

Non-contributory social protection through a child and equity lens in Lebanon¹

International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG)

Lebanon is a middle-income country bordered by Syria and Israel, with an estimated population of 6 million people in 2016, of whom approximately 0.4 million are children under 5 years of age and 1.7 million are under 18. According to data from the 2011 Household Budgetary Survey, the national poverty rate in the country was 27 per cent, with remarkable regional disparities: 16 per cent in Beirut, but as high as 38 per cent in Bekaa and 36 per cent in North Lebanon.

The country has a long history of hosting refugees from Palestine, but has been particularly affected by the Syrian refugee crisis. In 2017 there were more than 1 million registered Syrian refugees living in the country, 55 per cent of them being children under 18. The refugee influx has increased the demand for education and health care. In this context, the Government of Lebanon has authorised Syrian refugee families to access public services, including health and child care. However, most of the assistance provided to refugees is led by international organisations and funded by donors. In October 2016 the World Food Programme (WFP) operated e-cards and cash transfers, reaching approximately 650,000 Syrian refugees and 15,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria living in Lebanon.

The Government of Lebanon's overall expenditure on social safety nets was 0.6 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2008, the lowest when comparing 11 countries in the MENA region. The Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) is in charge of coordinating the provision of social assistance in Lebanon and has adopted a decentralised development strategy, with an increased focus on the community level through Social Development Centres (SDCs).

SDCs are also the first entry point for the National Poverty Targeting Programme (NPTP), a programme piloted in 2008 and rolled out nationally in 2011 which offers health and education fee waivers to poor households based on a PMT. In addition, the poorest beneficiaries receive e-card food vouchers (which replaced in-kind transfers), providing them with a monthly allowance of USD27 per person, capped at six individuals per household. By the end of 2016 over 108,000 households (456,819 individuals) received the *Halla* card and were eligible for health care and education benefits. However, take-up of NPTP-related services is still low: as of January 2017, only 10,008 households had received e-card food vouchers. In October 2016, 19,457 students benefited from fee waivers, and 11,730 hospital admissions were covered by the programme.

The Government of Lebanon provides subsidised education and health care services for the entire population, covering 70 per cent and 85 per cent, respectively, of the fees. The *Halla* card provides access to public hospitals, usually funding the remaining 15 per cent of health fees with

co-payments by users. Basic education services are universal, and both enrolment fees and school materials are provided free of charge to students at the basic education level in public schools. For all secondary students, a contribution of 30 per cent of fees is required. Children from NPTP beneficiary families pursuing secondary education are exempt from these fees. The programme is financed by the Lebanese government and supported by international donors, including the World Bank and the German government.

The need for a national cross-sectoral social development strategy was recognised in the Lebanese National Social Development Strategy, issued by MoSA, an Inter-Ministerial Committee on Social Issues and the UNDP in 2011. The National Strategy puts forward five general objectives, including the expansion of social protection. When it comes to child-sensitive social protection, the strategy prioritises expanding health care coverage for vulnerable children and programmes for orphans deprived of family care or those at risk of abuse or neglect.

The MoSA and the Ministry of Public Health also provide other forms of social assistance, such as the Disability Card, enabling access to education, health and employment services. About 13,000 children with disabilities have benefited from the programme, and an additional 3,000 have received a temporary Learning Disability Card, which makes them eligible for special education in MoSA-contracted non-governmental organisations. In addition, the Lebanese government provides food, fuel and electricity subsidies. In 2013 it spent USD3.1 billion on fuel subsidies (7 per cent of GDP), representing 94 per cent of all government subsidies. In 2016, energy price subsidies accounted for 6.7 per cent of GDP. The Fund for Displaced, created in 1993 to support victims of internal conflicts, is also available.

Despite several initiatives, Lebanon's main non-contributory social protection programme remains limited in scope and coverage, reaching less than 10 per cent of the population. Regarding the situation of children, low take-up rates of the school fee exemption indicates that there are barriers for accessing education other than the fees themselves, in which a broader flagship programme could play an enabling role. Indeed, the government has led efforts to institutionalise and scale up the NPTP, which should prove to be a unique opportunity to review its operational challenges and improve its child-sensitive features.

Note:

1. This One Pager is taken from a comprehensive study developed in partnership between the IPC-IG and UNICEF MENARO. All data are thoroughly referenced in the full report:

Machado, A. C., C. Bilo, R. G. Osorio, and F.V. Soares. 2018. *Overview of Non-contributory Social Protection Programmes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region through a Child and Equity Lens*. Brasília and Amman: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth and UNICEF Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa: <<https://goo.gl/QfmKwK>>.