Arab Reform Initiative

Blog, 31 January 2022

Rethinking our understanding of vulnerability under the pandemic

Farah Al Shami



Poor employment conditions for workers in Jordan's agricultural sector. ILO via Flickr

One of the challenges facing organisations trying to assess the Covid-19 pandemic's socio-economic impact on vulnerable social groups is how to understand vulnerability in a complex and data-poor context. As part of our efforts at the Arab Hub for Social Protection from COVID, we found that vulnerability has been expressing itself in different ways that are not necessarily being captured by existing indicators. Rethinking the definition and measures of vulnerability is therefore important for our struggle for social justice to be fruitful.

New forms of vulnerability

The typical approach to understanding vulnerability only captures those "seen" or "known" as vulnerable by researchers, activists, policy makers and international actors. These social groups mainly include poor households, as defined by metrics like the national poverty line, and those categorised as informal workers, people with disabilities, children, youth, the elderly, migrants, and women. Covid-19 has exacerbated poverty, inequality and informality, and widened the gap between these groups and the rest of society.

Furthermore, the pandemic has

produced new forms of vulnerability and has shed the light on vulnerabilities that were unperceived before. For instance, urban populations have become more vulnerable compared to their rural counterparts, since they live in densely populated areas where the virus can circulate more easily and where there is less space to confine. People living in slums and informal settlements, which are also unsanitary environments, are at an even higher disadvantage. Urban populations are more exposed to air pollution as well, which makes them more susceptible to respiratory diseases such as Covid-19.

The pandemic and its policy responses have had a different impact on individuals that belong to the same "group". For example, in some contexts such as Egypt, some key decisions aimed at supporting women through the pandemic were restricted to public

sector employees and excluded the private sector. Thus, women working in the private sector **– usually perceived as being better off – were more affected by the crisis than those working in the**

Cairo's fish market, Egypt (pre-pandemic). Image: WorldFish via Flickr

Other nascent forms of vulnerability include people working in the formal sector in particular contexts in the global South, who were sometimes worse hit by the pandemic than informal workers, especially during lockdowns. Reasons for this include informal workers having more mobility and freedom to do business, earn income and circumvent curfews away from State and employer restrictions. There are also vulnerabilities linked to institutional infrastructures. For instance, health workers and education staff, among other workers in essential services, are directly exposed to Covid-19-related risks and have no means to address these. On top of these are paid care workers such as migrant domestic workers and medical professions (particularly nurses) where women are at the bottom of the employment

pyramid.

Rethinking measures of vulnerability

These facets of vulnerability are hard to measure, with very few indicators set to quantify them. They are hard to list or classify as they cut across social categories in complex ways. They also vary from context to context, sometimes within the same country, and they change across time with changing circumstances. Moreover, they debunk one of the poor common practices in development research that treats typical social groups (e.g., informal workers or the poor) as homogenous and cohesive groups.

We need an additional layer of analysis that focuses on vulnerability issues in addition to vulnerable social groups or categories. This would allow to capture the heterogeneity and the intersectionalities that lead to a multiplied or multilayered vulnerability for certain groups. It is about time to get inspired by the concepts of multidimensional poverty **and** multidimensional inequality**, and start talking about multidimensional vulnerability. It is only when the multiple vulnerabilities characterising a certain social group, including intangible and occasional vulnerabilities, are addressed that**

Poor employment conditions for workers in Jordan's agricultural sector. Image: ILO via Flickr **One of the major challenges to this approach is the lack of adequate and centralised data in the Arab region, and more particularly the lack of data that is disaggregated by social group (e.g., by gender, age group, social class, or different social conditions). Despite this, we must adopt a more vulnerability sensitive approach where all forms of vulnerability and their intersectionalities are taken into account. More efforts should be exerted by researchers and human rights advocates to collect the data necessary to understand the differential impact of any shock, including Covid-19, from the different scattered and sometimes uncommon sources available.**

Potential solutions include referring to quantitative and/or qualitative data from others' research and advocacy efforts; and resorting to alternative or complementary research methods to fill any gaps and triangulate data. Another way forward includes reaching out to different constituencies, grassroots collectives and activist groups to bring representatives of these vulnerable social segments, give them a voice, and have them validate our research findings with their own stories, experiences and perceptions. The more disaggregated research findings are, the more possible and stronger the impact is.

This attempt should be complemented by contesting the top-down and opaque approach to Covid-19 responses, which mirrors to a large extent the pre-Covid-19 non-inclusive policy space. The Arab social contracts and governance systems were already fragile prior to Covid-19, which abated the level of trust in the governments and led to less collaboration between citizens and decision makers. Response planners should therefore engage with the different social groups, especially the vulnerable ones, to understand the realities and challenges imposed by the pandemic.

Promoting social justice amid Covid-19 in the Arab region

In our project, we are trying to facilitate this cooperation by organising national multi-stakeholder dialogues, where these different vulnerable groups are represented, all while accommodating for the context specificities of the four national settings addressed by the project (Tunisia, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan). In the national contexts where the space for civil society organisations is narrow and it is counter-productive for the different stakeholders to be brought together on the same table, we are adopting the 'relay approach' whereby a separate dialogue is organised for each type of stakeholders and the cumulative outcome documents of these dialogues are subsequently presented from dialogue to the other, in order to be reflected and built on.

The Arab Hub for Social Protection from COVID **aims to promote serious State interventions and inclusive social protection schemes by looking at vulnerability as it is experienced and not as traditionally perceived, and by overcoming the stated challenges to this approach. This is how we aim to combat the socio-economic repercussions of the pandemic. This is also how we seek to advocate for the desired change in the Arab development paradigms, more generally, despite the fragmented Arab political landscapes that settle for ad hoc policies and short-term measures as quick fixes, thus further producing marginalisation and vulnerabilities. So long that a certain vulnerable group is not well identified, it will be missing from welfare policies and more particularly from social protection programmes.**

Arab Reform Initiative

About the author



Farah Al Shami

Farah Al Shami is a policy and development economist. She is currently a Senior Fellow at the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), leading ARI's social protection program. She has more than eight years of experience, working with CSOs, academic institutes, and UN entities on advancing public policy reforms in the Arab region from a human rights-based perspective.

Her areas of expertise include conducting, managing and editing research, coordinating advocacy efforts at national, regional and international platforms, facilitating professional consortia/communities, and leading capacity-building programs.

Her research spans the disciplines of economic development, political economy and political sociology. It covers topics like social policy, tax justice, informality, inequality, gender justice, international financial institutions, youth trajectories (for livelihoods, political participation, civic engagement and peacebuilding) in conflict settings, public-private partnerships, the 2030 development agenda, transnational social movements, and governance and civil society.

Prior to working at ARI, Ms. Al Shami was a Program Officer and Researcher at the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA), and the Asian Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut (AUB).

She is Fulbright alumna, holding a Master's degree in Policy Economics and Economic Development from Williams College (MA-USA). She also holds a Master's Degree in Economics from AUB and a Bachelor of Science in Economics from the Lebanese American University (LAU).

About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

arab-reform.net

contact@arab-reform.net

© 2022 by the Arab Reform Initiative.
To view a copy of this licence, click here