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SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE ARAB WORLD

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Note: The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Secretariat.

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CONTENTS

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE	1
A. Evolution of the concept of social justice in recent history	1
B. Definitions of social justice as set out by international organisations	2
III. THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE ARAB WORLD.....	3
IV. ASSESSING THE LEVEL OF SOCIAL (IN)JUSTICE IN THE ARAB WORLD	5
A. Economic growth, economic development.....	5
B. Demographics, employment and human development.....	5
C. Growth inclusiveness and equality of opportunity	6
D. Food security and access to the basic household needs.....	6
E. Governance framework and role of the state.....	6
V. ADVANCING THE PRINCIPLE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE ARAB WORLD	7
VI. INSTITUTIONALIZING THE SOCIAL JUSTICE FRAMEWORK IN THE ARAB WORLD	9
VII. CONCLUSION.....	10

I. INTRODUCTION

The Arab region was partially sheltered from the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis, but it is now facing a high degree of socioeconomic uncertainty as a result of an unprecedented wave of political transformation in several Arab countries. These developments have coincided with an increasing level of geopolitical tensions and a weak global environment showing no signs of a vigorous recovery.

While political transformation is the predominant label of the popular uprisings, they were largely motivated by unresolved socioeconomic issues, such as demographic expansion, high unemployment, increased cost of living and poverty, pronounced economic disparities and dysfunctional social safety nets.

Prior to the onset of the uprisings, most of the countries of the region were suffering from large disparities in development and wealth.¹ The rate of informal employment was high, and youth and women were the most affected by the lack of sustainable job creation.

With protests sparking from Tunisia to Egypt, the call for social justice has been the main aspiration expressed in the streets. In Egypt, the popular chant was “bread, dignity and social justice”, which expressed the need for basic rights and access to better redistribution systems. This popular chant has, in fact, crystallized political, social and moral issues of the legitimacy of the state. The overall perception was that the Government had failed the people and abandoned its core responsibilities.²

In sum, the root causes of the protests were an amalgamation of discontent due to the prevailing socioeconomic conditions with low levels of political freedom and political inclusion. Therefore, any political transition will not be sustainable without an acceleration of the pace of reforms, with social justice being a primary goal, along with other economic, social and political targets.

II. DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Since 2011, the concept of social justice has been actively debated among intellectuals, the media and protesters. However, when it comes to defining the concept, there is no clear-cut or common understanding.

A. EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN RECENT HISTORY

Historically, the concept of social justice emerged in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, with the expansion of capitalism and the development of socialist doctrines. Previously, philosophers had addressed justice but few looked at the concept from a social perspective. In 1840, Luigi Taparelli coined the term when building on the writing of St. Thomas Aquinas. Since then, the term ‘social justice’ has gradually been associated with grievances of inequality in society.³

Contemporary philosophers and thinkers have looked at social justice as a concept of distribution. One of the most influential proponents of this idea was John Rawls, whose book, “A Theory of Justice”,

¹ Gregor Hamann, “Towards a new social contract: social justice in North Africa and Middle East”, September 2011. Available from <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/08475.pdf>.

² Jane Kinninmont, “‘Bread, dignity and Social Justice’: the political economy of Egypt’s transition”, April 2012. Available from http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/bp0412_kinninmont.pdf.

³ Pope Pius XI stated in his *Divini Redemptoris* that “it is of the very essence of social justice to demand for each individual all that is necessary for the common good ... it is impossible to care for the social organism and the good of society as a unit unless each single and each individual member is supplied with all that is necessary for the exercise of his social functions” (Pius XI, “*Divini Redemptoris*: Encyclical of Pope Pius XI to the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and other Ordinaries in Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See”, 19 March 1937, para. 51. Available from www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19031937_divini-redemptoris_en.html).

advanced the idea of “justice as fairness”.⁴ Some theorists have expounded on this concept by linking it to what needs to be distributed, and patterns of distribution. Others have argued that the distributive paradigm is insufficient as a framework of justice. For example, Iris Young stated that “social justice means the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression”,⁵ where oppression was described as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness and cultural imperialism.

The concept of social justice has developed without a unified definition, with various organizations interpreting it in their own ways. The difference in cultural backgrounds and value systems across the world led to various interpretations. Some proponents may argue that social justice implies equal incomes, while others may consider that inequalities could exist, but with an agreed-upon baseline under which no one should fall. According to Bertelsmann Stiftung, the modern concept of social justice implies that its establishment should focus on targeting investments in capabilities to give each person equal opportunities for self-realization.⁶ However, there are some overlaps and controversy surrounding the concept and definition of social justice.

B. DEFINITIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AS SET OUT BY INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

The concept of social justice did not appear in the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or the two International Covenants on Human Rights. However, it was frequently referred to in the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and the Programme of Action adopted by the World Summit for Social Development in 1995 – yet five years later, the concept was practically omitted from the United Nations Millennium Declaration.⁷

The United Nations as a whole makes no explicit distinction between international justice or justice among nationals, and social justice or justice among people. It does tie the concept to economic justice, as that sort of justice is “hampered by the concentration of wealth and power that seems to accompany the dissemination of the capitalist ethos”.⁸ The Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) of the United Nations goes on to say that social justice is equivalent to distributive justice, as both terms are understood to be interchangeable in common parlance and international relations. DESA also states that the neglect of the pursuit of social justice translates into an acceptance of a future of violence and chaos.⁹

When defining social justice, the International Labour Organization (ILO) states that it is “based on equality of rights for all peoples and the possibility for all human beings without discrimination, to benefit from economic and social progress everywhere”.¹⁰ Indeed, the ILO uses the concept of social justice to elaborate on its mission, but it does not explicitly define the concept; instead, it uses an accepted idea of social justice in its constitution, where it states that “universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice”.¹¹

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has designed the most elaborate and detailed framework to measure social justice and to evaluate member countries based on a

⁴ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

⁵ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁶ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Social Justice in the OECD – How Do the Member States Compare? Sustainable Governance Indicators 2011* (Gütersloh, 2011).

⁷ DESA, *Social Justice in an Open World: The Role of the United Nations* (New York, 2006).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰ ILO, “The International Labour Organization and Social Justice”, February 2011. Available from http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_151740.pdf.

¹¹ <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/leg/download/constitution.pdf>.

clear set of key performance indicators. They point to a modern concept of social justice whereby individuals are granted equal opportunities to achieve a measure of life success. Therefore, for OECD, social justice leads to the empowerment of the individual through broad social participation; being part of a social group or class should not negatively impact a person when making life choices.¹²

Although the World Bank does not have texts dedicated solely to the concept of social justice, it does define it as the equality of opportunities for intergenerational well-being on all economic, social and environmental aspects.¹³

SOLIDAR, a European network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to advance social justice worldwide, sees it as a means to address growing inequalities. It describes its vision as one where all people live in “dignity”; it may be safe to assume that living in social justice would therefore be equivalent to living in dignity.¹⁴

Hence, all of the above-mentioned organisations address the concept of social justice as an aspiration to build equal-opportunity societies and to improve overall socioeconomic conditions.

III. THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE ARAB WORLD

The concept of social justice has recently become a recurrent topic in political discourse and has regained interest among analysts, thinkers and institutions, particularly in political transition. The demand for democracy in the Arab region has led analysts and researchers to recognize the opportunity to advance ideals which contribute to their own societies’ social justice.

International organizations have also tried to address the issue of social justice in the Arab region, according to their own definitions and with a clear target of benefiting civil society. For the majority of those organizations, the main objective is to achieve economic parity and overcome the large unemployment rate prohibiting youth and women from actively participating in the formal labour market.

Moving forward, a definition of social justice should be formulated, taking into consideration the specific situation of the Arab region. The absence of a real consensus on the definition has led to the idea that social justice is mainly related to the creation of a just society, where justice means equal rights and access to opportunities to all citizens, with fair treatment and recognition of cultural differences.

A framework to assess social justice in the Arab region could be proposed; it would look at the various aspects which may contribute to social justice. According to the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), three factors can be looked at to assess social justice in the region: poverty, inequality and vulnerability.

- Develop a relative approach to social justice, where poverty is calculated as a proportion of the median per capita annual income or consumption. This allows for a measure that better reflects income distribution and inequalities within and between countries. Inequality can measure how income is distributed across a population, not only for those living below a specified poverty line. The Gini coefficient, Theil index, the decile dispersion ratio and the share of income of the poorest population quintile can all be used to measure inequality. Vulnerability, on the other

¹² Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Social Justice in the OECD*, p. 11.

¹³ Tatyana P. Soubbotina and Katherine A. Sheram, *Beyond Economic Growth: Meeting the Challenges of Global Development* (Washington D.C., World Bank, 2000), chapter 1. Available from www.worldbank.org/depweb/beyond/global/chapter1.html.

¹⁴ <http://cms.horus.be/files/99931/MediaArchive/Annex%201%20SOLIDAR%20Presentation.pdf>.

hand, focuses on assessing something that has yet not happened. Its measure requires regression techniques depending on variations in income and consumption patterns. Examples of indicators of vulnerability include participation of households in informal networks and self-perception of vulnerability;¹⁵

- Assess social justice in the Arab region through a gap analysis. In addition, benchmarking could be used to measure the gap against countries considered among the most ‘socially just’ and could be a useful method to establish a baseline from which Governments can move forward to implement better policies.

DEFINITION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE ARAB WORLD BY INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Institution	Definition of social justice	Issues to address in Arab region
ILO	“Universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice”.	1. Rights at work; 2. Creating jobs; 3. Youth employment; 4. Promoting social dialogue; 5. Extending social protection.
OECD	Social justice is a central constitutive element of the legitimacy and stability of any political community.	
UN	No explicit distinction is made between international justice, or justice among nations, and social justice, or justice among people.	1. Inequalities in the distribution of income; 2. Inequalities in the distribution of assets; 3. Inequalities in the distribution of opportunities for work and remunerated employment; 4. Inequalities in the distribution of access to knowledge; 5. Inequalities in the distribution of health services, social security and the provision of a safe environment; 6. Inequalities in the distribution of opportunities for civic and political participation.
ESCWA	Associated with the creation of a just society Underlying assumption that justice implies: Human welfare through equal rights and share of benefits; Fair treatment; Recognition of cultural differences; Equitable access to resources and opportunities.	1. Social policy and protection systems; 2. Subsidies; 3. Taxation systems; 4. Inclusive economic growth policies.
SOLIDAR	Living in dignity.	1. Freedom of peaceful assembly and association; 2. Freedom of expression and information; 3. Democratic transition and civil dialogue; 4. Respect for labour rights and decent work; 5. Access and coverage of quality services; 6. Ensuring income support.

¹⁵ ESCWA, “Achieving Social Justice for All”, Social Development Bulletin, vol. 3, No.1. Available from <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/publications/edit/upload/sdd-10-TP2.pdf>.

IV. ASSESSING THE LEVEL OF SOCIAL (IN)JUSTICE IN THE ARAB WORLD

According to an Egyptian journalist, social justice, no matter its definition, is essential to the political future of Egypt. He states that “social justice involves a redistribution of wealth in an equitable manner, the provision of fair wages for workers, and oversight of businessmen and market capital”.¹⁶ Indeed, ‘social justice’ is the *terme du jour* of the Middle East.

So, how can one assess the degree of social justice in the Arab world? What are the main factors behind the feeling of ‘social injustice’?

A. ECONOMIC GROWTH, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Over the past two decades, Arab economies have gradually shifted towards greater economic liberalization and away from the public sector. The steady economic growth over the last 10 years in most Arab countries can be partially attributed to the wide-ranging reforms introduced, aiming to promoting privatization, trade and ease of doing business.

However, the pace and patterns of growth registered over the past few decades differ across Arab countries. Foreign direct investment flows, which are generally a main source of job creation, are much lower relative to those in other emerging markets in Asia or Latin America. This is a direct consequence of investors’ perception of a heavy bureaucracy and an ineffective judicial system in many Arab countries, as reflected by their low ranking along Economic Freedom indices (e.g. Heritage Foundation Index).

In addition, Governments continue to control key sectors of the economy – directly or through state-owned enterprises, thus controlling job creation and acting as ‘employer of last resort’, at the expense of productivity, which, in addition to population growth, has been a key factor limiting growth in wealth. Hence, the relatively important government role in several Arab economies has significantly limited the role of their small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which are generally key drivers of employment and growth. This stands in stark contrast to the economies of most developed countries, where SMEs figure prominently in contributing to gross domestic product (GDP) and employment. As a result of this disparity, the middle class in Arab countries is unable to act as a social stabilizing factor.

B. DEMOGRAPHICS, EMPLOYMENT AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The Arab region has witnessed excessive population growth, while economic growth in many countries did not translate into a sufficient level of job creation, leading to ever rising unemployment.

There are two other important issues in the regional job market which are worth noting:

- The high unemployment rate, especially among the youth whose unemployment rates are two to three times higher than (the overall unemployment level in the Arab region). Youth unemployment rates range from 39 per cent in Saudi Arabia, to 34 per cent in Egypt and 31 per cent in Tunisia, much higher than in the rest of the world;
- The role of the Governments of the region as ‘employers of last resort’ has become unsustainable, as it imposes a high fiscal burden and comes at the expense of productivity, a primary driver of wealth.

¹⁶ Bassam Haddad and Ziad Abu-Rish, “How do you finance social justice in Egypt? Jadaliyya Interview with Journalist Wael Gamal”, 10 June 2011. Available from <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1820/-how-do-you-finance-social-justice-in-egypt-jadali>.

In addition, education outcomes, which remain broadly misaligned with workforce requirements, are also compounding the problem. Arab countries have generally average-educated populations and register relatively high illiteracy rates.

C. GROWTH INCLUSIVENESS AND EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

The lack of growth inclusiveness and inequality of opportunity is another factor capable of derailing the growth process through political upheavals. For growth to be sustainable, it should be broad-based across sectors and inclusive of most of a country's labour force. Several countries have been able to bring down poverty levels over the past 15 to 20 years, however they remain high in Yemen, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco or Tunisia.

Over the past decade, many Arab countries have implemented reforms aimed at boosting the private sector and increasing jobs. Despite this success, however, current challenges regarding employment in the region will require more aggressive policies.

Neither Governments nor government-owned enterprises are sufficient to create jobs in line with demand. Without a growing and vibrant private sector that is able to create jobs, the Arab region's middle-class segment will likely shrink over the next decade. In that context, policymakers must take steps to accelerate competitiveness of the private sector and create new jobs.

D. FOOD SECURITY AND ACCESS TO THE BASIC HOUSEHOLD NEEDS

Over the past decade, food security has emerged as a major challenge for a number of Governments in the Arab region, where food often constitutes a significant part of household spending. Increased demand for food imports versus domestic production led to an over-reliance on a select group of countries for key commodities. To meet their demand, Arab countries have historically relied on imports, which has increased the importance of food security.

Increases in food prices have ravaged the world – and Arab countries in particular – over the past several years, contributing to social and political unrest in countries like Egypt, where food inflation has been highest. Moreover, food inflation remains a major concern today. According to a recent index released by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 2011, global food prices remain near historical highs.

E. GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK AND ROLE OF THE STATE

Most countries in the region are perceived to have weak institutional setups, ineffective judicial systems and low rankings in economic freedom. As a result, it is not surprising that foreign direct investment levels have generally been lower in most Arab countries compared to other emerging markets in Asia or Latin America.

Moreover, Arab Governments are stuck in weak public finance management, with high levels of unproductive spending and untargeted subsidies, thereby hampering their ability to invest in growth projects or socioeconomic 'enablers'. This has led to, at best, stagnating standards of living, while other emerging countries have visibly improved their Governments' ability to provide adequate social protection.

In addition to differences in socioeconomic conditions, the pattern of ongoing protests in the region highlights a differentiated level of discontent with existing political systems and varied levels of restrictions imposed on freedoms in some countries. According to the World Bank Governance Indicators (WBI), records of political freedom and inclusion in the political process in the Arab region are far below the emerging markets levels.

V. ADVANCING THE PRINCIPLE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE ARAB WORLD

Tools to advance social justice in the Arab world are multiple and can include: developing social policy and social protection mechanisms, reforming taxation systems and promoting inclusive economic growth policies. Social policies offer a guideline as to how a Government should make decisions and how to prioritize social spending and the transfer of public goods. Basically, these policies regulate citizens/residents' rights. The objectives of social policies should be the expression of citizens' rights according to the political and constitutional frameworks that define the nation. If "equality" is an "essence of citizenship", then social policies must address equitably distributing and investing in opportunities, public goods, risks, services and resources.¹⁷

The above-mentioned analyses indicate that realizing social justice in the Arab region and sustaining it require a fundamental socioeconomic transformation. Hence, economic transformation in the region should be designed to respond to the aspirations of the people (dignity, fairness/equity, employment, participation), and to encompass economic growth, inclusiveness, governance and reforming the role of the state, as key pillars of a new economic agenda.

There is an urgent need to go beyond the 'rapid-response initiatives' currently being implemented in various Arab countries, and accelerate structural reform programmes to address economic and social developmental challenges. Ten reform directions are to be given priority to promote social justice in the Arab world. These are summarized hereafter, along with an illustration of some of the areas that require special focus.

1. *Strengthen governance and consolidate public trust*

(a) *Building modern government capabilities*: 'centre of government' functions, modern civil service management, streamlined 'doing business' environment;

(b) *Increasing transparency and accountability in economic management*: robust statistical frameworks, performance management systems and modern public procurement;

(c) *Promoting citizens' inclusion initiatives*: active participation of local think-tanks and NGOs in public policy, effective parliamentary mechanisms to include civil society in legislation.

2. *Reinvent a value job-oriented growth model*

(a) *Developing competitiveness*: targeting foreign and domestic investment, specific incentives and investment promotion initiatives for high-growth and/ or job-intensive sectors;

(b) *Pursuing economic diversification*: developing an innovative ecosystem with productivity enhancement programmes in specific sectors;

(c) *Supporting SMEs and private sector development*: financial and non-financial support schemes to start-ups and SMEs, deeper financial markets, alternative sources of funding (e.g. insurance sector), industrial funds.

3. *Match workforce skills with job market requirements*

(a) *Increasing fluidity of labour markets*: modern labour laws and institutions;

(b) *Spreading skill-building programmes*: grassroots partnerships with the private sector for vocational training and education;

¹⁷ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Social Protection Policy and Research in the Arab States: From Shared Challenges to Coordinated Efforts* (Beirut, UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States, LB/2011/SS/PI/68, 2011), p. 13.

(c) *Implementing job protection mechanisms*: unemployment insurance, employment reinsertion programmes, automatic stabilizers to protect income and replace ineffective subsidy systems.

4. *Accelerate entrepreneurship*

A more entrepreneurial and independent middle class can create more resilient economies in the Arab region.

(a) Policymakers could drive this evolution by providing advice and seed funding to aspiring business owners, developing entrepreneurship education initiatives for schools and corporations, and eliminating some of the obstacles to entrepreneurship;

(b) Governments should streamline the funding process for start-ups by developing a legal framework that encourages venture capital investments and eliminates legal barriers to foreign investors;

(c) Entrepreneurs in the region would benefit from a wider support structure with strong links between venture capitalists and prospective business owners, to connect investment funds with entrepreneurial ideas.

5. *Unlock private sector growth*

(a) Introduce credible reforms that increase competition and discourage monopolistic behaviour in key industries, such as the financial sector. In a competitive setting, banks will have an incentive to diversify their business activities, which in turn can provide easier access to credit, boosting private sector expansion and creating new jobs;

(b) Remove the major obstacles to establishing businesses, such as the relatively weak enforcement of contracts and weak protection of investors;

(c) Ensure that any economic reforms are transparent to all stakeholders. Governments must have a clear channel of communication with middle-class business owners and entrepreneurs.

6. *Redefine the social cohesion framework*

(a) *Meeting the needs of the middle-class*: linkages between human development programmes (education and health) and social development and cohesion;

(b) *Ensuring fairer distribution of wealth and income*: fiscal adjustment policies responding to social implications of structural reforms;

(c) *Better targeting of social support and subsidy systems*: mitigation of social vulnerabilities to cost-of-living inflation, scaled up and more effective social safety nets and poverty alleviation programmes.

7. *Safeguard macrofinancial stability*

(a) *Mitigating inflationary pressure*: fiscal sustainability at the heart of public finance management, improved fiscal and monetary policy coordination;

(b) *Safeguarding financial markets stability*: expanded governance framework of financial sector, potential consolidation of regulation of financial subsectors, early warning systems and diversification of banking activities.

8. *Maintain the pace of structural reforms*

(a) *Reforming the pension system*: structural, parametric and service-delivery improvement reforms;

(b) *Reforming public finance management*: efficiency and effectiveness of public spending, value-for-money, financial accountability in government;

(c) *Enacting a sustainable National Energy Policy*: investment promotion in alternative energy, optimal monetization of domestic hydrocarbon resources and reform of energy subsidies (domestic and industrial energy usage);

(d) *Reforming the education system*: align education outcomes with long-term market needs, redesign education pathways, upgrade teaching methods, testing and scoring, enhance partnership between the private sector and civil society.

9. *Reforming the tax system*

(a) *Develop more progressive income tax systems*: increase progressivity in tax systems, introduce new taxes to cover all types of income and wealth sources;

(b) *Widen the coverage of the tax base*: cover all sources of income, reduce special regimes and improve tax coverage on certain activities; modernize tax codes and tax administration.

10. *Accelerate regional economic integration*

(a) *Creating a regional labour market*: higher workforce competitiveness, higher level of qualifications and productivity;

(b) *Planning regional access infrastructure (transport of utilities, goods and people)*: interconnection, shared subsidies and reduced negative spillover.

VI. INSTITUTIONALIZING THE SOCIAL JUSTICE FRAMEWORK IN THE ARAB WORLD

If Arab countries are to advance in social justice, they must develop the means to evaluate and assess social justice gaps and also to measure the impact on policies and structural reforms that aim to achieve better social conditions. Countries should also develop a set of key social justice indicators that would help measure their performance in improving social justice. One way to advance the analysis in this direction is to use the approach that was adopted by OECD, through the Bertelsmann Stiftung report that measures social justice indicators, and to compare and rank countries accordingly. This approach ranks OECD countries based on their level of performance in achieving social justice according to a set of six key indicators: poverty prevention, access to education, labour market inclusion, social cohesion and non-discrimination, health and intergenerational justice. Each of these indicators is weighted according to its importance in the framework of social justice. Details are provided in the figure.

The obstacle to this approach in the Arab countries derives from the absence of a solid indicators system that can be used as a base to design a social justice index for Arab countries. The Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) previously attempted to measure certain dimensions of social justice through the Arab Democracy Index, where 7 of 40 indicators were used to measure the level of “equality and social justice” among Arab countries. These seven indicators are: (1) gender equality; (2) social security; (3) education; (4) school dropouts; (5) women in the labour force; (6) equality in wages; and (7) public expenditure on social needs as compared to security. However, since the beginning of the Arab uprisings, updates have not been provided.¹⁸ The seven indicators could also be used as a starting point to measure the level of social justice in several countries in the region. Indeed, according to ARI, there was information on these indicators in 10 Arab countries in 2010.

¹⁸ The Arab Reform Initiative and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, *The State of Reform in the Arab World: The Arab Democracy Index 2011* (March 2011). Available from [http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/Full%20Report 0.pdf](http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/Full%20Report%200.pdf).



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Social Justice in the OECD – How Do the Member States Compare?*, p. 14.

Heba Helmy, of the Modern Sciences and Arts University in Egypt, has also tried to build an index that measures the level of progress of social justice in the Arab world based on the approach and the indicators used to rank OECD member countries in terms of social justice. She adapted the methodology and the dimensions of these indicators to fit the Arab environment. Indeed, the Bertelsmann Stiftung approach cannot be used as such, due to the lack of solid indicators in developing countries and to the fact that assigning too many subindicators (Bertelsmann Stiftung has 28 subindicators) may complicate the interpretation of results. Instead, one major subindicator was used for each aspect of social justice.¹⁹

According to Helmy's report, not all developing countries had the appropriate data, resulting in only two Arab countries – Egypt and Jordan – making it on the list. However, the indicators used in that study could possibly be adapted to an Arab social justice index.

BUILDING AN ARAB INDEX FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Though Helmy's report has taken the Bertelsmann Stiftung index one step further by developing a simple model assessing developing countries, this indexation has not managed to cover all Arab countries. Yet, it still constitutes a definite improvement in that some Arab countries were included.

Ideally, a social justice index for the Arab region would be one where each country could measure its performance based on a set of indicators and implement its policies to improve its social justice index score. A major obstacle in building strong social justice indicators is the lack of data. Sophisticated survey systems have been established in many developed countries across the world, giving legislators and policymakers access to statistics which inform their decisions to implement certain policies.

¹⁹ These were: (a) multidimensional poverty index; (b) secondary school disenrollment; (c) unemployment rate; (d) Gini ratio; (e) infant mortality rate; and (f) public debt-to-GDP ratio. See Heba E. Helmy, "An approach to quantifying social justice in selected developing countries", *International Journal of Development Issues*, vol. 12, No. 1 (2013), p.69.

Currently, however, statistics and quantitative data are difficult to locate and survey taking is impeded in some of the countries, especially with today's ongoing conflicts. The Arab Democracy Index relies on data that is collected annually; there is thus a continuous calculation of the indicators used, allowing the Arab Reform Initiative to monitor changes in the Arab political systems. However, with the transitional changes which have occurred since 2011, the reliability of the indicators may have been affected and they may need to be revisited.

VII. CONCLUSION

Social justice in the Arab world is an aspiration that cannot be realized unless Governments recognize the need to implement policies to advance the concept. Policies that provide equitable opportunities to all citizens should be a priority, as investing in human capital can help spur economic growth and bring together different segments of society towards a future of social justice.

Unless managed as a holistic transformation agenda (social, economic and political) that emerges from within Arab countries, the ongoing transformation may be protracted and may not meet the aspirations of its citizens. This agenda should be first expressed in the form of 'national pacts for social justice', which inspire citizens to work towards new ideals. Then, these pacts should trickle down to national road maps for socioeconomic and political transformation, detailing specific policy initiatives, with clear and credible implementation time frames, as well as tangible and measurable goals, to be monitored through a clear accountability framework.

Three conditions are critical for ensuring successful planning and implementation of national pacts for social justice: determined leadership, inclusive process and availability of funding. As new Arab Governments experiencing political transitions are gradually finding their way, they will be looking for regional anchors to support them in their country's transformation.

The international community stands to greatly benefit, economically and politically, from stability and prosperity in the Arab region. Hence, it has a unique opportunity and a responsibility to assist in setting the developmental agendas for countries undergoing political transition. This means helping Governments establish and manage an inclusive process for formulating their national pacts for social justice and translating them into socioeconomic and political development road maps.