



Poverty in Syria

Towards
a Serious
Policy Shift in
Combating
Poverty

Fayez Sara

Transitional
Period Policy
Research



STRATEGIC RESEARCH AND
COMMUNICATION CENTRE

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Executive Summary

One of the deep structural issues that proved unsolvable by state and society-based plans and commissions has been the continued rise of poverty to unprecedented levels. This study considers the subject of poverty in Syria during the period from 2000 to 2010 by presenting an overall view of implemented policies and causes for its failure in slowing down the increasing poverty rates. Deep causes included lack of a political will, poor governance and corruption. This policy paper will present a broad roadmap to combating poverty in the initial phase of any transitional or reform oriented state. In addition, it presents a brief discussion of society's view of poverty, as well as the civil society and private-sector initiatives and grass-root efforts to tackle this phenomenon. The final section will present recommendations aimed at the formation of policies that can help policy-makers, advisers and civil and private society organisations independently and in collaboration with one another to counter and overcome the phenomenon of poverty.

*"Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural.
It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated
by the actions of human beings."*

Nelson Mandela

One: Introduction

There is no doubt poverty is one of the biggest problems facing the world. Almost three billion people live on less than two dollars a day (the measure of poverty's upper limit) in addition to over a billion people (around 20% of the world's population) live under extreme poverty that is on less than one dollar a day. That poverty is an even more pressing problem today is highlighted by the fact that the world is in the middle of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. It is during these downturns that high rates of unemployment and lower tax revenues collected by the government treasury that the issue of poverty becomes very politically charged. Many of those who previously had a job and were classified as middle or working class, find themselves below the poverty level and those who were classified as poor now find themselves having to live on less government subsidises. Nowhere is this being so visibly demonstrated presently as in North Africa and the Middle East, as millions of people have taken to the streets to vent their anger at their various governments' failure to address their economic plight. The protest movement in Syria that began on March 15 also poses this issue as a priority for any future transition to deal with on an urgent basis.

The poor in Arab countries total around 140 million people, among them over 65 million fall below the line of extreme poverty, from an overall population of around 317 million people (according to 2005 figures). This is expected to rise to 395 million people in 2015. Although each country in the region has its own unique circumstances that affect the varying degrees of poverty within the country, Arab countries generally fit into three categories in terms of their relationship with poverty.⁽¹⁾

The first category is represented by countries stricken by extreme poverty, within which the proportion of poor people exceeds half of the population. Among these countries are Somalia, Palestine and Yemen, where a majority of the population suffer from poverty, and a large portion from extreme poverty. The second category includes countries such as Egypt, Syria and Jordan. The proportion of poor people within their populations totals around 40%, around half of whom are living in extreme poverty. The third category of poverty within the Arab states comprises rich countries such as Algeria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. There are poverty-stricken groups living within these countries, some of them destitute, the proportion of whom rises as high as 20% of the

(1) See: Fayeza Sara. On Poverty in the Arab Situation. Al-Hayat Newspaper (London) 29/9/2010.

population. In all three types of countries, the various implications of poverty indicators are clear and the crises linked to poverty are both apparent and visible.⁽²⁾

The manifestations of poverty in the Arab countries are similar to those around the world, especially in terms of the declining living conditions of the poor, and particularly in the standard of living, which consists of a lack of food or malnutrition, insufficient or poor quality drinking water, unsanitary or dilapidated housing, inadequate health services and an absence of education, or its inadequacy if available. What separates the Arab world from many other regions of the world that are struggling with the issue of poverty is that the Arab world is experiencing a youth bubble that is either beginning or will in near future come of age politically. For example, the mean age in Tunisia is 30, Egypt is 24, Syria 22 and Iraq 20. With such economic disparity and a large generation coming of age (which is more educated and open to the world around them than their parents), it explains why the region is proving to be such a tinder box politically.

Estimates have warned that the huge increase in population may result in a doubling of poverty within the Arab countries over the coming two decades unless fundamental political and economic reforms are undertaken

There are numerous and diverse causes of poverty throughout the Arab world which makes it difficult to generalise about a given country. The causes in a country such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, foremost among them the poor distribution of oil wealth, are different from a country with limited resources such as Mauritania, where even the fair distribution of wealth would not prevent poverty, although it would lead to a reduction in its severity. In general, the common factors in the causes of poverty in the Arab countries are the Arab governments' imbalanced policies in the distribution of wealth (their bias in favour of the wealthy classes at the expense of the poor), the low rates of development and growth of unemployment, and the rising rates of inflation which rob income of its purchasing power⁽³⁾.

This is in addition to the growing costs of armament and security and of controlling the explosive population increase.⁽⁴⁾

The impact of these policies does not lead merely to the perpetuation of poverty, but rather to its exacerbation over time. Signs have been there as estimates have warned that the huge increase in population may result in a doubling of poverty within the Arab countries over the coming two decades unless fundamental political and economic reforms are undertaken. However, it was clear that the level of reforms necessary not only needed to be led by the state, but also private

(2) See: Jumaa Akash. 130 Million Arabs Under the Poverty Line, and 33 Individuals whose Wealth Exceeds \$179 billion. 18/8/2007. <http://www.alaswaq.net/articles/2007/08/18/10138.html>

(3) See: Ibid.. Fayez Sara. On Poverty in the Arab Situation. Al-Hayat Newspaper (London) 29/9/2010.

(4) See: Karam Al-Helou. Poverty in the Arab World: The Arabs' Greatest Challenge in the Twenty-First Century. Al-Hayat (London), 9/9/2007.

enterprise (free of state sponsorship) and civil society's involvement are needed in creating a surge of development along with a fair distribution of income and the rooting out of corruption. Even with the ticking time bomb of a 'youth bubble', most Arab governments refused to entertain any calls for reform, this refusal has cost several of those governments their jobs!

The ongoing political developments taking place in the Arab region, with the triumph of the popular revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and signs of the same in other countries, will play an important role in changing development policies in the region. With the increased expectation that comes from such dramatic events, people lean towards participation in public life and its political and economic activities on the one hand, and on the other hand to obtain a better share of the wealth. These events should be a warning to future governments that unless they can find a way to meet the expectations of its people, the people have already shown a willingness to make changes in who leads them.

Amid the current events that are taking place throughout the Arab region, let us focus on the phenomenon of poverty in Syria, which is a vital part of the Syrian people's dissatisfaction with their government. Poverty does not merely remove a section of Syrians from the framework of political, economic and social activity; rather it renders poor people a burden on Syrian life. A section of Syrians must bear the needs of a third of the population in addition to their own needs, leading to an increase in the burden upon them. This is most likely one of the factors which hinders the advancement of Syrian society.

This study considers the phenomenon of poverty and attempts to sketch its primary features in the Syrian context during the last decade, as well as its various dimensions from all perspectives. It then analyses governmental and societal policies and offers a comparison of their outcomes. In a separate section it will also offer proposals and ideas to policy-makers, advisers and civil society organisations, to support the theory of implementing alternative policies to assist in tackling poverty.

The study focuses on the qualitative, analytical aspect of the phenomenon, essentially employing official Syrian data issued by the Central Bureau of Statistics, which is an official institution headquartered in Damascus. It also utilises regional and international reports which consider some of the aspects of the case of Syria, plus the writings of experts and economists on the subject of poverty (drawn in part from the lectures of the Tuesday Economic Forum organised in Damascus each year), in addition to reports and interviews published by the news media related to the various aspects of the study.

Two: The Phenomenon of Poverty

Features of Syrian Poverty 2000-2010

At the beginning of this century's first decade, indicators of poverty began to increase and its manifestations broadened in Syria. This was particularly the case following the political and socio-economic developments witnessed in the country in the 1990's, which saw a move towards a social market economy. According to the announcement made by the government, this comprised a move towards increased economic freedoms, greater role for the private sector, a decline in state production and service sectors and an increase in foreign direct investment. One of the effects of this transformation was an increase in poverty. This drove interested parties (politicians, economist and researchers), to concentrate on poverty to understand the situation, amid a lack of statistical data regarding the phenomenon. There were shortcomings on the part of official statistics institutions, and a near total absence of socio-economic research institutions concerned with this subject.

For the above reasons, successive estimates regarding the scale of poverty and the area of its spread began to vary considerably. Official sources, in their treatment of this subject, would give lower estimates of poverty (around 10%), set against higher estimates offered by external sources (as high as 60%). Meanwhile, impartial experts provided estimates stating that poverty affects around 20% of the population in Syria. Then the results of the study launched by the United Nations Development Programme in cooperation with the Syrian government between the years 1996 and 2004, which established a limit for the poverty estimates, was released. It announced that the rate of poverty is around 30% – this report proved all other estimates woefully inaccurate.

The study of poverty in Syria⁽⁵⁾ employed two limits for poverty. The first was the lower limit, set at an income equivalent to SYP 1,458 per individual per month. On this basis the percentage of Syrians in poverty, who cannot obtain their basic needs, amounts to 11.4% of the population (around 2 million people). The upper poverty limit meanwhile falls at a monthly income per individual of SYP 2,052, at which the proportion of poor people amounts to 30% of the population (around 5.3 million people), outlining the details of poverty in Syria during the period from 1996 to 2004.

(5) Ibid.. Heba El Laithy (main investigator), Khalid Abu-Ismael. Poverty in Syria: 1996-2004. United Nations Development Programme. Damascus, June 2005.

The study demonstrated a number of basic realities, foremost the concentration of poverty in rural areas (62%), and its spread in urban areas (38%). Regionally, poverty's most severe presence was in the north eastern regions, which include the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo, Al-Raqqah, Deir Al-Zour and Hassakah. This was followed by the central and coastal region, which includes the provinces of Hama, Homs, Lattakia and Tartous, that has average poverty levels. Meanwhile the southern region, which comprises the provinces of Damascus, Deraa, Suweidah and Qaneitra, was distinguished by its lower levels of poverty.

Amid this overall picture, the poverty study provided some detailed data which shed more light on poverty during the period. Non-poor individuals benefited from the effects of economic growth to a relatively greater extent than the poor. Inequality in general also rose in Syria between the years 1997 and 2004. In the years 2003 and 2004 the lowest 20% of the population in income terms consumed only 7% of all Syrian expenditure, while the wealthiest 20% consumed 45% of total expenditure.

The study identified education as the greatest transformational weapon to combat poverty in Syria. More than 18% of the poor population are illiterate, and suffer the most severe hardship. Poverty is inversely linked to levels of education. The study confirmed that even a modest improvement in education would necessarily reduce the number of poor people. The difference in the proportion of poor people in terms of educational status was broad. In urban areas it affected 11.7% of illiterates, ranging to only 1.5% of university graduates. As regards equivalent rates in rural areas, these were 16.5% and 5% respectively. The foregoing confirms that poverty reinforces the lack of education, leading to a vicious circle of poverty and poor education.

The study considered the relationship between poverty and gender, indicating the interaction between them demonstrated by broad gaps in levels of school registration among poor people. It observed that rates of female enrolment in schools were extremely low, and that girls in poor families in rural areas were illiterate regardless of the sex of the head of the family. The study showed that rates of poverty reached their peak among the self-employed working in marginal and unskilled activities. The numbers of poor people working in agriculture and construction were huge. Moreover, 48% of poor people work in the unofficial sector.

Years after the issuance of the study, the picture of Syrian poverty it presented has not fundamentally changed. According to the data, a snapshot of Syrian poverty in the year 2007 -three years after the above study of poverty in Syria- shows that the presence of poverty in Syria had increased. Extreme poverty, under which individuals are unable to secure their basic essentials, affected 12.3% of the population (around 2.4 million people). The percentage of poor people at the upper poverty limit was 33.6% of the population (around 6.7 million people), of a total population amounting to 19 million people an increase of 3% from three years earlier.

This snapshot of poverty shows the occurrence of slight changes in the geography of extreme poverty. It confirms that the north eastern region is once again the poorest, with an extreme poverty rate of 15.4%. However, it shows that the central and coastal regions are now the least poor, with 7.68% of its population in this category, while the southern region is in the central position as regards to extreme poverty. In terms of the general poverty rate, the snapshot shows an equal distribution of poverty between the north eastern region and the southern region. It demonstrates that Syrian poverty remained concentrated in rural areas, although to a lesser extent than in the year 2004. The rural poor represented 56% of the total in "extreme poverty" and 50% of the general total of the population in poverty.⁽⁶⁾

Poverty contributes towards reinforcing the shadow economy and generating the marginal and illegal activities which expose the Syrian economy to greater challenges

The impact that poverty has on society can be seen in all areas of life. In the economic field, poverty affects the structure and plans of the economy, and the outcomes of these plans. In this regard, some of its effects can be seen in the negative impacts on economic and social development plans, the weakening of growth rates and the lowering of gross domestic product. It also further deepens the poor distribution of wealth. Poverty contributes towards reinforcing the shadow economy and generating the marginal and illegal activities which expose the Syrian economy to greater challenges, including the entrenchment of structural distortions in the economy and its inability to achieve sustained growth.

Poverty has a serious effect on the social field. Being classified or perceived to fall below the poverty line can often carry with it a social stigma. The presence of the stigma of poverty within society reinforces the class division and makes the process of climbing above the poverty line much more difficult. When the economy fails to perform well through low growth and/or higher inflation, this often causes shrinkage of the middle class, forcing many to join the ranks of the poor. Even when the economy begins to perform better, many of these former members of the middle class are unable to re-ascend the poverty line. The impacts of this phenomenon were manifested clearly in recent years⁽⁷⁾. Among the additional social effects of poverty is the fact that it leads to the weakening and marginalisation of particular social groups, mainly women, young people and children. It makes their

(6) United Nations Development Programme in Syria. Report on Poverty and Fairness of Distribution in Syria. Damascus 2007, *ibid*.

(7) See: United Nations Development Programme in Syria. Report on Poverty and Fairness of Distribution in Syria. Damascus 2009. This indicates that "22% of Syria's population are at risk of falling into extreme poverty in view of the increase witnessed recently in the prices of food and fuel."

lives more difficult, entrenches opportunities for the transgression of their rights, and pushes them onto dangerous paths, including involvement in prostitution networks and drug dealing⁽⁸⁾.

Naturally, the social effects of poverty also lead to changes in general behaviour within society. The rich classes tend to promote their patterns of consumption and of social relationships, including manifestations of the segregation established by the rich classes away from the poor classes. Examples of this include the increasing emergence of residential suburbs close to the cities, and the construction of high-cost educational institutions and hospitals, many of which are more like resorts than hospitals⁽⁹⁾. The most significant of poverty's social effects may be that it is a driver of social agitation between the poor and rich classes. In democratic societies it is expressed in the struggles of the political parties and other civil organisations like trade unions and business chambers. In autocratic societies, where there is no formal representation in the process, it may at times result in clashes between the poor and the branches of the state. That this is reoccurring with greater frequency in Syria suggests that the poor have become increasingly frustrated with their lack of representation.

This frustration within the political sphere stems from the effects of poverty that cause serious inequality of poor people from the general map of social and political activity. The majority of poor people are not involved in the activities of political parties or in the activities of unions or other civil society organisations. Most poor people do not participate in electing national and local representatives; if they do, this is conducted by means of intermediaries who endorse the participation of the poor in the interests of the rich and powerful. Naturally, the removal of the poor from political and social participation is one of the factors which contribute towards a generation of totalitarian, despotic and dictatorial behaviour. Perhaps the reality of Syria's post-independence struggles which took place subsequently, in particular during the eighties and beyond, reflected in some aspects the social classes' struggle for power. This generation has now awakened and constitute a large portion of society shifting the issue of poverty and social justice to the top of the reform list for any future transitional cabinet.

With regards to the cultural aspect, the effects of poverty are directly reflected in the declining spread of education – in particular among girls – which declines at greater levels the further we move along the spectrum towards the lower levels of poor communities. Poor classes tend to have low participation within cultural activities of all varieties. This estimate is observational owing to the absence of statistics, from the point of view of cultural production and the consumption of its products.

(8) Afra Mohamed. Pupil Absenteeism in Syria is a Phenomenon Exacerbated by Poverty, Customs and the Absence of Implementation of the Law. Deutsche Welle, 21/02/2010. <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,5271071,00.html>

(9) See: Syria, the Country of Rich and Poor... Each has its Own Way of Life. At http://www.nobles-news.com/news/news/index.php?page=show_det&select_page=17&id=49243

Three: Existing State and Society's Anti-Poverty Policies

The Third National Report on the Millennium Development Goals in Syria 2010, prepared in cooperation with the United Nations, indicated that poverty in Syria has not declined compared with previous years. In making this declaration the report officially characterises the outcomes of the government's anti-poverty policies as having been unsuccessful, demonstrating that they have failed to achieve their desired aims of combating poverty in Syria.

The outcomes of the efforts of Syrian civil, private and general society in fighting poverty can be classified as having had a similar result. This can be seen as a natural outcome for an initiative of limited capabilities which has not highlighted poverty as a focus of its efforts, and for which there is no detailed outcome with regards to its efforts to fight poverty.

Governmental Programs and Policies

The conclusion of the Third National Report on the Millennium Development Goals in Syria 2010 links the failure to reduce poverty to the outcomes of policies pursued by the Syrian government since 2000. During this time numerous anti-poverty projects were launched in the country. From the official perspective, these plans and projects were conducted on two levels, the first being projects of a general character targeting society as a whole, and the second being sector-related projects targeting specific groups within society.

1- General Governmental Anti-Poverty Programmes

The National Anti-Unemployment Programme was the first and most significant of the governmental projects to fight poverty in Syria during the past decade. Its basic features were outlined in Law No. 71 of 2001 on the National Anti-Unemployment Programme, creating the General Commission for the National Anti-Unemployment Programme, with a renewable term of five years. According to the National Anti-Unemployment Programme, the government allocated the sum of SYP 50 billion to be spent during the term of the project, which was specified as five years.⁽¹⁰⁾

(10) To read about the Commission's vision, and its view of the issue of fighting poverty, See: Abd-Alrahman Taychouri. Syria's Anti-Unemployment Commission, and its Required Economic and Developmental Role. Syria News,

The government then launched the tenth five year plan of 2005-2010. This was in effect a comprehensive plan, one of the fundamental aims of which was to combat poverty by means of the process of economic and social development.⁽¹¹⁾ During the term of this plan the National Programme to Limit Poverty in Syria was launched in early 2008. This comprised a partnership between the Ministry of Social Affairs, the General Federation of Trade Unions and the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Industry for the years 2008-2010. The aim was to limit poverty in Syria by allowing the Ministry and the two other organisations to improve the Syrian labour market mainly by such means as increasing job opportunities through a national employment strategy, and by reforming employment services for the unemployed in accordance with international labour standards. This is in addition to reinforcing social protection by improving the ability of the government and social partners to develop social security policy and management systems, expanding access to social protection for the entire workforce and their families, including those working in the unregulated sector that represents an important part of Syria's total workforce.

The Third National Report on the Millennium Development Goals in Syria 2010, prepared in cooperation with the United Nations, considers that poverty in Syria has not declined compared with previous years

In 2009 the General Commission for Employment and Project Development in Syria (which replaced the Anti-Unemployment Commission in 2007) took the procedural initiative of signing agreements with a number of banks operating in Syria to give financing to small and medium-sized projects for those wishing to benefit from the Commission's services. The Commission selected and prepared the entrepreneurs hoping to benefit from its services, organising training courses suited to the nature of their work, assessing economic viability studies of projects presented by those hoping to start their own small and medium-size businesses, as well as assisting beneficiaries by providing a bank guarantee and scrutinising the economic benefit studies.

The conclusion of the governmental initiatives in fighting poverty at the end of the last decade was the announcement of the creation of the Social Support Fund to provide social, financial assistance to poor families in the various areas of the country. The grand total of the aid amounted to \$250 million (SYP 11.5 billion). The fund took its first steps in this area in February 2011, distributing financial support to around 420,000 low income families through 170 centres across Syria⁽¹²⁾. It is

06/01/2006. http://www.syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=18258

(11) See: Ayham Assad. The Five Year Plan: the Scarecrow and the Hook of the Transition Period. Trade and Business Magazine, 27/10/2009.

(12) Syria Begins Dispensing Financial and Food Aid to Poor Families. Levant News website, 07/02/2011. http://www.levantnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5499:2011-02-07-21-22-45&catid=67:syria-economy&Itemid=56

equally important to link the timing of this assistance program to regional revolutions and the calls for protests in Syria at that time.

2- Sector-Based Programmes

These programmes targeted certain sectors of the population in Syria. Some of the programmes were aimed at Syrians or Palestinian permanent residents (refugees), while others covered geographical areas and some were age or gender-specific social sectors, focussing on women, youth or children. A most recent example of such a programme was inaugurated in July of 2003 by the International Agency for Relief and Employment of Palestinian refugees in Damascus, through which small cash services were offered to Syrian and Palestinian citizens seeking to establish small businesses or grow their existing businesses, with the aim of improving living conditions and reducing poverty.

In the context of these sector-based programmes, in the year 2004 the Healthy Villages programme was launched by the Ministry of Agriculture and Agricultural reform in cooperation with UNICEF. The project aimed to create job opportunities for rural women and to improve standards of living for them and their families, in particular the children. It was part of the larger national scheme of the Healthy Villages programme, which focused on improving social and economic conditions in rural Syria. It has been implemented in five Syrian provinces namely Hassakah, Al-Raqqah, Deir Al-Zour, Aleppo and Idlib. Within this framework around two thousand rural women were trained in the year 2004.⁽¹³⁾

Generally speaking, it can be said that the last decade (2000-2010) witnessed unprecedented focus and policies in Syria on the subject of fighting poverty. This took the form of plans, projects, numerous legislations, research initiatives, and diverse communications and relationships at various levels. These could have achieved a positive advancement in Syria on the front of fighting poverty had there been the appropriate political will to support and approve these policies, and to reinforce their administrative and informational structure. Furthermore, the lack of good governance measures as well as a deeply bureaucratic regime posed important obstacles to the ability of any commission or program to achieve its intended goals.

Civil Society Activities to Eradicate Poverty

Varied motives – some of them social, political or religious – led to a movement on the part of civil and proletarian levels of Syrian society towards involvement in combating poverty and limiting its

(13) See: Soha Mostafa. Charitable Associations Summarise Social Activities. Syria Alghad, 12/02/2009.

manifestations. This trend corresponded with governmental efforts in the area. However, there is a lack of data and statistics regarding the scale and impacts of the activities undertaken by society to fight poverty, which makes it impossible to form a comparison of the eventual outcomes of official and societal anti-poverty efforts in Syria. Yet estimates suggest that society's efforts to combat poverty have had significant and important results. Syrian society's efforts can be listed in two categories, the first being the activities by private and civil society organisations, and the second being grass-roots activities.

1- Civil and private society activities

Syrian society has for decades made tangible efforts to fight poverty by means of assisting poor people and those in need in various areas. Many private and civil organisations and associations emerged during the last decade, and many grass-roots activities formed with the aim of assisting society to overcome poverty. In this context, associations were founded on the basis of the Ottoman Associations Law,⁽¹⁴⁾ which was enacted into Syrian law in the 1960's.

Based on what was known as the Law of Associations and its amendments, civil and private associations operating in Syria under Ministry of Social Affairs license amounted to a total of 1,236 associations, of which 541 were concerned with charitable works by 2007. The remaining associations were distributed between a variety of activities; some were of a social nature, some were interested in culture, while others focussed on the environment, health and other societal concerns.⁽¹⁵⁾

Civil and private associations operating in Syria under Ministry of Social Affairs license amounted to a total of 1,236 associations, of which 541 were concerned with charitable works by 2007

Civil Associations Focussing on Development and the Fight against Poverty

There are of course a number of Syrian associations which focus on economic development and the fight against poverty. Governmental interest in associations of this kind emerged in order to benefit from existing regional and international capabilities. A number were founded by personalities closely linked to the regime, among them Mrs. Asma Assad, wife of the President. Of these associations, three were most closely connected with development and combating poverty, the Fund for Rural Development of Syria (FIRDOS), the Mawrad Institution for the Advancement and Activation of the Role of Women in Economic and Social Development, and the Syrian Young Entrepreneurs Association (SYEA).

(14) See: Soha Mostafa. Charitable Associations Summarise Social Activities. Syria Alghad, 12/02/2009.

(15) See: Soha Mostafa. Charitable Associations Summarise Social Activities. Syria Alghad, 12/02/2009.

Charitable Associations

Charitable associations, like those above, are located in city centres, owing to the greater population. The main portion is located in the city of Damascus and Damascus' Countryside, where there are 261 charitable associations. They cover around a third of the Syrian population: Damascus and the surrounding area has close to seven million people⁽¹⁶⁾. This large number of geographically spread associations do not all operate to the same level in their charitable activities, but some of the associations are outstanding in fighting poverty and assisting the poor, among them the Saving Grace association in Damascus and the Al-Birr Social Services Association in Homs⁽¹⁷⁾.

2- Grass-Roots Popular Activities to Combat Poverty and Assist the Poor

There are a variety of motivations -primarily connected with social and religious perspectives- behind grass-roots activities, two of the most significant experiences are the family associations and the monthly collection associations. The common denominator in the operation of associations of this type is that it is customary, in the sense that the groups are not founded in accordance with the law, and they have no set system other than the aims and method of operation accepted by the members.

Family associations are based on agreement between family members, and their activities do not have a set scope. Their membership can include parents, children, grandchildren, brothers and sisters, and generally the head of the family undertakes the management of the association, retaining its funds and register, in accordance with the aims agreed upon by the participants. With regards to the monthly collection associations, these are formed between neighbours, relatives or work colleagues. Their fundamental aim is to amass a certain level of capital, and disburse it periodically without any deductions or interest to the members of the association.⁽¹⁸⁾

(16) See: Soha Mostafa. Charitable Associations Summarise Social Activities. 'Ain Souria, 12/02/2009.

(17) See the directory of associations in Syria at <http://www.fjrna.com/?cat=12>

(18) See: Hisham Adraa. Monthly Financial Associations: A Widespread Social Phenomenon in Syria. Asharq Al-Awsat (London), 30/01/2011.

Four: General Outcomes of the Official Anti-Poverty Policies

The official policy in the area of combating poverty targeted either poor Syrians in all sectors and regions, or poor Syrians of specific sectors or groups, or particular geographic areas. The outcomes of these policies expectedly has been diverse from the point of view of their effects, but it can be said that no fundamental achievement -involving a decline in poverty rates- has been achieved even though some of its manifestations declined according to Member of Parliament and economist Abdullah Al-Dardari who stated that "the income of the poor is improving."⁽¹⁹⁾

It follows from the above summary that it is necessary to establish the causes which gave rise to the failure to achieve the aims of the governmental plans in combating poverty. These factors can be found in two areas: general causes relating to Syrian policy of combating poverty, and specific causes pertaining to each individual project aiming to fight or reduce poverty.

The most important of the general causes hindering Syria's economic and social development objectives lies in the transitional stage through which the country is passing. It has lived throughout four decades of a closed economy with the total control by the state of almost all aspects of economic activities to a more recent stage when the state began transitional steps towards the liberation of the economy. This liberalisation has been clouded by confusion causing Syrian officials to herald a movement towards the social market economy, without having any specific meaning in practical terms.

The second general cause is that the Syrian policy on liberalisation is not inclined favourably for the poor. Regardless of the numerous comments and statements made by Syrian officials, the policies have led to a collapse in the circumstances of the poor over the past ten years, as revealed by official statistics and figures.

The third reason for the government's failure to combat poverty lies in corruption penetrating all levels of state administration. This resulted in plans and projects being governed more according to the interests of corrupt lobbyists than to the interests of publicised official state policy.

(19) Al-Dardari: The Rich in Syria are Getting Richer and the Income of the Poor is Improving. Syria News, 08/03/2008. http://www.syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=72659

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The National Anti-Unemployment Programme was the first large state-run project to combat poverty in Syria in the last decade. The General Anti-Unemployment Commission was tasked to studying, financing and implementing production and service sector activities of almost all aspects of the Syrian work force. The Commission was supposed to provide 440,000 job opportunities in five years and was budgeted with SYP 50 billion. According to an economic researcher, the anti-unemployment project was a hostage to three conditions. There was the random nature of the overall policy, the erratic nature of policies for the supervision of courses, and the lack of financial auditing experience. This forced structural and administrative alterations to be made to the project.⁽²⁰⁾

The tenth five year plan's share of success in the fight against poverty was no better than that of the anti-unemployment project. As Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Al-Dardari, stated: "The rich in Syria are getting richer and the income of the poor is improving, although the phenomenon of the disparity between the classes has become more prominent."⁽²¹⁾ One of the analyses showed that it could not lead to a reduction in poverty, given the increasing rates of inflation which were reducing citizens' purchasing power and pushing people towards the poverty line.⁽²²⁾ Although it is too early to pass judgment regarding the outcomes of the Social Support Fund project, which began in early 2011⁽²³⁾, it can nonetheless be said, that the result of the Fund's efforts will suffer the same fate as the tenth five year plan.

The last ten years have witnessed numerous programmes to combat poverty, both on the general and sector levels. These projects have had access to material technical means, as well as local and international institutions. Yet the overall result failed to have the same support from Syrian officials concerned with poverty, demonstrated firstly by the example of the abolition of the Anti-Unemployment Commission and its replacement with the General Commission for Employment and Project Development, which shifted the policy away from the poorest Syrians towards the less

(20) See Dr. Osama Kadi. He asks the First Lady: So Why has the Anti-Unemployment Commission Closed? All 4 Syria. 05/06/2010. <http://www.annidaa.org/modules/news/article.php?storyid=5310>

(21) Al-Dardari: The Rich in Syria are Getting Richer and the Income of the Poor is Improving. Syria News, 08/03/2008. http://www.syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=72659

(22) What is Needed is a Package of Policies: If the Government Does not Favour the Poor... They will Represent 40% of the Population in 2015. Syria Steps, 19/08/2010. <http://www.syriasteps.com/?d=127&id=55145>

(23) See: Lorka Khayzuran. Director of the Social Support Fund: The Fund will Support the Poorest, Rather than the Ordinary Citizen. Syria News, 20/02/2011.

poor.⁽²⁴⁾ The government also pursued policies which hampered the poor, such as increasing taxes and removing support for primary materials such as fuel⁽²⁵⁾. Lastly, the government's disregard of the black market, which has burdened both the state and society as it ferments corruption and the plundering of public funds⁽²⁶⁾. There has been one positive outcome produced by the fight on poverty: the public has become more aware that poverty in Syria is a fundamental challenge to society.

Political Outcomes

The official anti-poverty policies has not only failed, but served to deepen the phenomenon further as the data reveals. However, the most serious element of the issue is that these failures led to a very deep resentment of the Syrian people to their government. Even if the government could manage a complete rethinking on how to confront poverty, the question that arises is do they have the political will necessary to fight poverty? In order to transform official anti-poverty policy, a direct engagement with the groups targeted is necessary. However, the regime at the moment seems in no mood to engage with those protesting in the streets, among many things, the state of poverty in Syria today. It is impossible to achieve serious, forceful outcomes in fighting poverty while the government is using live ammunition from tanks and snipers to target the poor!

There is no doubt that the continued failure of anti-poverty policies to close the gap between rich and poor and the marginalisation of social groups is a main factor that has led to the outbreak of popular uprisings that we are currently witnessing. These uprisings are a direct threat to the existing regime and will pose a similar threat to whatever form of government exists in the longer term.

Social Outcomes

There is no doubt that failure of the anti-poverty policies on the social front were no less harmful than on the political front. As the inequalities within society intensified (disparities between rich and poor, between men and women and between adults and children), people were led not only to a sense of resentment but also desperation and the belief that their sole option was to take to the streets. Every social phenomenon which can have an impact of the worst kind on society, from child labour (which affects 650,000 children), to truancy from school to the point of absenteeism, to family and domestic and sexual violence, to declining health circumstances and to the consumption of alcoholic drinks and narcotic substances, are all blamed directly on the regime in the minds of the people. After the present protest movement concludes (in whatever form the

(24) Dr. Osama Kadi. He Asks the First Lady: So Why Has the Anti-Unemployment Commission Closed? All 4 Syria, 05/06/2010. Annidaa, the website of the Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change.

(25) Ibrahim Misk. Why has Poverty Not Decreased, and Why has the Tenth Five Year Plan Failed? Syria News, 24/01/2011.

(26) Ibid.. George Kadr, Elias Najmeh. The Shadow Economy: Over \$11 Billion Pouring into the Pockets of the Corrupt. Syria News, 05/06/2005.

future Syrian state takes), the re-establishment of social cohesion will take a long time. There will be immediate policy fixes needed alongside with long term and deep reforms in the fundamental principles of many anti-poverty and anti-unemployment policies and their social perceptions.

One of the most pressing outcomes of the failure of anti-poverty policies has been the increase of unemployment, which is estimated to have reached 14% before the latest protests. This forced Syrians, especially young people, to migrate in search of better opportunities to make a living or in some cases to be underemployed in professions which conflict with the academic and vocational experience they have attained. Some of these jobs may also conflict with the people's values. Examples of such activities include the black-market trading, smuggling or trading in human organs.⁽²⁷⁾

Whenever there is a failure to address poverty in a society, it is those segments of society that are least able to protect themselves that suffer the most. This seems to be especially true of women in Syria, where a sizable minority are subjected to violence; studies show that one in every three Syrian women is subjected to domestic violence, that is "practised under frameworks which are socially accepted". Violence against women may go as far as murder, as in honour crimes for example, the instance of which is highest in Syria among the Arab states.⁽²⁸⁾

Needless to say, whatever the outcome of the present situation, any future Syrian government will need to make a concerted effort to combat poverty in order to ensure that the lower classes of Syrian society can escape from that which they are suffering.

Cultural Outcomes

Perhaps the cultural outcomes of the failure of poverty policy in Syria have had the greatest impact on the lives of Syrians. Poverty makes poor environments fertile ground for superficial myth. There is no doubt that the failure of official anti-poverty policies has exacerbated the declining rates and level of education as a result of school absenteeism, the failure to enrol girls in schools and the collapsing state of government schools, particularly in environments of poverty including remote villages and marginal areas.

(27) See: Amer Matar. New Professions in Syrian Society... More than 60 New Professions have Entered the Market. Aliqtisadi Magazine (Damascus), 08/02/2009.

(28) See the study: One in Every Three Syrian Women is Subjected to Physical Violence by her Family. http://www.syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=122246

Five: Proposals and Recommendations

It is no coincidence that millions of people have taken to the streets to vent their anger in North Africa and the Middle East and now in Syria while the world is in the middle of the worst economic downturn in more than 75 years. This period, punctuated by high unemployment and spiralling costs, has forced the issue of poverty to the top of the political agenda. Their anger is clearly directed at their various governments, but not solely for their failure to manage this economic crisis, but also because of decades of economic disparity and outright poverty in their countries.

The warning signs of the huge increase in population that was quickly coming of age has long been there pressuring governments in the region to undertake fundamental political and economic reforms. The scale of this population surge meant that no government in the region would be able to face the coming demands unless that state would recognise that private enterprise (free of state sponsorship) and civil society's involvement were also needed in creating the needed development – achieving high growth rates of around ten per cent-, to the fair distribution of income and the rooting out of corruption. Several of those governments failed to heed the signs and have been relegated to the scrapheap of history, more may follow. Future governments should be wary, their people disposed themselves of governments that did not serve in their interests, and they will only be more determined next time to rid themselves of a government that fails to meet their expectations.

The proposals and recommendations in this section outline a vision for policies to fight poverty in Syria. For any of these policies to work, they must be expended in partnership between the government, civil society and private sector organisations. These recommendations can only work given a comprehensive change of fundamental governance standards as practiced in society.

1- General Partnership-Oriented Proposals

- A Syrian strategy for development and combating poverty must be announced, and committed to publicly. These shall include among other things the redistribution of wealth; the offering of urgent assistance to those in poverty, combating corruption and bribery, inequality of opportunity and discrimination against women.
- The state and society must work together in order to establish all of the legal, administrative and regulatory frameworks required to combat poverty.

- A State-Society alliance commission must be established, to develop partnerships between government and society to implement projects, rally efforts to benefit from regional and international cooperation to tackle poverty, promote a fair commercial system; eliminate the state's debts, and reduce interest incurred on those loans. The cooperation must extend to staging publicity campaigns regarding poverty to rally the broadest sectors of the population to combat the phenomenon.

2- Government-Related Proposals

- Complete revamping of state institutions according to the principles of good governance, transparency and accountability to the public. The image of a fair and equitable state policy need to be emphasized and established in the minds of the population.
- A cohesive governmental body with overall authority to administer various aspects of the development process at the state level. A development strategy must include not only economic development but also human development.
- Mechanisms must be developed for oversight of public investments to ensure its effectiveness.
- There must be a focus on unemployment, encouraging businesses to create jobs by offering incentives and lessening the obstacles to investing, especially in small and medium size businesses and industries.
- Advanced agricultural programmes must be activated, together with a focus on tackling the negative effects on farmers of the liberation of prices.
- There must be a focus on the labour market institutions and the unregulated sector, given the significant role they play in employing the poor.
- Priority in revenues must be granted to indirect taxes and reforming public sector institutions.
- Revamping those institutions required for redistributing support and studying the effects of previous policies.
- Attention must be paid to the regional balance by creating job opportunities and developing the infrastructure in the less developed and poorer regions.
- Long term investment in science education and vocational training of the population is highly needed for sustained development policy.
- A social protection package must be established, focussing directly on reducing poverty, lessening and insuring against unemployment and activating the social and health insurance systems.

3- Proposals for Civil Society and Private Sector Groups

- The rules governing religious endowments and charity organizations must be revamped to be compatible with modern ideas that promote a cohesive and long term social justice outside the scope of the state and ensure its efficiency.
- A broad national framework must be established comprising representatives of political groups and social bodies with the aim of fighting poverty.
- Pressure must be put on government to bring about democratic breakthroughs, permitting a broader role for civil groups and the media in public life.
- Relationships must be reinforced between the groups operating in the field of development and those combating poverty; benefit must be gained from the experience of the various groups in developing local strategies; regional and international partnerships, in particular by means of promoting a fair commercial system.
- Marginalised and poor groups must be supported, and the government pushed to adopt policies which favour these people and the values of fairness and equality.
- The role of oversight of the government's policies must be undertaken both individually and in partnership with the representative institutions of parliament and the local administrative councils.
- A role of consultation and oversight of the government's activities in all areas of government activities must be pursued.
- Efforts must be expended through the media and cultural channels with the aim of revealing the nature of poverty, and its serious impacts on society.
- Coordination must be conducted with the political, economic, social, cultural, and media groups to guarantee their support for the efforts and plans of the private and civil organisations.

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