employer is technically obliged to cover the cost

[99] ILO (2016), OP. Cit.

[100] Vohra, A. (2020). The death of Lebanon's middle class: a country with a proud history of trade and commerce is starting to crumble into permanent poverty. Foreign Policy. Retrieved from: https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/21/lebanon-coronavirus-middle-class-poverty/

[101] Majzoub, A. (2020). RAMCO strike a key moment for labor rights in Lebanon. Executive Magazine. June 3, 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.executive.magazine.com/last-word-2/ramco-strike-a-key-moment-for-labor-right-in-lebanon

[102] Alaily-Mattar, N. (2008). Beyond gated communities? Detachment and concentration in networked nodes of affluence in the city of Beirut. Urban Design International, 13. 263-271.

of the worker's return after her contract ends. As such, migrant women live and work in Lebanon for years without having basic health protections.

The faux insurance document, which both employers and government institutions accept, is one of many examples of how racial capitalism operates in the Lebanese context. Specifically, this insurance exposes a context of gendered structural racism in which the denial of maternity services for a group of women workers is normative and where the motherhood of these women is viewed as abnormal. Silvey advanced that the migration of women from Indonesia to Saudi Arabia responded to the needs of a gendered political economy that cast womanhood as motherhood while at the same time pushed low-income Indonesian women to work abroad to contribute to national development.[103] The transnational migration to Lebanon takes place under similar economic conditions that push women to sacrifice for the nation and to live for years under conditions where their health is devalued.

Given lack of health coverage, live-in workers' access to COVID-19 testing or treatment depends on whether their employer agrees to pay for these healthcare services. On the other hand, freelance workers are on their own; the documented would have to pay out of pocket while the undocumented would hesitate to seek healthcare services altogether out of fear of being arrested. Even when workers overcome their fears, they can be denied healthcare. ARM received a number of reports from migrant workers who have been refused testing by hospital staff due to lack of documentation, which raises concerns not only about violating the rights of workers but also endangering the health of the public, both citizens and non-citizens alike.

Upon their arrival to Lebanon, women migrant workers undergo tests for HIV and Tuberculosis but do not receive screening tests for hypertension, diabetes, or other chronic illnesses that are established COVID-19 medical risk factors. Occupational stress, limited physical activity even if one engages in strenuous housework, and lack of autonomy and occupational decision-making constitute a cluster of factors that activate stress mechanisms and increase chronic disease risk at young ages.[104] Although migrant workers are generally young, the presumption that they have low medical risk is not justified as they experience isolation, occupational stress, and, importantly, structural racism, which has received ample attention in examining racial inequities in COVID-19 mortality in the United States.[105]

Economic Vulnerability

Travel restrictions and lockdowns instituted to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 triggered catastrophic economic consequences worldwide but particularly in Lebanon as the pandemic arrived following months of economic downward spiral. It is not possible in this paper to disentangle lingering economic hardships from the acute economic shock following the pandemic. What is sure is that citizens as well as immigrants and refugees in Lebanon experienced an accumulation of economic difficulties. Migrant workers who send most of their wages as remittances to relatives back home were hard hit when their earnings in Lebanese pounds devalued immensely. Following the closure of Beirut airport on March 17, 2020, and knowing that economic conditions back home were as dreadful as they are in Lebanon, many migrant workers had no alternative but to stay put and manage with whatever income they could generate. Although migrant domestic workers used to earn meager salaries to begin with – for example, the majority of women from Bangladesh

[103] Sy, KTL., Martinez, ME., Rader, B., White, LF. (2020). Socioeconomic disparities in subway use and COVID-19 outcomes in New York City. medRxiv. Doi: 10.1101/2020.05.28.20115949

[104] Kline, NS. (2020). Rethinking COVID-19 vulnerability: a call for LGBTQ+ im/migrant health equity in the United States during and after the pandemic. Health Equity, 4(1). Doi:10.1089/heq.2020.0012

[105] Mocayar Marón, FJ., Ferder, L., Saraví, FD., Manucha, W. (2019. Hypertension linked to allostatic load: from psychosocial stress to inflammation and mitochondrial dysfunction. Stress, 22(2), 169-181. Doi: 10.1080/10253890.2018.1542683

and Indonesia and 40% of women from Ethiopia earned less than $200 in monthly wages a few years ago[106] – they were able to send remittances in hard currency to support the livelihood of their children, parents, and other family members. With the disappearance of U.S. dollars from Lebanese banks, employers who do not have bank accounts outside Lebanon had to pay the workers' wages in local currency. This meant that workers needed to exchange Lebanese pounds for U.S. dollars at exorbitantly high rates and send significantly less remittances back home. Even worse, some employers stopped paying the worker her salary altogether before abandoning her a few months later in front of her embassy or at the doorsteps of a shelter or a service organization. In the months following COVID-19 lockdown, ARM experienced a sharp increase in need for emergency shelter, which they struggled to provide, and repatriation requests, which was impossible to fulfill due to the airport closure.

Freelance workers lost work opportunities as many employers no longer hired them either because they had less cash to pay wages or because of fear of COVID-19 transmission, or both, which impacted the workers' income and ability to pay for rent. ARM received complaints from multiple groups of freelance workers who were illegally evicted from a shared apartment. Freelance workers thus became trapped in a spiral where they could neither survive and receive protection in Lebanon nor repatriate back home. Live-in workers similarly suffered severe economic consequences as many were abandoned by their employers. Feeling betrayed after years of dedication, they bore the brunt of the Lebanese trickle-down poverty. In these circumstances, embassies and honorary consulates were non-responsive to the needs of their nationals and provided little if any support or protection. In light of the economic crisis, and before COVID-19, thousands of migrant workers had registered with their embassies or consulates to be repatriated home. Many incurred debts in order to pay for registration fees at the embassy/consulate, penalty fees due to overstaying their visa, and plane tickets. When the airport closed following the spread of COVID-19, these workers lost the money they spent and remained trapped in Lebanon.

Economic vulnerability exposed women to further abuse and exploitation whether in the employers' homes, public spaces, or regrettably by their own embassies/consulates and organizations that are expected to provide services and protection. Feeding on the desperation of live-in workers, some employers reduced wages and increased job demands whilst further abusing the worker by telling her to be grateful that she at least has food and a roof over her head. Workers who were abandoned by their employers were further touted by strangers in public. Passers by, both men and women, approached workers offering them cleaning jobs at low wages; some persisted in their demands despite workers repeatedly refusing their offers citing mistrust of the system as a whole. A committee assigned by the Ethiopian consulate sheltered a number of abandoned Ethiopian women in two apartments under conditions described by the women themselves as abysmal. The women were practically held in confinement without access to outsiders and were not offered any healthcare or other forms of support. Indeed, one of the "sheltered" women fell off an apartment balcony during the second week of July.[107] Moreover, 13 former live-in domestic workers who were temporarily sheltered at Caritas Migrant Center left the shelter a week later citing problematic conditions where the women were kept completely uninformed about their status or length of stay in detention and denied access to their mobile phones and suitcases. Three human rights groups issued a statement based on testimonies by the 13 women that described violations committed by Caritas.

[106] Egede, LE. & Walker, RJ. (2020). Structural racism, social risk factors, and COVID-19 – a dangerous convergence for Black Americans. The New England Journal of Medicine. Doi: 10.1056/NEJMp2023616

[107] The Daily Star (2020). Migrant worker attempts suicide in Lebanon. Retrieved from: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2020/Jul-09/508784-migrant-worker-attempts-suicide-in-lebanon.ashx

In addition to the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown and the economic crisis in further intensifying economic vulnerability, women experienced other knock-on effects such as poor mental health and disillusionment with any future prospects of seeking justice in Lebanon. Since March 2020, ARM witnessed a rise in the mental health needs of young migrant workers and believed that some cases demanded urgent psychiatric care. Women described experiences of abuse, exploitation, and forced labor; in some cases, the experience were traumatizing enough that a woman was not able to describe it or to express her feelings to a fellow woman who spoke the same language. In addition to lived experiences, women also expressed fear of being subjected to further abuse by strangers and opportunistic individuals who sought to hire them in exchange for very low pay, consulate staff, and even organizations entrusted with their protection. Women expressed disillusionment with having a viable future in Lebanon or back home where poverty and unemployment are also rampant. Even those who wished to return home felt embittered that they would return "empty handed" following years of dedicated work and without redressing the injustices they have experienced.

ARM's Solidarity Efforts to Mitigate the Impact of the Double Crisis

Women's agency, resilience, and ability to cope diminish during times of crisis and solidarity efforts become needed to provide support and ensure resilience. Even though ARM's mission is to decrease racism on the social and institutional levels through awareness, advocacy and community-building, the organization was faced with a high need to provide support services before the spread of the pandemic but particularly during the weeks and months following lockdown. The need has further intensified following the tragic Beirut Port explosion. ARM's sister organization, the Migrant Community Centers (MCC), has been working on the ground to provide migrant women with skills trainings and to prepare them as agents of social change. In early April 2020, MCC conducted an assessment of needs among 345 of its members, and learned to discover that migrant workers have needs that are akin to what is offered in humanitarian settings such as food security and shelter. For example, 35% of the respondents to the assessment reported that they have minimal to no access to food and the majority (65%) reported having enough food for the next few days only. Of those who rent shared apartments, more than two thirds (68%) reported that they will not be able to pay their monthly rent.

In light of these stark findings, ARM decided to temporarily shift its priorities to align with the pressing needs of the migrant community and to coordinate with other migrant worker collectives who also began to organize solidarity campaigns. ARM and MCC had established over the course of a decade strong ties with migrant workers in Lebanon, especially women domestic workers, and were therefore in a good position to launch solidarity efforts that address the most pertinent needs. Their solidarity campaign aimed to provide basic needs to 2,500-3,000 individuals including migrant workers and family members. Another grassroots feminist community group of Ethiopian women, Egna Legna, focused their relief work on single mothers and migrant families with children, distributing food and baby kits in and around Greater Beirut. Egna Legna organized a very successful GoFundMe fundraiser through which they collected $100,000 in donations to support workers who wanted to return home but needed support until that becomes possible.

ARM and MCC chose to focus their solidarity efforts on securing shelters for abandoned or evicted women migrant workers. Prior to COVID-19, workers in distress and in need of shelter had limited options and turned to a handful of organizations that provided shelter or to embassies/consulates. Organizational shelters were not adequate and provided limited space. Unfortunately, shelters provided by embassies/consulates placed women in crowded and unsanitary conditions and did not provide a minimal level of protection. As the homelessness crisis unfolded with COVID-19, ARM became inundated with requests to facilitate access to safe shelters and protect women from the dangers of sleeping on the street. The demand was enormous and there were weeks when hundreds of women

requested shelter. ARM activists, both Lebanese and migrant, believed that the best approach to address the shelter need is to build on resources that exist within the migrant community itself. For years, the community has been the haven and shelter for workers who are distressed, violated, or stranded. When a worker leaves an abusive employer, she oftentimes seeks support from other women who empathize with them, take them in, link them with new employers, support them until they are able to get on their feet again.

Whereas relying on community solidarity and resources provided better protection, the campaign organizers faced numerous challenges. First and foremost, fundraising during COVID-19 was difficult due to widespread economic hardship and given the extent of the need and the duration of the crisis were not known. Moreover, as the demand for shelter intensified, community shelter options in the few weeks following COVID-19 diminished due to the fear of coming in contact with a potentially infected person. With the passing of time, community members who could offer shelter to those in need became more amenable to doing so, however, overcrowding remained a problem and posed a new risk related to evictions by landlords. Upon learning that an apartment that is rented by a few migrant workers is used as a shelter, a landlord would pursue eviction procedures which put a higher number of women at the risk of homelessness. Despite difficulties, activists were able to raise enough funds to rent a couple of apartments to use as shelters knowing that this would be a temporary solution and that an eviction notice may come shortly after a few women move in. Finally, ARM faced a situation where it was challenging to shelter one woman who had experienced severe trauma with other women who were not prepared to address her mental health needs. Some of the women who became homeless after being abandoned by their employers required specialized psychological care that could not be provided. ARM faced infinite challenges and an astronomical increase in its work following the shift to provide relief and address community needs. The provision of safe shelter was its biggest challenge as it entailed taking on the responsibility of protecting the sheltered women, investing time and energy in fundraising in order to sustain their efforts, and dealing with the moral dilemma of not being able provide a community shelter to someone despite all efforts.

Conclusion

In Lebanon, the COVID-19 pandemic overlaid an economic crisis that plunged the majority of the Lebanese population into poverty and specifically exposed the fragile position of women migrant workers in the country. For decades, this group of essential workers helped maintain family life and, through their low wages, ensured the accumulation of capital in Lebanon. They were severely impacted by the double crisis due to their precarious position in a system of gendered racial capitalism that has devalued their labor, despite its monetary and symbolic contributions. The nature of COVID-19 as a crisis that has led to the closure of international borders points action away from recommendations to reform Kafala and instead to examine the fundamental cause that gives life to this pervasive system. At the very least, advocacy efforts should point in the direction of integrating the rights of migrant workers into a broad agenda of protecting the rights of all workers in Lebanon. Political will is necessary to achieve this goal and to raise the bar and call for dismantling racial capitalism altogether. Solidarity networks built through Lebanese and non-Lebanese activists remain necessary. During the early days of the 17 October Revolution, youth and feminist activists chanted that fighting for the rights and dignity of migrant workers and refugees is integral to creating a new social system in Lebanon that works for everyone, citizen and non-citizen alike. A new social system will inevitably have to dismantle the fundamental cause that sustains Kafala. Calls to abolish Kafala, a policy mechanism, have to be coupled with calls to abolish racial capitalism.

3. The Impact of Coronavirus on Small Farmers in Egypt: A Case of Dire Inequality

Abdel Mawla Ismail

Introduction

Egypt has more the 5.4 million farmers (5,404,395), including 965,000 without land[108] and despite the substantial weight of this group and the fact that it is responsible for food production for both rural and urban areas, most of them are deprived of protection whether in terms of social insurance or healthcare coverage. The outbreak of the Coronavirus further highlighted the economic and social conditions of poor and small farmers and intensified the degree of inequality they had already been suffering from. This paper tackles the complex crisis of small farmers in Egypt and the impact of Coronavirus on their living conditions. The paper focuses on a number of questions:

- Who are small farmers?
- What are the causes of inequality and poverty among small farmers before and after the spread of Coronavirus?
- What are the strategies that can counter than impact of the pandemic on small farmers?

Methodology

The paper will use a comparative historical approach to trace the differences between before and after Coronavirus in addition to field research. Other methodological tools were used to assist in this research such as focus groups.

Geographical scope

The paper covers several villages in Minya governorate in Upper Egypt and Beheira governorate in northern Egypt.

Time frame

The field study covers the time from March 2020, when lockdown and travel restrictions were imposed, till early July 2020, when restrictions were relatively eased up and freedom of movement and economic activities were partially restored. Statistics about the number of small farmers cover the period from 2000 to 2010 regarding female small farmers and extends till 2015 regarding all small farmers without focusing on gender categorizations based on available statistics.

Challenges

This study was met by several challenges. These include the fact that statistics on poor and small farmers are released every five to ten years. That is why the study depended on the most recent official statistics, issued in 2015. It is noteworthy that this type of statistics needs a time frame of not less than five years since it includes data on 5107 villages in Egypt. It was also hard to move between villages during the pandemic, especially with a curfew imposed in the regions subject of this study. That is why it was not before July 2020 that it was possible to meet with farmers and form discussion groups in addition to several meetings conducted with farmers in January and February before the lockdown.

Structure of the study

The first section of the study examines the phenomenon of small farmers in the Egyptian countryside and the developments it went

[108] Agricultural Census 2009/2010, Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation.

through between 2000 and 2015. The second section tackles mechanisms of poverty production among small farmers in Egypt before the pandemic. This section will analyze some forms of poverty production in Egyptian villages. The third section focuses on the mechanisms of poverty production in the aftermath of the pandemic. The fourth section is about coping mechanisms small farmers used to deal with the ramifications of the pandemic. The paper will end with a conclusion that presents the main findings of the study and lessons learnt from the spread of Coronavirus.

Definitions

- **Landholding:** the possession of agricultural assets, including non-land assets such as livestock, apiaries… etc.
- **Landholder:** A farmer who cultivates land whether as owner or tenant (whether the rent is paid in cash or crops)
- **Non-landed farmer:** A farmer who owns livestock, apiaries… etc. but does not own or rent land
- **Feddan:** A plot of land with an area of 4,400 square meters

First: The phenomenon of small farmers

There are several ways to identify poor and small famers in order to determine the extent of this phenomenon on which all rural production depends[109]. Mohamed Abu Mandour argued that small farmers are those who own two or less feddans in his study about production relations in Egyptian agriculture and which was tackled by Hassanein Keshk in his study about the impoverishment of farmers[110]. Samir Amin argued that small and poor farmers include all those who do not own land or own less than one feddan, based on the 1961 agricultural census, which was the most comprehensive in terms of land ownership, its geographical distribution, and its relation with several developments in the reality of Egyptian farmers. In the same vein, Mahmoud Abdel Fadil said that any farmer who owns less than two feddans in considered a poor farmer, also based on the 1961 census. Abdel Baset Abdel Moati argued that farmers who own less than three feddans are poor, based on their income according to the five-year plan 1978-1982, which stated that the average income of owners of less than three feddans is 150 Egyptian Pounds per year, hence placing those farmers on the line of poverty[111]. Salah El Amrousi said that small farmers combine ownership with rent and own between two and five feddans[112] and this is the same approach adopted by Hassanein Keshk in his study about the reproduction of poverty in the Egyptian countryside[113].

All above-mentioned views depend in their definition of small and poor famers on the quantitative approach on the land ownership map across different years. There is no doubt that the concept of poor and small farmers changes through time and so does other factors such as farmers' relationship with the land, the revenue of this land… etc. Determining who small farmers are is linked to the land, the revenue it yields, and any other forms of production on this land whether livestock or equipment. While these are all measured quantitatively, there are other factors that are measured qualitatively as Abdel Baset Abdel Moati[114] and Hassanein Keshk[115] argued and which include social influence, intermarriages… etc.

The study will, however, mainly focus on the quantitative approach since combing both the quantitative and the qualitative extends beyond

[109] Abdel Baset Abdel Moati. *The distribution of poverty in Egyptian villages* [Arabic]. Cairo: Dar Al Thakafa Al Gadida, 1979

[110] Hassanein Keshk. *The reproduction of poverty in Egyptian villages* [Arabic]. Cairo: Merit Publishing House, 2004.

[111] Abdel Baset Abdel Moati. Op. cit.

[112] Salah El Amrousi. "The farming and agricultural question in Egypt [Arabic]." Cairo, 1992.

[113] Hassanein Keshk. *The conditions of agriculture and farmers under structural adjustment policies* [Arabic]. Institute for Arab and African Studies in collaboration with the Third World Forum in Dakar.

[114] Abdel Baset Abdel Moati. Op. cit.

[115] Hassanein Keshk. Op. cit.

the scope of this paper. The study will base its definition of small farmers on Mohamed Abu Mandour's view that they own between two and five feddans while only changing it from two feddans to three. This change seems more realistic based on the 2015/2020 statistics and the income of farmers who own between three and five feddans in light of current prices. Rich farmers, on the other hand, could be those who own between 20 and 50 feddans.

Determining the number of female small farmers in this study will be confined to the interval between 1999/2000 and 2009/2010 based on the last agricultural census issued in 2010. This is because categorizing ownership based on gender is only done in the agricultural census while ownership statistics issued by the Central Authority for Public Mobilization and statistics in 2015 do not include gender-based categorizations.

When studying the number of women who own land, it will be obvious that their percentage dropped from 8.2% of total landowners in 1989/1990[116] to 5.2% in 2000[117]. In the same vein, the number of women who own land dropped by half in 2010 as it did not exceed 4% of the total number of landowners, which reveals the gap between men and women as far as access to agricultural land is concerned. The percentage of small female farmers also dropped from 8% in 1989/1999 to 5% in 1999/2000 then dropped further in 2009/2010 to reach 3.9% as shown in Table (1)

Table 1. Land ownership by female farmers

Ownership categories	1999/2000		2009/2010			
	Women	Total owners	Women	Total owners	Area of land for woman	Area
Non-landed	29933	821188	35672	964863		00
Less than one feddan	110275	1615590	106981	2143888	42740	923638
-1	42517	881085	34864	1068634	43691	1322103
-2	24751	516926	17314	531455	38704	1177899
-3	9484	239106	6607	230359	21337	736217
-4	4242	107389	2947	99302	12462	416972
-5	6900	169064	4841	170336	26686	922730
-7	3118	65362	1998	60993	16019	485444
-10	2639	57236	2132	66006	24123	749340
-15	1091	24322	194	24704	11360	398017
-20	1000	21661	165	23516	15169	531344
-30	473	11910	302	12027	10815	429660
-50	168	5654	106	5425	3674	332043
100+	41	2686	21	2456	3569	413590
500+				218		138224
1000+				213		7535557
Total	236632	4537319	179472	5404395	273082	9730785

[116] The percentage was calculated by the author based on the 1989/1990 agricultural census., Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation.

[117] The percentage was calculated by the author based on the 1999/2000 agricultural census., Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation.

When looking at landownership by all small and poor farmers, it becomes clear that farmers who own less than one feddan were estimated at 48.3% of the total number of owners in 2010 while the land they own does not exceed 9.5% of total agricultural land. The percentage of farmers who own two or less feddans is 84.3% of the total number of farmers based on the 2009/2010 census and they own 35.2% of agricultural land. Farmers who own three or less feddans constitute 89.5% of the total number of farmers and the land they own is estimated at 42.7% of agricultural land. The number of farmers who own five or less feddans is 4,069,981, that is 95% of the total number of farmers in Egypt and they own 56.5% of agricultural land. On the other hand, rich farmers who own 50 feddans or more are estimated at 0.2% of the total number of farmers and they own 16.8% of agricultural land.

Table 2. Total number of farmers who own land between 2009/2010 and 2015

Ownership categories	2009/2010		2015	
	Total owners	Area	Total owners	Area
Non-landed				
Less than one feddan	2143888	923638	2567475	1196925
-1	1068634	1322103	654035	802714
-2	531455	1177899	389732	732558
-3	230356	736217	227860	611553
-4	99302	416972	168824	569090
-5	170336	922730	161049	760517
-7	60993	485444	00	00
-10	66006	749340	108138	824803
-15	24704	398017	00	00
-20	23516	531344	66877	832863
-30	12027	229660	00	00
-50	5425	332043	28584	600586
100+	2456	413590	16009	1112317
500+	218	138224	00	00
1000+	213	753557	00	00
Total	5404395	9730785	4388583	8043926

Source. The table was prepared by the author based the 2009/2010 agricultural census and the 2015 ownership statistics issued by the Central Authority for Public Mobilization and Statistics.

Disparities in access to land intensified in 2015 as the number of farmers who own less than one feddan reached 58.7%, that is a 10.2% increase in the number of poor farmers, compared to 2009/2010. These farmers own 14.9% of agricultural land, that is an increase of 5.4%. Meanwhile, farmers who own two or less feddans reached 82.3% in 2015, which means they decreased by 2% compared to 2009/2010, and they own 34% of the land, which means a drop of 1.2%. The number of farmers who own three or less feddans dropped to 87.5% of the total number of farmers in 2015, compared to 89.4% in 2009/2010, that is a drop by 1.9%. The land they owned dropped by 1.1% to reach 41.6%. Farmers who own five or less feddans decreased by 0.6% to reach 95% in 2015, compared to 2009/2010, and the land they own also decreased by 1.6% to reach 58.1%. On the other hand, the percentage of rich farmers who own 50 or more feddans increased by 0.8% to reach 1% and the land they own increased by 4.5% to reach 21.3%, that is 1,712,903 feddans.

It is clear from all the above that despite the fact the small and poor farmers constitute 95% of the total number of farmers, they own 58.1% of agricultural land while rich farmers, who are estimated at 1%, own 21.3% of the land. This demonstrates growing inequality as far as access to land in the Egyptian countryside is concerned.

Second: Poverty reproduction before Coronavirus

The mechanisms of poverty reproduction among small farmers in Egypt are different. The paper will focus on the most common of those mechanisms.

2.1 Social protection

2.1.1 Health insurance

Health insurance in Egypt requires that beneficiaries be part of the social insurance program which covers only 52% of the Egyptian population based on official statistics. This means that 48% of Egyptians are not covered by insurance. In 2014, law number 127 on Regulating Health Insurance for Farmers and Agricultural Workers was issued[118] and its regulatory framework was issued in 2015[119]. Egyptian farmers did not benefit from this until 2018 when the Comprehensive Health Insurance Law was issued[120]. This law replaced the 2014 one and made it more difficult for farmers to get coverage.

The new law is costly for farmers since each farmer pays 4% of his income, 3% for his non-working wife, and 1% for each child that increases to 1.5% starting the second child, to be paid on four yearly instalments. This means that if a farmer has a wife and three children, he will pay at least 11% of his annual income. Payment receipts are extremely important when dealing with any government institution to the extent that a child can be suspended from school if instalments are not paid on time. Farmers also pay one third of the price of medication, tests and scans, surgeries, and in-patient care. In addition, the new law will be applied in six stages until 2032. The first and second stages include 3-4% of the population, the third stage 50.7% starting 2028, and the last stage, which will be implemented from 2030 till 2032, covers 25% of the population and includes Greater Cairo[121]. This means that farmers need to wait until it is their turn to have health insurance while taking into consideration any upcoming developments that could delay the process altogether.

[118] The Official Gazette, no. 37 repeated (c) on farmers' health insurance

[119] The Official Gazette, no. 17 repeated (a), April 27, 2015 on prime minister's decree no. 981 for the year 2015 on the regulatory framework of law no. 127 for the year 2014.

[120] *The Official Gazette*, no. 2 supplement (b) on law no. 2 for the year 2018 on the Comprehensive Insurance Law.

[121] *The Official Gazette*, no. 18 repeated, May 8, 2018 on prime minister's decree no. 909 for the year 2018 on issuing the regulatory framework for law no, 2 for the year 2018.

2.1.2 Social insurance

Farmers in Egypt are not covered by social insurance and they only used to get a pension, around 420 Egyptian Pounds for a family of four, when they reached 65 years old based on law no. 112 for the year 1980[122]. When law no. 148 for the year 2019, the Comprehensive Social Insurance Law, was issued[123], the 1980 law was annulled. The new law dealt with small and poor farmers who cultivate one feddan or more as business owners even if the land is rented and whether they pay in cash or crops. The law also considered absentee landowners and farmers who cultivate less than one feddan, whether they are owners or tenants, irregular workers. Dealing with small farmers as business owners deprives them of health insurance coverage based on the current laws and equates between them and businessmen.

2.2 The right to organize

2.2.1 The status of Cooperatives

Even though more than 100 years have passed since the emergence of the Cooperative Movement in 2017 and even though the 2014 Egyptian constitution warrants the right to create agricultural cooperatives, there are no legislations that regulate the establishment of cooperatives. In fact, cooperatives are still governed by laws that give administrative entities the right to monitor and supervise any cooperative activity. These laws are quite rigid since they date back to the 1960s and strip farmers of the right to independently create their cooperatives and choose the activities they want to engage in within those cooperatives. Farmers, therefore, play a minimal role in running their cooperatives.

2.2.2 Trade Unions

For the first time in their history, Egyptian farmers were given the right to create their own trade union following the January 25 Revolution in 2011. After the Declaration of Union Freedoms in March 2011, dozens of farmers' trade unions were created across Egypt. The Minya governorate alone witnessed the creation of 28 independent trade unions from March 2011 till the end of 2012. However, union activities were suppressed starting early 2013 until the Law on Union Freedoms was issued in 2017. The new law stipulated that all trade unions legalize their status in the period from March to May 2019 and set a minimum of 150 members to establish a trade union instead of 50 in addition to several administrative restrictions that made many farmers' unions unable to legalize their status. Only nine unions across Egypt managed to legalize their status in 2019. Despite introducing modifications to the law following lobbying by civil society organizations and the International Labor Organization, going back to the minimum of 50 members, bureaucratic restrictions still made it hard for farmers to practice their right to unionize.

2.3 Access to agricultural land

Following the implementation of the law on the liberalization of landlord-tenant relationship in the Egyptian countryside in October 1997, rents remarkably increased. Before 1992, the rent of one feddan did not exceed LE 200 annually then increased to LE 600 between 1992 and 1997 when the law was implemented. Rents kept increasing until they reached LE 6,000 annually in some Upper Egyptian governorates such as Minya and reached between LE 6,500 and 7,000 in northern Egypt. Now the annual rent in some villages in Minya reaches LE 12,000 and in some Nile Delta governorates such as Daqahliya and Beheira it reaches 15,000 (based on interviews with farmers from Minya and Daqahliya on July 5, 2020). Added to that is the absence of a contractual relationship between the landlord the tenant and lack of stability. Tenants are also unable to deal with any farming associations such as cooperatives, hence they are at the mercy of exchange markets to gain access to agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, and seeds.

[122] *The Official Gazette*, issue no. 23, June 5, 1980.

[123] The Official Gazette, issue no. 23 repeated, August 19, 2019.

2.4 Agricultural input markets

The livelihood of Egyptian farmers depends on the prices of agricultural inputs, which constantly keep fluctuating. Since the liberalization of agriculture in 1980s, prices of agricultural inputs have been on the rise. The price of wheat fertilizers increased by 850% in 2009, compared to 1985, pesticides by 4500%[124] . Seeds constituted 19.5% of agricultural inputs in 2016/2017, chemical fertilizers 21%, and pesticides 4.8%[125].

2.5 Access to credit sources

The Agricultural Development and Credit Bank abandoned its role in providing farmers with loans. Interest rates for loans given to small farmers increased from 13% to 15% in 1989 then reached 20.3% in 1992 and settled in 2009 between 18% and 20%[126]. The bank, now called the Egyptian Agricultural Bank[127], turned into an investment bank that requires material assets such lands, instead of crops, as collateral for any loans farmers take.

Third: Poverty production during the pandemic

The most common poverty production mechanisms are as follows:

3.1 Prices of agricultural inputs

The impact of Coronavirus on prices of agricultural supplies was manifested at an early stage with the shortage of imported agricultural inputs that started in late December in 2019 and was intensified with imposing lockdown and restrictions on movement in the second week of March 2020. While there are no statistics about changes in the prices of agricultural inputs, meetings held with farmers in the governorates subject of this study revealed that prices of seeds, whether local or imported, increased. For example, a bag of wheat seeds from the brand Beni Suef-5 increased from LE 220 in the agricultural season 2018/2019 to LE 300 in 2019/2020, that is a percentage of 36%. One feddan needs two 50 KG bags. The prices of soybean seeds, from the local brand Clark, increased from LE 8 in 2019 to LE 15 in 2020, that is a percentage of 87.5%. One feddan needs 48-50 kilograms. A 50 Kg bag of corn seeds, from the brand High-Tech, increased from LE 200 in 2019 to LE 500 in 2020. On the other hand, garlic seeds from the Sids cultivar did not cost farmers at all since they depend on self-pollination.

The prices of chemical fertilizers also increased in the same interval, especially that farmers depend on black markets. The price of a 50 Kg bag of urea/nitrates increased from LE 220 in 2019 to LE 250 in 2020, that is by 14%, and in some governorates like Minya, the price reached LE 270. Meanwhile, the price at agricultural cooperatives and land reclamation associations is LE 165, yet not all farmers have access to those because they do not have agricultural holding cards through which they can buy from these entities. Farmers who do have the cards refuse to deal with those associations because they make farmers buy corn seed bags for LE 500. Another reason whu fertilizer black markets flourished is lack of land tenure security whether farmers pay in cash or crops and it reaches 8% of the total number of landholders according to the 2009/2010 statistics. In addition, the urea/nitrates fertilizers farmers need exceed the quota for each holding card. For example, a farmer gets only two bags of wheat fertilizers while one feddan of wheat needs 300 Kgs of fertilizers, that is six bags. One 50 Kg bag of phosphate fertilizer increased from LE 85 in 2019 to LE 100 in 2020, that is by 18%.

The prices of micro and macro nutrients also increased from LE 20/Kg in 2019 to LE 35 in 2020, that is 75%. The amount of nutrients needed per feddan differ based on the crops, but they have been used widely as an alternative to chemical pesticides.

[124] "Agricultural Expenses Bulletin in 1985-2006 [Arabic]." Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation.

[125] "Annual bulletin of the agriculture sector income estimations 2016-2017 [Arabic]." The Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, 2019.

[126] Hassanein Keshk. Op. cit.

[127] The Official Gazette, issue no. 45 repeated (e), November 16, 2016.

3.2 Drop in crop yields

Because crops do not generally have a high price elasticity of demand and because of the continuous rise in the prices of agricultural inputs, crop yields per feddan were affected. The study will examine the condition of several crops during the pandemic and will focus on cash crops such as beans and subsistence crops such as wheat. The calculation of crop yields depended on the crops produced through an entire agricultural season so that yields can be compared to the poverty threshold during the same time. According to the most recent income and expenditure survey for the fiscal year 2017/2018[128], issued in 2019, the poverty threshold for an individual was LE 8,827/ year or LE 736/month while the extreme poverty threshold for the same year was LE 5,890/year or LE 491/month.

3.2.1 Wheat crop yield for 2019/2020

In order to examine the wheat crop yield compared to the cost of cultivation per feddan, it is important to go through the different methods of sowing wheat. The first method is broadcasting and the second is drilling. The first does not need a lot of farmers since two per feddan can be enough. The problem with this method is that it requires extensive use of pesticides, which has negative health effects. In the second method, more farmers are needed per feddan and the cost of labor is calculated at LE 15 per kirat (a feddan is 24 kirats). Wheat stays in the land for six months for the seeds are sowed in early October/November and the harvest is in April/May. This might differ from one governorate to another and between farmers.

It becomes obvious from the list of inputs and outputs that the net yield per feddan is LE 3560 through the six months, which means that the monthly income of the farmer is LE 593.3.

Table 3. List of inputs and outputs of the wheat crop for the agricultural season 2019/2020

Items	Value	Frequency	Cost	Yield	Net profit/ loss
Seeds	300	2*300	600		
Ploughing	500		500		
Sowing	15/ kirat	24*15	360		
Super phosphate	100	5*100	500		
Nitrates	250	4*250	1000		
Harvest labor	70	20*70	1400		
Irrigation	20	4*20	80		
Rent	12000	100/0.5*12000	6000		
Selling crops	610/ ardeb	20 ardebs - 700			
			10440	13400	
Sub-total			600	14000	
Net yield					3560

[128] "Income and expenditure survey [Arabic]." Central Authority for Public Mobilization and Statistics, Cairo, June 2019.

Table 4. List of inputs and outputs of the bean crop for the agricultural season 2020

Items	Value	Frequency	Cost	Yield	Net profit/ loss
Seeds	20 /Kg	20*80	1600		
Ploughing	300		500		
Sowing (through broadcasting)					
Super phosphate	100	5*100	500		
Nitrates	250	6*250	1500		
Local fertilizers	3000				
Fertilization	1500				
Harvest and threshing labor	1300		1400		
Irrigation	2500				
Rent	12000	100/0.5*12000	6000		
Selling crops	16 / Kg	16*1.5 tons		24000	
Sub-total			19900	24000	
Net yield					3560

3.2.2 Bean crop yield for 2019/2020

Beans are cultivated twice a year, the first in in the second half of August (winter harvest) and the second in the second half of February (summer harvest). Beans remain from 90 to 120 days in the land. Beans are cash crops on which farmers depend to increase their income.

It becomes obvious from the list of inputs and outputs that the net yield per feddan is LE 3560, which means that the monthly income of the farmer is LE 890.

When comparing the incomes from the two above-mentioned crops (LE593.3/month for wheat and LE 890/ month for beans) to the thresholds of poverty and extreme poverty, it becomes obvious that the income from wheat falls between the threshold of poverty (LE 736) and extreme poverty (LE 491) while the income from beans is slightly above the poverty threshold.

3.3 Discrepancy between farm and market prices:

There is a discrepancy between farm prices, for which farmers sell their crops in the land, and market prices, for which famers sell their crops through market suppliers. For example, the farm price of dry beans was LE14-16 /Kg in January 2020 (based on an interview with one of the farmers who grow beans in Beheira on March 29, 2020) while the market price for the same crop at the same time reached LE 29.62[129], that is a difference of 85%. Similarly, the farm price of garlic was LE1.75/Kg (based on an interview with a farmer who grows garlic in Minya on March 20, 2020) while it reached LE21.68 in the consumer market[130].

[129] "Monthly bulletin: Average consumer price of most important food commodities," the Central Authority for Public Mobilization and Statistics, Cairo, January 2020

[130] "Monthly bulletin: Average consumer price of most important food commodities." Op. cit.

Farmers sell an ardeb of wheat for LE 700. An ardeb equals 150 Kgs and suppliers buy 155 Kgs for the same price, which means that farmers lose 5 Kgs per ardeb. The price of one ton of wheat when sold by the farmer is 4,515 while its price in the consumer market is 7,140, which means a loss of 58% for farmers.

3.4 Rise of consumer prices

Prices kept increasing during the pandemic in both urban and rural areas, yet they had a stronger impact on consumers in rural areas because their income elasticity is quite low. For example, one kilogram of potatoes reached LE 10.69 in January 2020, compared to 10.36 in December 2019, that is an increase of 3.2% while the average selling price in January 2019 was LE 6.5, that is an increase of 64.5%[131]. The same applies to tilapia fish that increased by 15.6% to reach LE 32.91 in January 2020, compared to 28.53 in January 2019. Similarly, prices of red meat increased by 15.6% in January 2020. The price of one kilogram of dry beans increased by 1.9% compared to January 2019 to reach LE 29.62 in January 2020[132].

3.5 Restrictions on selling crops

With the spread of Coronavirus, weekly crop markets in villages were closed as a precautionary measure. While this is a necessary procedure to curb the spread of the virus in the Egyptian countryside, it rendered small farmers unable to sell surplus crops at fair prices, hence placing them under the mercy of market suppliers. This meant that market suppliers benefited from the crisis at the expense of small farmers.

Fourth: Countering the impact of Coronavirus

Small and poor farmers used a number of strategies to face the challenges arising from the spread of Coronavirus.

4.1 Reliance on subsistence economy

The spread of Coronavirus and the subsequent closure of local crop markets forced large numbers of small farmers to rely on subsistence economy, which means cultivating the crops that cover their basic needs and as well as those of their livestock. Farmers, therefore, focused on particular crops such as wheat, corn, and alfalfa.

4.2 Village cooperatives

In the absence of trade unions and cooperatives and restrictions imposed on agricultural loans, small farmers created a system of productive village cooperatives. Based on this system, farmers exchange agricultural inputs and equipment. For example, female farmers in several villages in the Giza governorate, particularly the villages of Wardan and Abu Ghaleb, as well as villages in Beheira and Minya started a collective project for breeding chickens. One woman would, for example, provide corn fodder in return for products such as eggs and meat. The same was done with diary products, apiaries… etc.

These cooperatives go back to what is similar to the bartering system, yet are different in the sense that parties involved in the system play different roles in the production process. For example, some women would collect milk from different parts of the village and take it to other women to sort it then take it to another group of women who make cheese and butter that are sold in local markets.

4.3 Shared space

Sharing a living space is one of the most common strategies used by farmers to face poverty. This is mainly done through extended families living in the same space. This living pattern was particularly revived following the spread of the virus since many farmers who worked in urban areas got back to their home villages and stayed with their

[131] "Monthly bulletin: Average consumer price of most important food commodities." Op. cit.

[132] "Monthly bulletin: Average consumer price of most important food commodities." Op. cit.

families. While this living style is commonly seen as a survival mechanism, it is also considered a form of solidarity that replaces relations based on profit with those based cooperation, solidarity, and reciprocity. This pattern that is currently applied within families is also seen as the adequate form of a social solidarity system[133].

4.4 Diversifying sources of income

The pandemic had a negative impact on farmers' incomes, which had been already low. This drove small farmers and their families to seek other sources of income, particularly by finding jobs outside the agriculture sector in an attempt to cope with the financial crisis.

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn out of this study:

- **The link between Egyptian agriculture and exchange markets:** There is a discrepancy between the cost and income of crops because agriculture is linked to exchange markets on the global level. The cost of cultivating crops, especially the cost of agricultural inputs, keeps increasing in a geometric progression while crop yields increase in an arithmetic sequence. This explains why agricultural inputs are sold to framers in Egypt with prices that are similar to those of global markets, which leads to a negative growth in farmers' incomes. Most small farmers are, therefore, impoverished.

- **Weak institutional structure:** Agricultural crops are generally known for weak price elasticity of demand whether on the production or marketing levels. This situation is aggravated in the case of small farmers since they do not have organized institutions that can maximize their opportunities whether through the industrialization of agricultural products or increasing supply of crops through, for example, new storage techniques. These entities would also help in developing a system of cooperative production that includes sowing, harvesting, and selling. Lack of these institutions is what places small and poor farmers at the mercy of all market fluctuations.

- **Lack of insurance funds and ongoing agricultural crises:** The pandemic exposed the absence of all forms of insurance funds that protect crops whether from climate changes, ongoing and emergency crises and any changes in the market as a result, drop in crop yields, and speculations on crop prices in case of lack of elasticity. Insurance funds created by relevant ministries are not only associated with crippling bureaucratic restrictions but are also temporary so that private insurance companies become the only alternative. When the pandemic started, the Insurance Federation of Egypt announced an imminent agreement with international reinsurance companies to support the agriculture sector in Egypt and reduce the risks to which farmers are exposed. Added to this is the support offered by the government through its sustainable development programs according to the federation's statement[134] .

Lessons learnt

- **Rethinking the comparative advantage theory:** The pandemic exposed the setbacks of the comparative advantage theory. As shown in the study, the prices of agricultural inputs kept rising as a result of the closure of export and import markets in several countries to curb the spread of the virus. This led to the absence of several basic commodities since suppliers relied on importing these

[133] 26 Jeremy Rifkin. The End of Work, 1995.

[134] Bulletin of the Insurance Federation of Egypt [Arabic], issue no. 154, June 2020.

commodities from abroad, which in turn led to attempts at replacing those commodities with local ones.

- **Solidarity economy as a developmental alternative:** The pandemic underlined the necessity of looking for a production pattern that is more flexible in dealing with crises, especially those associated with food production. Because the pandemic led to the reproduction of poverty among small farmers as a result of linking agriculture to global markets, it is important to look for alternative economic patterns that rely on solidarity markets which give precedence to satisfying the basic needs of the population, particularly food. Such patterns would work on achieving more integration between production and consumption market to overcome monopolies on agricultural inputs and benefiting from the surplus. This would empower vulnerable and marginalized groups in the agriculture sector, especially food production.

The pandemic also revealed that small farmers, especially women, do not have access to exchange markets and the same applies to credit markets, which accentuates their poverty and leads to the deterioration of their social and economic conditions. This necessitates the creation of solidarity markets that enable farmers to act independently or under the supervision of farming entities such as production and consumption cooperatives, trade unions, and others.

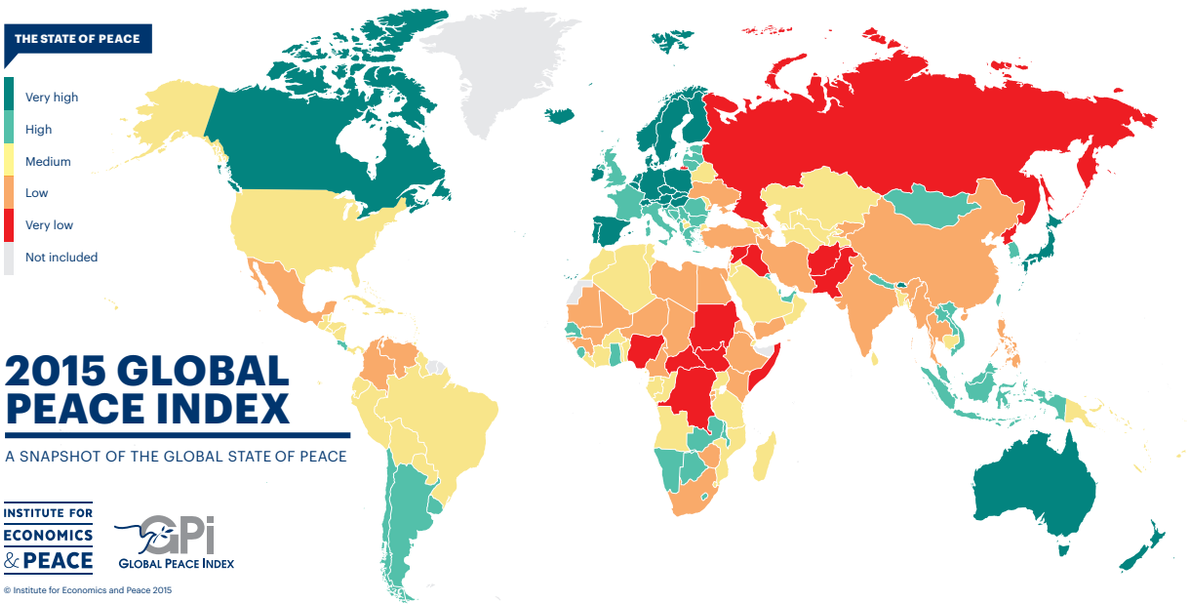
4. A Humanitarian Crisis and Disastrous Ramifications: The Impact of Coronavirus on Vulnerable/ Marginalized Groups in Sudan

Azza Mustafa Mohamed Ahmed

Introduction

This paper aims at examining the social and economic impact of the humanitarian crisis caused by Coronavirus on vulnerable and marginalized groups in Sudan with special emphasis on female street vendors and women with special needs in the capital Khartoum. It also tackles how these groups cope with the crisis and the role played by relevant state institutions, particularly the Ministry of health and the Ministry of labor and social development. The paper does not include refugees and the displaced owing to restrictions imposed on movement and the remote location of the camps where they live.

Vulnerable or fragile groups are those economically, socially, or politically marginalized and whose role in their societies is overlooked. Marginalization on one hand and poverty, deprivation, and lack of social justice on the other hand are two sides of the same coin. Marginalized groups receive little or no education since their basic needs become the topmost priority, work in unstable and informal jobs, including children, have incomes that do not satisfy their basic needs hence are usually categorized as below the poverty line, live in neighborhoods where they have no access to public services, and have limited or no access to healthcare[135].



[135] Mohamed Ibrahim Taha. "Marginalized groups [Arabic]," 2018: www.alkhabbar.com.cdn.ampproject.org

Vulnerable groups in Sudan

Sudan has been going through conflicts and civil wars since 2003 in different regions including Darfur, Blue Nile, and South Kordofan. The impact of these conflicts on the Sudanese people is manifested in the number of refugee camps in which the displaced live, many of which are located in the outskirts of the capital Khartoum. The Global Peace Index map for 2019 shows the categorization of Sudan as one of the least peaceful countries in the world as a result of on-going civil conflicts.

Before conflicts started in Sudan, agriculture was the main source of income for the majority of the population. The wars, however, forced to them to flee. Women practiced a number of activities including manufacturing dairy products, grazing, and agriculture. Based on reports, 65% to 84% of women were the main breadwinners while 64% to 70% of displaced women are within the working age range[136]. After being displaced, women started looking for other alternatives to generate income. Some of them worked in cleaning services whether in houses or institutions while others sold food and tea at construction sites, bus stops, and marketplaces in an attempt at adapting to their new situation[137]. Those women work for long hours to support their families and children. Some of them start at 6:00 am and finish at 6:00 pm while others stay till 11:00 pm[138], which in many cases has a negative impact on the children who stay away from their mothers for almost all day. It is noteworthy that the majority of displaced families depend on women in their livelihood since usually men are absent either because they join anti-regime militias or died at war. Many of those women are divorced and many of the men who are present do not earn enough money to support the family[139].

Most of these women lack the professional skills required to adapt to their new realities. This led to the emergence of marginal and informal jobs that require neither training nor experience, do not need official permits, and whose income is not subject to taxes. The percentage of women working in the informal sector is estimated at 88% while the size of this sector is estimated at 76%-86%, with these numbers likely to increase[140]. Several studies noted that the majority of women work in the informal sector for several reasons. These include the conflicts that displaced entire families and/or claimed the lives of male breadwinners, the deterioration of economic conditions manifested in price hikes and growing inflation rates, and high illiteracy rates that do not allow for competition in the formal sector[141]. Selling tea and food has become a common

Table 5. The social conditions of female tea sellers in Khartoum

Province	Age range	Social status	Place of origin	Percentage
Khartoum	18-45 (87%)	Single	South Kordofan, Darfur, Blue Nile (88.6%)	45.1%
		Married		33%
		Widows and divorcees		21%

Source. Bodour Mubarak. "Female tea sellers in Khartoum wait for legalization [Arabic]." October 2017: www.alrakoba.net

[136] World Food Programme (2004) Emergency food security and Nutrition Assessment in Darfur, Sudan.

[137] Khaled El Tijani. "War economics and economics of war: The case of Darfur [Arabic]." Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2013.

[138] Interview with Saeida Awad, tea seller, Khartoum, May 25, 2020

[139] Interview with Aida Khamis, tea seller, Khartoum, August 15, 2020. Her husband joined the militias and left her with five children at school age.

[140] Abdel Moneim Hussein Mahmoud. "Informal economic activity: Challenges and future possibilities [Arabic]." The Informal sector in a changing world: workshop, Khartoum, 2015.

[141] For more info see Hassan Abdel Aati and Ashraf Osman. "Informal labor in Sudan [Arabic]." Arab NGO Network for Development: www.annd.org

job that provides a relatively stable income for women who financially support their families[142].

While usually the majority of women who work in in selling tea and food are either illiterate or received little education, worsening economic conditions and high unemployment rates forced many university graduates to resort to those jobs[143]. While admitting that these jobs do not satisfy their ambitions, those women say they had to find a source of income to meet their basic needs. Also, such jobs acquired a new significance as customers started engaging in conversations about current affairs, political, social, and economic. This led to the emergence of makeshift cultural forums that made up for lack of adequate places after the former regime's encroachment upon public spaces in favor of investment projects. Gatherings around the "tea lady," as they are commonly called now, have become a common spectacle, especially in parts that overlook the Nile.[144]

The impact of Coronavirus on marginalized groups

1. Tea and food sellers

All tea and food sellers interviewed for this study confirmed that Coronavirus had a strong impact on their economic situation, especially that they depend on income that is generated on daily bases. Before the pandemic, those women earned 1,000-3,000 pounds every day (around 7 dollars) and this could increase based on the type of the customers and the neighborhood in which they wroked. While these amounts are still very little in light of increasing prices and inflation rates, women still managed. Before the revolution, tea and food sellers were always threatened by raids from local authorities under the pretext that they do not have a permit and were then forced to pay fines that exceeded their income. This, in turn, forced them to work for two shifts[145]. While permits were required based on the Public Order Law[146], local authorities just took advantage of the law to collect as much as they can for their own benefit.

Several women rights organizations, such as El Sayha (the cry) and No to Oppressing Women, supported tea and food sellers legally until they established a trade union[147] to protect their rights and represent them in case of conflicts with the authorities. When the revolution took place in December 2019, the interim government warranted their right to work without any pressure on the part of the authorities. In fact, the Ministry of Labor and Social Development is currently working on building them kiosks in collaboration with the private sector[148]. After the pandemic, tea and food sellers were forced to stay at home for three months starting March 12, 2020 and those violating the lockdown were subject to fines and jail sentences. Many of the sellers threatened to violate the lockdown if they are not given an alternative and others had to sell their furniture in order to pay rent. After negotiations with the trade union, the Ministry of Labor and Social Development agreed to provide the women with monthly vouchers for 3,000 pounds in addition

[142] Omayma Sayed-Ahmed and Ahmed Mukhtar. "Women Tea-Sellers in Khartoum and HIV/AIDS: Surviving Against the Odds," January 2006, Khartoum.

[143] "The 'tea ladies' who take no break [Arabic]": www.alnilin.com.cdn.ampproject.org

[144] Ihsan Fakiri, activist, in "The Sudanese 'tea lady': The controversial hangout [Arabic]." June 5, 2017: www.albayan-ae.cdn.amproject.org

[145] Interview with Azaz Ishak, food seller, Khartoum, July 2, 2020 For more info see Sayed Ahmed Ibrahim, "Tea sellers facing the authorities [Arabic]." December 19, 2018: www.sudancp.com

[146] The Law of Public Order was issued in 1996 and includes 25 articles that regulate public behavior in social occasions and marketplaces. The law was annulled in 2019 following criticism by local and international rights organizations.

[147] The Tea and Food Sellers Union was established in 2013 and includes 14 associations, each with more than 500 members. The total number of members in the union is 42,000. One of the main objectives of the union was to stop campaigns against tea and food sellers, providing female street vendors with a stable income, and empowering women through reviewing personal status law. The secretary general of the union, Awadiya Koko, was named one of the world's 10 most courageous women by the US State Department in April 2016.

[148] Press conference by minister of labor and social development, SUNA, May 2020,

to a box of food supplies. Many of the women interviewed for this study confirmed that not all sellers got the money and the food and some of them, 55 women, had to take the risk and resume work while the lockdown was still in force. A fine of 500 pounds was imposed on each of them and they were spared the jail sentence following negotiations with the union[149]. As the pandemic started, several volunteers joined the community service organization called We're All Values to help families in need in collaboration with the Social Responsibility Department at one of the major corporates[150] in the country and the Ministry of Labor and Social Development through preparing the "Corona basket." The number of baskets reached 10,000, distributed among families in the outskirts of Khartoum. The project underlines the role civil society can play in mitigating the impact of crises on marginalized and fragile groups.

We're All Values[151] and the food initiative[152]

The food initiative launched by the We're All Values Organization prepared 7,000 meals per day to feed the homeless, which came to be called "street heroes" instead of "street children." The initiative also created 15 job opportunities for food sellers who became unemployed after the pandemic. The project did not stop at providing food since it started establishing shelters for the homeless. This was implemented in the states of White Nile and North Kordofan and is being implemented in Khartoum.

After restrictions on movement were relaxed and the lockdown was gradually lifted, tea and food sellers started going back to work. In order to keep the women safe, especially that their work involves mingling with a lot of people, they are constantly provided with sanitizers, soap, and water and they comply with health and safety measures[153].

2. Women with special needs

According to the National Persons with Disabilities Act 2017, "persons with disability shall have the rights, privileges, facilities and exemptions in accordance with the international treaties and conventions ratified by the Sudan, and all the State organs shall be committed to implement the same, and without prejudice"[154]. This means that the state should work on protecting the rights of persons with disabilities[155] under normal circumstances, let alone under extraordinary circumstances like a pandemic that would affect them more than other groups.

---

149 Interview with Awadiya Koko, secretary general of the Tea and Food Sellers Union, Khartoum North, July 8, 2020.

150 DAL Food Industries is one of the major companies in Sudan and is known for its participation in several humanitarian and development projects: www.corporatesocialresponsibilityuae,wordpress.com

151 A volunteer-based youth organization established in 2013and was involved in several initiatives that provided different forms of medical assistance, including free of charge tests and medications in addition to establishing a hospital for children with cancer and helping orphans.

152 Interview with Mohamed Ibrahim Mohamed, the executive director of We're All Values, July 6, 2020, Khartoum North

153 Interviews with food sellers Hanan Abdel Karim Bakhet, Mona Abdel Kader Abdallah, and Yousria Mohamed Zakaria, Khartoum, July 8, 2020

154 Report on the condition of people with disabilities on the tenth anniversary of Sudan's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, National Council for Persons with Disabilities, General Secretariat, Khartoum, 2019.

155 The National Persons with Disabilities Act 2017 does not consider lack of access to means of facilitation a form of disability-based discrimination, therefore does not offer protection from this form of discriminated. That is why people with disabilities are faced with numerous challenges when looking a job. Even those who get a job are not provided with means that facilitates their work. There are also no penalties for state institutions that do not abide by the quota of people with disabilities https://www.apminebanconvention.org/fileadmin/APMBC/Victim_Assistance_Docs/Sudan_Disability_Law_Translated_2017.pdf). In order to address this issue, a department for people with disabilities was created at the Ministry of Labor and Social Development to work on creating job opportunities for them in both the public and private sectors, interview with Souad El Tayeb, head of the Department of Women, Children, and People with Disabilities at the ministry, January 5, 2020: www.ultrasudan.com

The spread of Coronavirus had a strong impact on people with disabilities since they are usually assisted by other people in many of their activities, yet social distancing made that difficult. This had a negative effect on the psychological state of people with disabilities since they needed to adjust to a new reality where they depend on themselves in almost everything and also felt more isolated than they already were.

Many of them had to stay at home with the start of the pandemic, especially that they are more at risk. In the case of those who work at state institutions, the Ministry of Labor paid their salaries during the lockdown and issued a decree exempting them from work until normalcy is restored[156]. The Center for the Elimination of Poverty and the Zakat (alms) Chamber[157] provided two million food baskets in addition to financial assistance for 15% of poor groups among people with disabilities[158], which is very little compared to their total number as 14.4% live in the outskirts of Khartoum alone[159].

Women with disabilities are doubly marginalized since they belong to two marginalized groups at the same time. They are discriminated against and exposed to violence more than men with disabilities and are more subject to exclusion. In addition, there are no fixed mechanisms to trace abuse against women with disabilities[160]. Several women with disabilities said they are unable to enjoy their full rights, which is particularly demonstrated in the challenges they face to find job. After the pandemic, their condition got worse and many of them started craft projects at home to support themselves. This added to the already-exiting burdens of women with disabilities who lived below the poverty line and only got intermittent assistance[161].

3. Social and psychological impact on vulnerable groups

Vulnerable groups have lived in a constant state of insecurity since the outbreak of Coronavirus, not only because of fear of contracting the virus but also because of concerns about self-isolation, which makes it impossible for them to seek help from family. They also suffer from anxiety because of the economic impact of the pandemic and the possibility of not having a regular income[162]. The lockdown had a negative effect on those groups, particularly people with disabilities who felt more isolated. Staying at home with all members of the family led to continuous tension which led to an increase in the cases of domestic violence against women[163] and made people with disabilities feel they are becoming a burden. This also applied to those of them who had jobs, hence spent a few hours at home every day and needed little help from others[164]. Many said they missed their friends who are also with disabilities and who made them

[156] Ministry of Labor decree issued on April 16, 2020

[157] The Center for the Elimination of Poverty and the Zakat Chamber are affiliated to the Ministry of Labor and Social Development and they both offer financial and in-kind assistance to families in need. The Zakat Chamber also supports small businesses by students and the poor. For more see: www.molsd.gov.sd

[158] Interview with Badr El Din Ahmed Hassan, secretary general of the National Council for Persons with Disabilities, Khartoum, July 13, 2020

[159] "Sudan names 2018 the year of people with disabilities [Arabic]." December 2017: www.alaraby.co.uk

[160] Report on the condition of people with disabilities. Op. cit.

[161] Interview with Zeinab Adam Sheen, worker with physical disability, July 25, 2020

[162] Interview with Mariam Mohamed Ibrahim, physical disability, former employee at Cheshire Disability Services, Khartoum, July 25, 2020

[163] The Unit for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Children was created at the Ministry of Labor and Social Development and receives calls from girls, women, and children. At the beginning of the pandemic, the unit used to receive on call per day then this number kept increasing until it reached 100 per week. The unit is working on creating a data base of abused women who have no income to start building a shelter for them. Interestingly enough, tea and food sellers said they were not subjected to any forms of violence during the lockdown, which demonstrates the role of economic empowerment in protecting women. Interview with Karima Fatah El Rahman, Unit for the Elimination of Violence Against women, July 30, 2020

[164] Interview with Mohamed Soliman Abu Bakr, visual impairment, university student, Khartoum, July 24, 2020

feel more at ease unlike the awkwardness at times associated with being around healthy people[165]. Autistic people were among the most impacted by the lockdown since they were no longer able to go to their special schools, which delayed the development of their skills, speech, and behavioral patterns[166].

The role state institutions in mitigating the impact of the pandemic[167]

The Ministry of Health

In April 2020, the Ministry of Health adopted a strategy to face the pandemic in coordination with the World Health Organization. This strategy included taking nation-wide precautionary measures, preparing response teams, establishing local labs for tests, and monitoring patients. The ministry also launched a project to create emergency committees at local medical centers, including in the outskirts and in refugee camps, and preparing emergency rooms in each of these centers. This project aims at engaging the community in the process of curbing the spread of the disease as well as raising awareness especially among vulnerable groups[168].

The Ministry of Labor and Social Development

The ministry identified 750,000 families in need around Khartoum and sent each of them a food basket that includes eleven essential items in collaboration with the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees and the World Food Program. The ministry also works with the Zakat Chamber to include those families in the national social and health insurance programs to mitigate the economic impacts of the pandemic. Added to this is an initiative to provide another 100,000 food boxes in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance. The ministry will launch a project called Sawa (Arabic for together) to provide financial, healthcare, and social assistance for poor families in addition to providing opportunities for starting small businesses and helping with the education of children. The ministry collected data on targeted families in six municipalities in Khartoum, including the outskirts while preparations for the project are underway in other states across Sudan. The project's main challenge is starting statistics from scratch since much of the information was manipulated in favor of former regime loyalists[169].

The two ministries worked on those initiatives together with the Resistance and Change Committees that led protests against the former regime. After the ouster of the regime, those committees started offering different services to the community despite their limited resources. After the pandemic, the committees raised awareness about the spread of the virus, precautionary measures that need to be taken, and ways of dealing with patients. They also monitored the process of social distancing, especially in places where there are long lines such as bakeries and collected donations from the neighborhoods in which they are based to buy sanitizers and medications for the people[170].

Conclusion

The outbreak of Coronavirus came at a time when Sudan was already facing an economic crisis with price hikes and a tendency to lift subsidies. Vulnerable and marginalized groups were already

[165] Interview with Zeinab Adam Sheen. Op. cit.

[166] Phone interview with Fatma Mohamed Hassan, specialist in the behavioral development of autistic children, July 15, 2020.

[167] The ministries of health and labor and social development were chosen for this study since they are the most relevant in terms of dealing with the pandemic, particularly in relation to mitigating its impact on vulnerable groups.

[168] The Federal Ministry of Health. The project of emergency committees in medical centers: www.fmoh.gov.sd. There are no official statistics on the percentage of cases within vulnerable groups. Available statistics indicate the total number of cases, deaths, and recoveries without categorization. The author also knew that available statistics have been withheld and it is still not known when they will be released.

[169] Interview with Mohamed El Shabek, deputy minister of labor and social development, Khartoum, July 30, 2020

[170] Interview with members of the resistance committee in old Omdurman

suffering before the pandemic and suffered more after as they either lost their jobs or part of their income. Women who financially support their families were faced with many challenges, especially with many of them already fleeing wars and living in refugee camps or in poor neighborhoods in the outskirts of the capital. This is demonstrated in the case of tea and food sellers who had no other sources of income and were out of work when the lockdown was imposed. The same applies to people with disabilities who were also impacted psychologically by the lockdown and women who were subjected to growing domestic violence.

All these challenges underline the necessity of providing social and economic protection for vulnerable groups through joint efforts by the government, the private sector, and civil society. This requires establishing a participatory system that prioritizes human rights and designs policies that enable different segments of society to deal with crises without having their lives disrupted.