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Coping with Concurrent Crises in Lebanon: For an Inclusive National Social Registry to Protect the Vulnerable

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This brief assesses the response of the Lebanese government to the pandemic and other concurrent crises on vulnerable populations. It provides a discussion of the major challenges in mounting a wide-scale response to alleviate the social and economic repercussions of the various crises. The work highlights two main shortcomings: 1) the lack of information (data) to guide any relief or social safety net program, and 2) the limited scope of already existing programs, mainly due to budgetary constraints. We argue that putting in place a unified digital social registry that covers all residents in Lebanon is a necessity. Based on observed vulnerabilities in the past three years, we urge the government to prioritize adopting and implementing a universal national social protection strategy to better protect the disadvantaged population. Equally important is the need to ensure that the financial sustainability of these programs in the medium to long term (once Lebanon enhances its fiscal capacity) by decreasing reliance on foreign aid and shifting towards viable domestic social spending.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped human life in all countries across the globe by impacting every aspect of economic and social life (WHO, 2020); it has particularly affected the health sector, education, food security, poverty, social protection, and gender (Herzberger-Fofana, 2021). The response to the crisis worldwide demonstrated the importance of the availability of timely and comprehensive data in managing and containing the pandemic (Dong et al. 2021, Thompson et al. 2021, Wu et al. 2020).

Timely and accurate data played an important role in aid distribution programs (World Bank, 2020a). In response to the pandemic, many countries expanded their social safety net programs and implemented stimulus packages to alleviate the economic burden of the pandemic for households and small businesses. Availability of data played a crucial role in determining beneficiaries and expediting the aid distribution process.

In the United States, for example, multiple aid packages aimed at supporting families were based on income, family size, age of children in the household, and other socioeconomic determinants. This information was readily available through social security data and annual tax filings. Timely information allowed the disbursement of stimulus payments in the US as early as the summer of 2020. Other countries, including Pakistan, expanded cash assistance by building off existing targeting data and using already-in-place program platforms (World Bank, 2020a). Such detailed comprehensive data are rarely available in many low- and middle-income countries. This challenge is due to multiple factors, including widespread informal employment.

In addition to the pandemic, Lebanon was plagued with an unprecedented financial and economic collapse. The downturn was aggravated by political instability and a series of destabilizing events, most notably the Beirut port explosion on 4 August 2020. The multitude of crises that hit Lebanon in the past three years had grave consequences on the living conditions of the majority of its residents, with informally employed workers being hit the hardest.

In Lebanon, informal workers constitute a majority of the workforce. The 2019 labor force survey shows that 54.9% of those employed were informal workers (CAS 2019). The rate of informality increased during the crisis to 62.4% (CAS 2022). Moreover, the presence of a large refugee population in Lebanon adds to the layers of complexity in policy discussion. There are around two million refugees in Lebanon who were impacted alongside

Lebanese nationals by the multitude of crises that were hitting the country. Moreover, it seems that the amount of information collected on living conditions and the impact of the refugee population in Lebanon is very limited and lacks accuracy (Abu-Rish 2021).

There is a significant gap in the literature investigating the impact of global health shocks on workers in the informal sector in Lebanon, including refugees and migrant workers, who are considered to be more vulnerable to COVID-19 because they tend to live in crowded spaces with limited access to clean water, medical services, and personal protective equipment (Abu-Rish, 2021).

A recent study—‘For Inclusive and Fair Covid-19 Socio-Economic Recovery Measures in Lebanon: Synthesis Report’ by researchers at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and funded by Oxfam—examined how the pandemic and the government’s response impacted the urban informal sector. The focus of the study was on the direct impact on employment and earnings, and the subsequent effect on living conditions of informal workers and their households. Particular attention was given to the impact of the pandemic on health and healthcare accessibility of workers and their families. As part of this project, the research team conducted a data collection exercise based on both focus group discussions (FGDs) with 121 participants from the population of interest and key informant interviews (KIIs) with 15 experts in the field.

The findings provide rigorous evidence and data to guide policymaking. Our main recommendations in the report¹ include: 1) enacting the National Social Protection Strategy, 2) expanding investment in public institutions and increasing social spending, 3) providing cash transfers to households to compensate for lost income and financial subsidies for small-business owners, 4) revising the National Social Security Fund law to include informal and migrant workers, 5) ensuring social protection schemes are extended to include all workers in Lebanon, 6) implementing progressive taxation, 7) updating the national disaster management strategy, taking into account previous disaster responses, 8) preparing action plans for crisis management and providing the adequate resources for implementation, 9) developing and implementing financial sustainability plans for social protection, and 10) creating and maintaining a unified digital social registry. This policy brief will focus on the last two recommendations.

To implement effective and inclusive social protection programs, Lebanon should start by building and maintaining a large-scale digital social registry. A comprehensive integrated registry (that includes all Lebanese residents and

¹ Dagher, L., Abboud A., Sidani, O., Abi Younes, O. (2022). ‘For Inclusive and Fair Covid-19 Socio-Economic Recovery Measures in Lebanon: Synthesis Report.’

not only citizens) is a pre-requisite for an inclusive social protection scheme. In fact, experiences from other countries have shown unified social registries play an important role in the implementation of social protection programs (Fernandez et al., 2019; Leite et al., 2017). According to the World Bank (2017), social registries ‘are information systems that support outreach, application, registration, and determination of potential eligibility for one or more social programs. They have both a **social policy role, as inclusion systems**, and an operational role, as information systems.’

Ensuring the financial sustainability of social protection programs is also key. In the early stages of conceptualization and development, the government should identify sustainable financial mechanisms and budgeting for social protection. Globally, countries spend on average 6.3% of GDP on social protection (ILO 2016), while a recent study by the Asian Development Bank estimates that the social protection floor package costs around 5.4% of GDP in lower-middle-income countries and around 12.4% of GDP in low-income countries by 2030 (Van der Auwera, Van der Meerendonk, and Kumar 2021).

A Unified Digital Social Registry

The recent shocks have exposed the vulnerability of the population in Lebanon to crises. Over the past two years, as a result of the cumulative financial/economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, a large proportion of residents slid below the poverty line, many for the first time (Dagher et al. 2022). Despite this, Lebanon is still struggling to develop a national social protection strategy. The first national strategy, developed by the Ministry of Social Affairs with technical support from UNICEF and ILO, had been approved by the Council of Ministers in May 2022 and is contingent on some modifications, but the final document is still pending as of December 2022.

The unavailability of a comprehensive digital database with detailed information on household conditions led to the use of scattered and uncoordinated datasets, along with emergency attempts to collect data unsystematically. As a result, the government was forced to bridge the gap by adopting uncoordinated relief emergency support packages and indirect means of support, such as subsidization of bundles of consumption goods. In fact, the government had to resort to unsustainable blanket subsidies, rather than targeted subsidies. This policy was widely inefficient, and it rapidly depleted the limited foreign currency reserves with minimal benefits reaching the intended beneficiaries (Dagher and Nehme 2021).

Other, more direct, approaches to provide social support relied on very specific characteristics for eligibility, ranging from the beneficiary conditionality in existing social safety net programs to ad hoc fitness criteria, which were also uncoordinated. For instance, a monthly cash transfer was given to taxi drivers and families with children registered in public schools. While this approach resolved some of the inefficiency aspects of untargeted support, it was too specific and missed large segments of the population in need.

In our field research with a group of urban informal sector employees, many interviewees reported that they did not understand eligibility criteria and aid distribution processes adopted by the government. Many felt that the aid was sporadic and unequally distributed. Putting in place an integrated unified digital social registry and making it the base for aid provision will be seen as more transparent and will improve trust in the government and its policies. Moreover, it could reduce transaction costs and increase access for citizens, and result in more efficient programs at a lower cost (World Bank 2021).

In addition to transparency, having a comprehensive and timely dataset is a necessary step for implementing long-term social protection programs (Dagher 2021). Historically, the Lebanese state never put in place an overarching universal social protection system. The few available social protection schemes were limited in scope and coverage. The monumental changes that took place in Lebanon in the last three years makes it imperative to establish such a program.

As part of the immediate response to the compounded crises, the Lebanese government is attempting to scale-up its already established social safety nets to provide support for the impoverished population. This effort has had limited success to date, due to both limitations in information about the population in need and unavailability of required funding to finance these programs. Establishing and fine-tuning these social safety net schemes and turning them into full-fledged, impact-oriented programs is an immediate short-term need, given the current circumstances, but it should also be seen as a first step towards establishing sustainable universal social protection programs in the long run.

A policy of social protection should be inclusive and mindful of the various vulnerabilities in the population. Recent studies have shown that certain vulnerable groups, such as women, people with disabilities, migrants, refugees, and people with legally ambiguous status, are likely to be excluded

from programs that could be beneficial to them (Barca et al. 2021, ILO 2021). A unified digital social registry will help ensure social protection programs are more inclusive.

Building on Existing Foundations

Lebanon will not have to start from scratch in its efforts to build an effective national registry. In 2011, the government launched its first poverty-targeted social assistance program for the poorest and most vulnerable Lebanese families, the national poverty targeting program (NPTP). The NPTP initially supported 15,000 households and was expanded to around 20,000 households in 2020 (with a target of 75,000 households), in response to both the socioeconomic collapse and the protracted Syrian refugee crisis. Another program, the Emergency Crisis and COVID-19 Response Social Safety Net Project (ESSN), was rolled out in response to the 2019 financial crisis and aimed to scale up and enhance the NPTP, such that together they can support around 200,000 families (World Bank 2021). Both programs targeted poor households based on the Proxy Means Test (PMT) score.

The experience and knowledge acquired in designing, implementing, and monitoring these programs should be instrumental in the development of a national digital registry. Such a database will act as the basis for social protection programs in the long run, and for the systematic expansion of protection in times of crisis.

According to the World Bank (2021), the ESSN will assess the eligibility of households already in the NPTP database (more than 150,000 applicants), other households in the Inter-Municipal Electronic Platform for Assessment, Coordination and Tracking (IMPACT) database, including new applications through voluntary registration.² This approach might present a significant challenge in terms of representativity. It was evident from the field research that many people were neither aware that they may be eligible nor how to go about applying.

This phenomenon might be more significant in rural areas, where the population in general has lower digital literacy and limited access to internet and other digital means to apply for such programs. Registration assistance campaigns organized by local actors, most notably local NGOs and political parties, helped mitigate this problem. This approach, however, raises questions about the fairness of the process and opens the door to clientelism.

² Registration on the platform was open for two months, during which more than 500,000 families registered. Naturally, if the platform opens again for registration and is well promoted, while technical help is provided for the technologically illiterate, it is expected that more households would register.

According to the World Food Program (2022), a major reason for delays in expanding the NPTP (adding 10,000 additional households and conducting 18,000 verification visits) is due to deduplication with ESSN applicants. However, when a unified digital national registry is available, this process could be done in minutes, thus expediting selection and disbursement. Moreover, such a registry will allow the government to digitally process several steps, such as identification, authentication, and authorization of disbursements, making the whole process more efficient and transparent, while minimizing errors.

A second major database on living conditions and employment status is the labor survey conducted by the Central Administration for Statistics (CAS). According to multiple field interviews conducted with experts, there was reliance on the 2019 survey in studying the impact of potential policies and measures taken during the crisis. The major shortcoming of the labor force surveys is that they are not regular. CAS managed to conduct a follow up survey, whose findings were published at the beginning of 2022. These surveys should be conducted more regularly, preferably yearly.

A frequent and more inclusive household and labor force survey should provide policymakers with regular information on changes in major trends and needs of the population. One of the components of the ESSN (component number 4, allotted US \$9 million) supports the creation and strengthening of social safety net delivery systems, including building a national social registry, among other things (World Bank 2021). The unified social registry combined with a regular household and labor force survey should be the information basis for any future policy or program discussed by policymakers. Most importantly, the information collected in this database should be taken into consideration for the design of future social protection programs.

Political and Social Challenges

There are several challenges facing the implementation of a national digital registry in Lebanon, some of which are political. The country hasn't conducted a population census since independence in 1943. Those who oppose such a step claim that there are two main concerns with national data collection: (1) its impact on representative politics, for example providing evidence that the ratio of Christian to Muslim parliamentarians is not representative of the population, and (2) data privacy and national security. Successful

implementation of a national registry will require alleviation of these concerns to insure buy-in and cooperation by all influential actors in the society. Reliable guarantees that the data collected in the national registry will be used strictly for informing and guaranteeing equality in the distribution of social safety nets should be provided.

In the Lebanese political discourse, there is a serious concern among different constituent groups that substantiating claims of demographic changes with official data might lead to changes in the balance of the political system and the representative politics in the country. This concern could lead to serious resistance from several sides to the implementation of a national registry, despite its potential advantages. The design of the registry and the type of information collection should take these concerns into consideration. It should be evident that the collected information is for the sole purpose of determining eligibility for social protection and the amount of individual aid that the household would need.

The inclination to preserve the relationship of clientelism between the different political actors and their support base is another source of political resistance to a registry. Since the creation of the modern state in Lebanon, political actors at the national and local levels have been a gateway for individuals and groups to access resources. The incentive to preserve and monopolize these links could be a major obstacle in the way of implementing a more systematic and direct relationship between citizens and the state.

Privacy and security concerns should also be alleviated. This concern is not particular to Lebanon. Households might be reluctant to share certain information or to even register if they do not trust that their data are adequately protected.

Sustainable Financing in the Long Run

Funding has been one of the major issues preventing the implementation of large-scale safety nets during the crisis. According to the World Bank (2020b), spending on safety net programs in Lebanon is certainly insufficient to ensure poor households against the effects of the crisis, primarily due to budgetary constraints, resulting in the ESSN reaching only 4 percent of the poor. Recent studies estimate that more than 80% of people residing in Lebanon plunged into poverty (ESCWA 2021), and are in dire need of support. While there were plans to provide cash transfers and other forms of support to more than

a million Lebanese families, such plans were placed on hold due to a lack of funding.

Currently, a much smaller number are receiving some form of support through the NTPT or the ESSN programs, but only for a one-year period in the case of the latter program. Funding sustainability for these programs is not guaranteed in the future. Alternatives to state-driven social protection funding schemes are those funded by the private sector, civil society organizations, expats, international NGOs, and other social solidarity institutions. While this may act as a substitute or complementary act, it does keep the social protection system and provision scattered and lacking consolidation.

Since the inception of social safety nets, the Lebanese government has relied on international aid in the form of grants and external loans to finance them, primarily due to the lack of fiscal space. Since the onset of the current crisis, the government has been seeking different schemes of support from various funding institutions. There has been no consideration given to possible financing of these programs through the regular state budget, due to the inability of the state to cover its regular operational expenses, let alone other proposed program-based expenses. Thus, it is believed that this kind of financing is the only possible source of funding in the short term, given the depleted finances of the state and the sizeable budget needed for such programs. According to the World Bank (2021), domestic financing will take several years to materialize in light of the current fiscal environment.

In the short term, there are two major challenges for national financing of safety net programs: (1) the large size of the population that needs to be covered by these programs, and (2) the low ability of the government to generate revenues. The latter problem has always been a challenge to the Lebanese government. Resistance to redistributive taxation and tax evasion are a de facto traditional characteristic of Lebanon. This problem was further exacerbated during the crisis years. Moreover, currency depreciations and the significant decline in real wages have widened the gap in income distribution. These major changes were not accompanied by any serious revision of income tax code and tax brackets that take the new realities into consideration.

The current size and level of need has been used as an excuse for the government to distance itself from financing these programs through its budget. If the poverty numbers persist at such high rates, it would be hard for any government to finance such programs. Macroeconomic stabilization

policies and an economic recovery plan should go hand in hand with any social protection programs. Considering relief interventions with a developmental component will help speed up poverty alleviation and job creation. A reversal of the downward trend in all economic indicators, most importantly an increase in employment opportunities, should reduce the number of people in need of such support in the long term. This will make financing these programs more feasible. Redistributive policies could be applied in the short run to provide at least a partial funding for the social safety nets that are currently planned.

Policy Recommendations

Despite their devastating effects, the concurrent crises could also be an opportunity for change in the way the Lebanese state approaches social protection. The experience of the past three years highlights the need for a comprehensive social protection program in Lebanon that is capable of quickly responding to any future shock. The lessons learned from the management of the crises could be constructive in quickly endorsing and implementing a rights-based, shock-responsive, and financially sustainable national social protection strategy.

In this brief, we argue that a necessary first step for implementing both short-term safety nets and long-term social protection schemes is a comprehensive digital national social registry, 'which would serve as a gateway for people (individuals and households) to be considered for inclusion in one or more social programs based on an assessment of their needs and living conditions' (World Bank 2021).

A large-scale social registry that includes all relevant information on all potential beneficiaries will reduce fragmentation of data and programs and eliminate the risk of duplication of benefits, thus increasing efficiency and transparency, while reducing administrative costs through economies of scale. The range of information in this registry should be expanded over the current one and should be updated more regularly to keep the information timely. This can help better address the dynamic needs of the vulnerable population as they change with time or due to positive or negative shocks. Policymakers are urged to prioritize the design and implementation of such a registry in the current situation.

One option would be to expand the recently populated registry provided by the IMPACT platform mentioned above, or otherwise the government can start from scratch. In either case, here are some recommendations:

- **Make it comprehensive.** Currently registration is voluntary, and individuals and households who believe they are eligible and would like to benefit from one of the available programs can self-register. A more comprehensive approach would seek to register all residents of the territory. A sound filtering mechanism will then be applied to identify eligibility based on the criteria set for each program.

- **Expand the range of information collected and the frequency of data collection.** Conduct regular automated follow ups to update status of employment, earnings, and special needs of the various household members.

Sustainable financing is critical for the success of social protection programs. The lack of funding has been the Achilles heel of any attempt to implement large-scale social protection programs. There should be a transition from Lebanon's historical approach of reliance on external funding through grants and loans towards more sustainable financing through regular government spending, particularly as the economy stabilizes. Going forward, it should be a priority for the government to mobilize the necessary public resources to cover the cost of social protection floors on a yearly basis.

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