

Building Back Better Social Contracts

International Cooperation with Fragile MENA Countries in the COVID-19 Context

by Erin McCandless and Bernhard Trautner,

School of Governance at Witwatersrand University

German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)



The Current Column

of 24 August 2020

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute



Governments in the Middle East and in North Africa (MENA) are tackling the pandemic in different ways, many challenged by weak social systems and growing societal frustrations. In relatively prosperous (middle-income) countries – such as Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq – leaders have used the pandemic as an excuse to suppress justified protests at their lack of accountability and failure to provide basic services. For international cooperation, which supports the functioning of legitimate, accountable governments and resilient societies, this poses a critical challenge – as the case of Lebanon currently illuminates.

In seeming perpetual crisis, Yemen, Syria and Libya cycles of violent conflict have left profoundly fragile, rudimentary health care and social protection systems overwhelmed by the pandemic, and compounded by vast, growing inequalities and political fragility. As always, the most vulnerable are the hardest hit – the civilian population, and especially women, children, displaced persons and refugees.

"At the core of social cohesion lies the building of trust and delivering on the material needs and political expectations of societies"

By contrast, Tunisia, economically weak and by no means politically stable, appears to stand out in the region for addressing the virus head on. Tunisia took early and drastic measures initially to protect its population, and thus its economy over the longer term.

Despite the grave challenges in the region profoundly exacerbated by the pandemic, UN-Secretary General António Guterres recently reminded Arab leaders that the pandemic also offers opportunities for resolving conflict and "building back better", notably by addressing structural weaknesses and strengthening social contracts. Guterres' suggests a paradigm shift by stating that 'no one is safe until everyone is safe'. This captures our interdependent vulnerabilities, and demands a more holistic and inclusive view of threats to collective 'human security'. The latter is integrally linked to environmental security, and it needs to form the core of our thinking and action globally.

It is in the vital interest of responsible governments to continue to improve, rather than dismantle or defund the international organisations that are seeking to tackle the interdependent root causes of human insecurity – including deep structural and horizontal inequalities within and across countries, and failing social contracts. Greater efforts

must be made to understand state and society relationships, tackle constraints and support means to forge nationwide social contracts.

The popular uprisings across the Arab Spring have, over the last decade, catalysed varying responses and outcomes for the fate of social contracts, and state-society relations in general. Tunisia, the initiator of the catalytic change movements, started genuine political reform. Following an extraordinarily inclusive and bottom-up transition, Tunisia introduced a regular trilateral social dialogue between labour unions, employer associations, and government. Earned public trust has now supported societal compliance with the government's COVID-19 response. For Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq, with long histories of failed social contracts and continued violent conflict and crisis, the pandemic and its emerging consequences demand radical measures. It is vital to break the path dependences and cycles of violence and fragility. This is easier said than done, where regional and international actors become part of the conflict. One global multi-country analysis of deeply divided societies underscores the imperative of tying national political settlements to robust and inclusive institutional arrangements that can transform structural sources of conflict, and ensure delivery on promises. Critically, growing social cohesion – a driver of an inclusive social contract – is deeply connected to progress in these areas.

At the core of social cohesion lies the building of trust and delivering on the material needs and political expectations of societies. Greater trust lies at the core of more robust social contracts, and centrally supports whole of society willing compliance to government action, i.e. to a pandemic. International support through political-normative, financial, and technical cooperation is vital in such contexts, to assist national actors in setting up multi-stakeholder dialogues and implementing robust agreements. Such agreements – manifestations of national social contracts – must hold promise for inclusive outcomes that tackle structural issues dividing societies and undermining development.

Critically, international actors must ensure coordinated support does not do harm – ultimately allowing national settings to organically grow peace. Efforts to address the pandemic within and across fragile and conflict affected countries must attune to these priorities and practices, if the notion of building back better is to be realised. Doing this is not rocket science anymore, due to ground-breaking insights about best practices in international cooperation by various institutions – even in times of pandemic.