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**Achieving social justice in the Arab region
From concept and vision to policy and practice**

Summary

The present document provides an overview of the guide on incorporating social justice principles into development plans and programmes in Arab countries. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) is preparing this guide within the framework of implementing the Tunis Declaration on Social Justice in the Arab region, adopted by ESCWA at its twenty-eighth session (Tunis, 15-18 September 2014), and under the project on “Promoting social justice in selected countries in the Arab region”, funded by the Development Account. At its tenth session (Rabat, 8-9 September 2015), the Commission for Social Development requested the secretariat to develop capacity-building and training programmes to assist member States in designing, implementing and evaluating national human rights-based development programmes aimed at achieving social justice.

In this context, ESCWA has included a series of activities in its work programme, such as preparing tools/guides to assist member States in incorporating the principles of social justice into national and local development plans, policies and programmes, and conducting national capacity-building workshops to test, apply and disseminate such tools/guides.

Below is a summary of the contents of this guide, which is still under preparation and review.

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Introduction

1. Today, Arab countries face a growing need for a new participatory social contract that enshrines citizens' expectations to achieve social justice, safeguard rights, and ensure just and inclusive access to services and opportunities. In many of its programmes and activities, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) seeks to define, implement and disseminate the concept of social justice. It has provided an accurate definition of social justice, drawing on definitions from various schools of thought, and taking into account regional specificities and challenges. ESCWA defines social justice as "equal rights and access to resources and opportunities for all, men and women, paying particular attention to the removal of barriers that hinder the empowerment of disadvantaged groups to fulfil their potential to participate in decisions that govern their lives". Therefore, social justice is based on the principles of equality, equity, rights and participation; however, it faces implementation challenges, namely poverty, geographic inequality, unequal access to social services, unemployment, social exclusion, poor governance and lack of participatory policies.
2. Many Arab countries prioritize equality and social solidarity, yet they do not offer any guarantees to mainstream social justice into national development plans, policies and programmes, especially given that the methods and efforts deployed towards that end are often disconnected. Arab countries should revisit their development models and legislative and regulatory frameworks to incorporate social justice principles. Social justice is a prerequisite for peace, security and social cohesion. Thus, its principles should be mainstreamed into national policies, plans and programmes to induce the required change towards a just and cohesive society. They should also be aligned with the needs and priorities of Arab countries and fulfil the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and other global commitments.
3. ESCWA is implementing a project financed by the Development Account of the United Nations, on "Promoting social justice in selected countries in the Arab region". This project is aimed at supporting member countries in formulating plans, policies and programmes to achieve social justice, and at incorporating gender equality into national development strategies and programmes. In partnership with civil society and stakeholders, ESCWA will closely work with member States to develop policies that take into account social justice in line with country-specific needs. It will also provide technical advice and contribute to the implementation of field projects and capacity-building, to pave the way for an effective dialogue and consensus on social justice, to enhance the skills of government officials in mainstreaming social justice concepts into development plans and to build just and cohesive societies. Below is a summary of the contents of this guide, which is still under preparation.

I. OBJECTIVES OF THE GUIDE

4. The guide aims to inform policymakers in member States on how to mainstream the concepts and principles of social justice into national development policies, plans and programmes. It also aims to explain the relationship between social justice and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and other recent global treaties. Moreover, the guide highlights practical steps and tools to develop policies that uphold social justice principles, taking into account disparities between Arab countries in terms of capacity, needs and institutional, economic, social and political structure. The guide draws upon the ESCWA conceptual approach to social justice, based on the principles of equality, equity, human rights and participation, with a focus on practical aspect. It reviews interventions, institutional mechanisms and various policy components that strengthen national policymaking, guided by the principles of social justice.
5. The guide tackles selected aspects of policy areas that are key to achieving social justice. It includes a set of practical examples, skills and tools that are necessary to formulate, implement, finance, evaluate, build consensus on, apply and increase the potential of success of social justice policies, and to address the needs of all segments of society. Furthermore, the guide relies on analytical and training tools, scientific references and regional and global experiences that can benefit Arab countries.

6. The guide suggests providing national and regional training workshops to build the capacities of stakeholders in developing policies that uphold social justice. It also calls for active participation in implementing reforms aimed at achieving social justice and equality, and at ensuring citizens' rights to shape their future and access social services tailored to their needs without discrimination.

II. CONTENTS OF THE GUIDE

7. The guide consists of five parts. The first part sets out the background and methodology. The second part addresses the enabling environment for policymaking that upholds social justice concepts, and examines international commitments and the institutional basis of decision-making and policymaking that embrace social justice concepts. The third part explains the formulation of policies grounded in social justice concepts by tackling a number of relevant topics such as tax policy, subsidy policies, investment and public procurement policies, wage and minimum wage policies, food security, the right to food, and social protection policies. The fourth part considers the provision of financial resources as a key factor for the implementation and sustainability of social justice policies. The last part reviews the role of non-State actors, such as civil society organizations, in the development and implementation of national plans, policies and programmes that embrace social justice concepts.

A. PART I: BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

8. Part I of the guide addresses the evolution of social justice from a charity-related issue to a citizenship-based approach geared towards establishing economic, political, social and cultural rights, with close links to social contract theory.

9. The Arab region is still experiencing an unstable political, economic, social and cultural situation. The impact of conflicts afflicting a number of Arab countries is expected to affect many future generations. In this context, new regional consensus on the role and relationship of the State with various social actors should be reached by developing a new social contract. Part I addresses the role of the State and the need for macroeconomic policies that support development goals and achieve social justice. It also tackles the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that should inspire more equitable policies commensurate with social justice concepts. Part I concludes with a practical exercise aimed at consolidating the reviewed ideas and concepts through discussion and opinion exchange.

B. PART II: ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR POLICYMAKING THAT UPHOLDS SOCIAL JUSTICE CONCEPTS

10. Part II addresses the role of policymaking institutions in terms of coordinating the interventions of relevant ministries to ensure the success and sustainability of policies grounded in social justice concepts, while fulfilling their mandate. It is imperative to rethink the role of existing institutions, consider the possibility of establishing new institutions as required by the development process (such as national development banks, for example), and cooperate with civil society organizations and the private sector. Part II stresses the importance of dealing with the structural implications and potential constraints of trade and investment policies and agreements, especially when national development goals are inconsistent with negotiated commitments.

C. PART III: FORMULATING POLICIES THAT EMBRACE SOCIAL JUSTICE CONCEPTS

11. Part III of the guide tackles the following six policy areas that are key to achieving social justice: tax policy; subsidy policies; development-based investment and public procurement policies; wage and minimum wage policies; food security and the right to food; and social protection policies. These areas include technical factors to consider when developing policies that embrace social justice concepts. Practical exercises have been developed in each area to train participants, and assess their knowledge and the benefit they reap from guidelines and theory.

- (1) Tax policy: the guide provides an overview of the role of tax policy in providing the necessary resources for policy implementation, its contribution to achieving equity through redistribution of income and wealth, and its intervention ability to control and revitalize the economy. It tackles the most common types of tax interventions and their impact on achieving social justice, and identifies key conditions to design tax policies grounded in social justice concepts.

Furthermore, the guide presents a number of interventions that could expand countries' tax space and balance between achieving higher tax revenue and fulfilling goals related to redistributing income, alleviating the tax burden on poor social segments, maintaining transparency in decision-making, fighting corruption and engaging stakeholders affected by such interventions.

- (2) Subsidy policies: the guide explores the importance of subsidy and reform policies that many Arab countries have experienced since 2010, and focuses on the adverse impact of subsidies on State budgets and the need to seek alternatives such as social safety nets and other social protection programmes. This section includes key aspects to consider when developing and implementing subsidy policies, while taking into account both their social and legal facets in achieving the principles of social justice. It also highlights mechanisms for distributing subsidies and assisting the most disadvantaged groups, and explores the capacity of administrative institutions that implement subsidy policies and the importance of developing alternatives tailored to social, economic and institutional realities. Moreover, this section emphasizes the importance of developing plans for comprehensive or expanding social protection, and establishing or reforming subsidy policies in a transparent manner through participation and community dialogue. It cites a global experience as an example of subsidy policies and programmes, and suggests several actions that could guide member States in that regard.
- (3) Development-based investment policies and public procurement policies: the guide highlights the importance of adopting an approach that reinforces equality and equal opportunities when developing investment and procurement policies. It tackles the main issues to consider when adopting this approach, such as converting the State from a crisis manager to an investment catalyst, increasing public investment in infrastructure and human development, acknowledging the quality of national and foreign investment, and promoting the participation of investors in long-term productive projects. This section also showcases successful global experiences underpinned by policies that nurture a linkage between country procurement and social objectives. It addresses the role and experiences of development banks and sovereign funds in reorienting available resources to priority sectors and segments of society, to achieve the goals of sustainable development and social justice.
- (4) Wage and minimum wage policies: the guide contains an overview of the role of wage policies in achieving social justice, particularly in terms of their impact on decent work, poverty reduction, and macroeconomic support. It addresses minimum wage policies and standards, which protect low-income earners and reduce disparities between groups that engage in remunerated activities, while emphasizing that minimum wage does not yield adverse effects on employment. It reviews a set of recommended mechanisms to fulfill the conditions of social justice when developing wage policies. It also presents experiences from developed and developing countries on simplifying approaches, ensuring effective implementation, conducting periodic wage reviews in the light of increasing living costs and labour productivity, determining the minimum wage within a broader social and economic policy, strengthening institutional capacities, ensuring sustainable funding of minimum wage policy, and protecting low-income workers.
- (5) Food security and the right to food: the guide highlights the importance of food sovereignty and security in establishing social justice, noting that the popular uprisings witnessed in some Arab countries since 2010 were linked to a food crisis. It explores common challenges faced by Arab countries in achieving self-sufficiency, and the need to incorporate the human-rights perspective of

the right to food into national laws and constitutions. This section also deals with fundamental elements to ensure the right to adequate food, citing the experience of India, and the role of the State in securing food.

Moreover, it tackles priorities to improve food sovereignty and security, in line with social justice values. This includes moving from a quantitative dimension pertaining to food availability towards access to resources and fair distribution; strengthening the role of the State to complement market mechanisms to secure food access for vulnerable groups; adopting a comprehensive approach to develop food security policy linked to development policies on water management, the agricultural sector, production and consumption; establishing laws that identify stakeholders responsible for food programmes and holding them accountable; and developing a regional dimension, such as investing in production and food value chains in Arab countries.

- (6) Social protection policies: the guide deals with social protection policies and their role in achieving social cohesion, reducing poverty, redistributing growth returns, and averting risks resulting from the loss of income or various crises. It focuses on difficulties faced by Arab countries in expanding the coverage of social protection programmes, such as fragmentation, poor management, the exclusion of some groups working in the informal sector from contributory social security systems, and the high cost of private health insurance. Moreover, the guide reviews the main social protection mechanisms in Arab countries, namely contributory social security programmes, social assistance programmes or conditional or unconditional social transfers, government subsidies for fuel and food, and other interventions and projects aimed at assisting workers in informal sectors.

The guide clarifies that social protection is a human right that should be provided to secure access to basic healthcare, provide children with access to education and healthcare, ensure unemployment, and offer minimum protection for the elderly and persons with disabilities. In conclusion, the guide suggests the following issues for consideration when implementing social protection policies and programmes to achieve social justice:

- a. Develop mechanisms to provide targeted groups with access to services and programmes;
- b. Prioritize funding in government budgets to ensure minimum levels of social protection;
- c. Reduce destabilizing factors in social protection policies and programmes;
- d. Develop social protection policies within an integrated national strategy for social, development based on equality and participation;
- e. Strengthen institutional capacity in the areas of coordination, planning, design and targeting;
- f. Adopt a participatory and transparent approach in the design, implementation and monitoring of social protection programmes;
- g. Combat all forms of discrimination, particularly gender-based discrimination.

D. PART IV: RESOURCE AVAILABILITY

12. Part IV of the guide focuses on resource mobilization for the implementation and sustainability of policies related to social justice, and addresses the role of international cooperation in this regard. It tackles government priorities in tax policy, and options to distribute financial space in line with development and social justice goals, such as distributing public budget allocations, fairly expanding tax returns, broadening contributory social security coverage, restructuring debts, and adopting a supportive approach in macroeconomic policy.

13. The guide also explores a number of mechanisms to allocate resources in line with social justice concepts namely:

- (1) Adopt a rights-based approach when developing participatory budgets to ensure transparency, multistakeholder participation and control;
- (2) Promote the role of legislative authorities in budget evaluation and audit to achieve social justice;
- (3) Strengthen social dialogue by promoting tripartite dialogue (Government-employers-workers) and engage all stakeholders to harness the political will to adopt the optimal combination of policies and interventions that uphold social justice principles;
- (4) Acknowledge the interests of different groups;
- (5) Promote the self-financing of social programmes.

14. This part also tackles the role of international assistance in providing resources, and highlights possible challenges faced by donors and beneficiaries and their adverse impact on the effectiveness of policies aimed at achieving development and social justice. It concludes with a practical exercise to analyse the role of the private sector in the provision of resources, and to identify the necessary legal frameworks so as to regulate and benefit from it.

E. PART V: ROLE OF NON-STATE ACTORS

15. Part V focuses on the contribution of civil society organizations in developing a national vision that embraces and implements the concepts of social justice. It stresses the importance of effective citizen participation in various areas, and reviews the major challenges to effective participation. It also emphasizes the differences between interventions by policy-based organizations, organizations involved in direct local development and charity organizations.

16. This part also provides practical suggestions on how to engage civil society organizations and other non-State actors in developing, implementing and reviewing policies that embrace social justice concepts. Those suggestions draw on relevant publications and training programmes developed by ESCWA, and on empirical studies inspired by developed and developing countries. It concludes with a practical exercise that reviews a case study from the Arab region, and helps participants engage in dialogue and build consensus on selected issues.

III. THE WAY FORWARD

17. After preparing this guide, ESCWA will hold a regional workshop to allow experts from governmental institutions and local authorities concerned with the formulation of social development policies and programmes to test the guide and verify its alignment with country-specific political, social and economic characteristics. Based on participants' views and observations, ESCWA will review the guide prior to adopting its final version, and to inviting governmental and non-governmental stakeholders to actively participate in the implementation of political and social reforms that aim to achieve social justice and equality and uphold citizens' right to shape their future and have access to social services without discrimination.
