

Non-contributory social protection through a child and equity lens in Qatar¹

International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG)

The State of Qatar has the highest per capita income in the Persian Gulf. Its territory is a peninsula in the east of Arabia, bordering Saudi Arabia to the south and the Gulf Sea to the east. The country has the highest Human Development Index in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, at 0.856. During the last decade, Qatar experienced rapid and unprecedented population growth, doubling its population from 1.2 million people in 2007 to 2.5 million in 2016. This growth is mostly due to the constant inflow of foreign workers, mostly male and lesser-skilled professionals attracted by employment opportunities in the infrastructure sector. In 2014, non-Qataris accounted for 88 per cent of the country's population. The proportion of children in the country's population is one of the smallest in the region: only 5 per cent of the population are under 5 years old, and 16 per cent are under 18.

Qatar's National Development Strategy 2011–2016 paved the way for establishing the country's first national relative poverty line. According to the 2012–2013 Household Expenditure and Income Survey (HEIS), 6.4 per cent of Qatari households are considered to have a low income (relatively poor). Families headed by divorced women and women with several children (five or more) are more likely to be among low-income Qatari households (12.1 and 16.2 per cent, respectively). In 2012–2013, 15 per cent of Qatari children lived in relatively poor households. Limited data are available for the non-Qatari population. According to official estimates, non-Qatari households receive, on average, a quarter of the monthly income of Qatari households.

Qatar's social protection system offers different types of universal subsidies for food, energy and water for Qatari nationals. Ration Cards include food products (cooking oil, milk, sugar etc.) as well as energy and water subsidies. Much like other oil exporters in the Gulf region, the country has taken important steps towards reforming its subsidies system. Qatar Vision 2030 revealed the government's plans to reduce water, energy and fuel subsidies and redirect resources to the social sector, mainly education and health care. Since 2011, fuel prices have been readjusted, and energy price subsidies dropped from 5.1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2013 to 3.8 per cent in 2016.

The social protection system also comprises a social insurance system that offers pensions to Qatari citizens working in the public sector and to some categories in the private sector, and a set of non-contributory programmes is provided by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs under the 1995 Social Insurance Law. For instance,

social insurance benefits are provided to families in need without sufficient income and certain vulnerable groups, especially widows, divorcees, people with disabilities, elderly people, orphans, families of prisoners and abandoned wives. For some categories, the benefit increases according to the number of household members, which is a positive child-sensitive feature. In 2014, benefit levels were readjusted, including higher benefits for orphans and children. Both non-contributory and contributory systems exclude non-Qatari families. Moreover, coverage levels are low, reaching only 4 per cent of Qatari families for pensions and 1 per cent for other social protection schemes. Primary health care centres offer services free of charge to all children and mothers, and a health card is issued to every newborn baby.

Another key component of social protection in Qatar is the Zakat Fund contributions that started in 1994. The Fund is managed by Qatar's public authorities through the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs and supports low-income families with cash and in-kind transfers. Additionally, part of the Fund's contributions is directed to Official Development Assistance (ODA) through civil society organisations providing aid to African and Asian countries. A school feeding programme is also available under the National Nutrition Programme, reaching 57,000 children in 2011.

Social protection is at the core of Qatar Vision 2030. While social service provision is considered a crucial mechanism to promote human development, challenges remain to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of Qatar's social assistance system, and a reliance on ad hoc programmes compromises the development of longer-term plans to reduce poverty. Children in low-income households remain at risk of suffering more from poverty and deprivation, especially those belonging to larger families. The situation of non-Qatari low-skilled workers and their families should be a matter of primary attention, as these segments of the population are deprived of access to Qatar's social security and social assistance systems and are, therefore, more prone to vulnerability at different stages of their lives.

Note:

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

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