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**A New Framing of social Policies:  
Why, What and How?**

**By Hoda Rashad<sup>1</sup>**

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This issue paper argues for the need for governance and public policy reforms that are anchored on well-being equity, and that adopt fairness in the social patterns of well-being as a measure of development and social success.

Well-being equity is defined as: “The absence of systematic, unnecessary and preventable differences in well-being across groups in society classified according to a social stratum”. The definition recognizes that not all social differences in well-being are inequitable. The equity definition is confined to differences that are shaped by causes that are not distributed fairly across social groups. A clear example of inequity is a distribution of well-being that shows systematic differences across geographic or ethnic classifications. Such differences do not lend themselves easily to explanations of generic geographic or ethnic differences. Such differences are more readily explained by differential allocations of opportunities by geographic areas, or differentiated treatment by ethnic compositions.

The adoption of fairness in the social patterns of well-being as a measure of development and social success relates to the incorporation of the inclusiveness concept as a criterion for development. A country that suffers from unfair differences in well-being by social groups is now no longer foreseen as developed. Furthermore, these unfair systematic differences signal a non-cohesive and mal-functioning society. It manifests failures on the social fronts.

The justification for the governance and public policy reforms draws on a growing appreciation of the centrality of the “well-being Equity” paradigm in international development thinking and on a recognition of the invisibility of this paradigm in the Arab region and the price paid by such invisibility. A more detailed explanation for this justification is provided in the first part of this issue paper.

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The second part discusses the policies and actions that need to be adopted. The third touches on pre-requisites and enablers for the proposed reforms.

This issue paper is meant to start a debate on the future of social policies, and to serve as the basis for future research and publications by the working group.

## **I. The rationale for policy reforms: The why?**

### The centrality of “well-being” in the international development thinking

The internationally adopted vision for development places people’s well-being at the center and acknowledges their aspirations for dignity and human rights. Such a vision pledges to ‘leaving no one behind’.

This lofty vision was translated, through a participatory process, into a set sustainable development goals (SDGs 2030)<sup>1</sup>.

The key elements that speak to such a development vision in the SDGs are:

- The wide spectrum of goals that are introduced as anchors for people’s well-being and for the realization of their human rights. These range from basic human rights’ goals related to alleviation of the burden of vulnerability (poverty, disease, harsh living conditions,.) to broader ones for provision of empowering opportunities (employment, education, health, decent livelihoods,).
- Incorporating good governance, and social inclusiveness as key components of these development goals.
- The introduction of a standalone goal (SDG 10) as a reflection of the importance of addressing inequalities and ‘leaving no one behind’.

These elements and their related goals are not conceptually separated from each other. Their integration and self-reinforcement are principles that have been emphasized.

It should be noted however, that the SDGs discourse did not manage to differentiate between goals that are foundational goals and those that are impact goals. There is now an emerging well-being equity paradigm and a growing call for placing the goal of health and well-being (SDG 3) as an end impact goal for all the other SDG goals. The emerging paradigm moves health and well-being equity from just a sectoral public health challenge to become a whole of government responsibility.

The 'well-being Equity' paradigm entails three interconnected and self-reinforcing features:

1) Pushing health and well-being to the forefront.

The underpinning of the movement of health and well-being from just one of the goals to becoming an end goal can be traced back to Aristotle, who noted that: Wealth is not the good we are seeking, it is useful only in as much as it allows the acquisition of another goal.

More recently, this move was adequately articulated in the United Nation General Assembly resolution (July 2011)<sup>2</sup> which recognized well-being as the end objective of all policies, and invited countries to measure the happiness of their people and to use this to help guide public policies.

The same move underlies the many calls for Health in All Policies (HiAP), which:

“Places responsibility for action on health and health equity at the highest level of government and ensures its coherent consideration across all policies”.<sup>3</sup> It should be clarified that the concept of health in HiAP, is synonymous to well-being. It goes beyond the absence of ill health to the realization of social and psychological good health and satisfaction of potentials.

2- Embracing fairness as central to well-being and cohesive societies

Fairness is now fully recognized as a human aspiration that shapes individual well-being. A number of studies argued that unfairness (and even the perception of unfairness) is detrimental to human well-being. A recent study provided an evidence based finding that "Non- material factors such as social support, freedoms, and fairness may play a bigger role than money in future well-being".<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, there is now a growing appreciation in the development field of the price borne by social injustices (unequal opportunities and high burden of sufferings). Such injustices break the very fabric of a cohesive society, lead to marginalized and disgruntled social groups, and threaten the security of nations:

"From Arab youth clamoring for better job opportunities and Chilean students protesting for university education accessible to all, to Occupy Wall Street, popular demonstrations of frustration with status quo demand that governments and international organizations pay more attention to equity, social exclusion, and democracy".<sup>5</sup>

### 3- Differentiating between inequality and inequity

The recent flurry of publications on inequality is reflecting the concern with the growing levels of inequalities and their detrimental impacts. Such a concern, however, does not always differentiate between inequalities and inequities.

Inequalities are differences in well-being that are not linked to their underlying causes. The concern with inequalities is driven by a moral and a human right rationale and is expressed in targeting the most disadvantaged. Inequities are differences that are caused by unfair root causes that manifest themselves in social compositions and societal arrangements that produce, “systematic patterns of well-being inequalities that are preventable and unjust”.<sup>3</sup>

The equity framing crystalizes the difference between a social determinants approach to well-being and a social justice approach to well-being equity.

The social determinants approach to well-being recognizes that well-being is determined by social conditions. Indeed, poor social conditions, such as low levels of education and economic status, are closely linked to health and well-being status. Addressing inequalities in well-being is hence challenged by the limitations of existing resources to allow improvement of socio-economic conditions. The adopted approach mainly emphasizes changing detrimental behaviours that are precipitated by such conditions and may include attempts to improve few aspects of the social conditions of specific groups.

The social justice approach traces the denial of well-being to the unfairness of forces producing social conditions. The social justice approach is not about increasing the size of resources or targeting the social conditions of the most disadvantaged. The social justice approach is about transforming social stratification in society through the fair allocation and distribution of: resources, power, and voice.

Examples of the implementation of this approach include that public services and goods, (water and sanitation, education and health, infrastructure,.) are fairly availed to different social groups. The approach also requires that all social groups have fair opportunities, representations and leverage in all matters pertaining to their well-being. Exclusion of women from public life, of youth from political participation, or of the disabled from voicing their needs are clear infringements on the fair distribution of power and voice.

The social justice approach requires that the pledge for ‘leaving no one behind’ is anchored on a fairness lens and not just a humanitarian rationale for alleviating the very high burden of sufferings, the latter is always welcome but is not enough.

In brief, the social determinants approach links the level of socio-economic development to well-being. The limitations of resources are readily introduced to explain the persisting challenges on the health front. In contrast, the social justice approach links the mal-distribution of resources to the extra sufferings across social groups. The unfairness of the distribution of opportunities for health is the explanatory determinants of the unnecessary and preventable unequal extra burden of health challenges.

The movement from inequality to inequity underlies the statement: “Unfair policies, poor social arrangements and bad politics are killing people at a wide scale”.<sup>3</sup>

The equity framing introduces an urgency and an ethical imperative for addressing inequalities. It also moves adopted policies from their confinement to targeting the disadvantage towards the provision of fair transformative opportunities that influence the social composition and arrangements leading to fairer distribution of well-being. The transformative opportunities, as referred to earlier, are not just material ones but include non-material ones shaping well-being. Freedoms, power, voice, social support are but examples of well-being determinants that require fair distribution.

### The invisibility of ‘Well-being Equity’ paradigm in the Arab region

The calls for freedom, social justice and human dignity that resonated within the Arab region have been heard loud and clear, but, as of yet, have not been reflected in a new development paradigm.

The dominating development paradigm emphasizes economic growth and access to services. Social justice in this paradigm is very narrowly translated in terms of provision of minimum basic rights and alleviation of sufferings of the most disadvantaged.

What is missing in this picture is a grounding of fairness on a foundation of non-discrimination and equal opportunities regardless of sex, religion, ethnic or social background. These opportunities cannot be limited to material resources and services. They need to incorporate non-

material forces such as freedoms, participation, and inclusiveness. The grounding of fairness in these opportunities implies a systematic concern and effective actions to ensure that such opportunities are distributed equally across social groups.

A recent regional report on “Reviewing the implementation of the 2013 Cairo declaration” commended the many efforts in the Arab region to alleviate poverty and vulnerability, particularly in terms of using an interpretation of poverty that goes beyond monetary deprivation and recognizing the importance of empowerment and investment in contextual conditions.<sup>6</sup> However, the same report noted that “The impact of such endeavours can be sustained and strengthened through institutionalizing an approach that reaches further than transfers of benefits and targeting disadvantaged groups. Such an approach needs to be fully aware of the importance of a fair distribution of resources and transformative opportunities. Switching from a charity to a social justice perspective, aiming to address issues of social stratification remains a challenge. Such engagement would ensure that the deprivation and disadvantage in society is not clustered by geographic residence, ethnic background, gender or any other social classification. A people-centred human poverty approach would help in translating economic growth into social returns”.<sup>6</sup>

Improvements in the evidence base linking unfairness to the inequality distribution of well-being in the Arab region can greatly support advocacy efforts. Another recent regional study, focussing on the distribution of ill well-being (measured by the denial of sexual and reproductive health (SRH), documented a high degree of inequality in Arab countries.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, this study traced the inequalities in well-being to the invisibility of fairness as a pillar of good governance and to the weak mainstreaming of equity in public policies.

There are many pieces of evidence to demonstrate that well-being equity is not pursued in the Arab region as a sign of good governance and of social success. Well-being equity is not even pursued as a performance measure of sectoral social public policies. Mainstreaming of fairness as a founding principle is glaringly absent.

The fact that there is a knowledge vacuum on the distribution of well-being, the non-existence of structures, systems, and processes for monitoring fairness and for accountability are few examples of the invisibility of the equity paradigm.

The price of these shortcomings is not just unfair denial of health and well-being among many social groups. The price of inequities signals increased polarization, marginalization and is conducive to societal unrests and the unsustainability of progress.

Indeed, the recent and current political developments in the Arab region attest to the ramifications of the many dimensions of inequities. A development model that does not fully embrace the equity lens is openly exposed to external and internal threats. The disempowerment and unfair exclusion of social groups pave the way to the concentration of power and authority within a selected few and is conducive to civil unrests.

## **II. Proposed policies and actions: The what?**

A new equity framing is very much needed to meet the aspirations of the Arab people.<sup>8</sup> This framing needs to be mainstreamed into the six following domains, that are shaping the societies' ability to (re)distribute material resources among their members: “(1) governance in the broadest sense with particular emphasis on accountability/ transparency and participation of the different stakeholders in the society; (2) macroeconomic policy, including fiscal, monetary, balance of payments and trade policies and underlying labor market structures; (3) social policies affecting factors of social welfare; (4) relevant public policy such as education, medical care, water and sanitation; (5) culture and societal values; and (6) epidemiological conditions”.<sup>9</sup>

The definition of social policies in the previous six domains confines it to the domain of social welfare. Other more widely used definition is that social policies are those performed by social sectors (described by the domains numbered 3,4 and 5 in the above division). In this issue paper, we adopt a different and much broader definition of social policies. Social policies are defined here as: “Policies that are concerned with the fairness and distribution of equal opportunities across social groups and that lend themselves to the mainstreaming of an equity lens”. The six domains described earlier are components of social policies whenever they seek to adopt the equity lens and to explicitly recognize and uphold their responsibility for the well-being goal.

The proposed policy reforms require the adoption of sectoral-based, as well as governance and whole of government based policies and actions.

A recent policy brief report on “Reproductive health equity in the Arab region” focussing on one dimension of ill health, details the specific role of health sector, other social sectors, as well as the

research and non-state actors.<sup>10</sup> The whole of government recommendations of this brief, adapted to cover well-being, include:

- Articulating well-being inequities as a whole of government responsibility and establishing structures and availing resources to oversee the implementation and accountability of such responsibility.
- Mainstreaming well-being equity in all policies and enforcing impact assessment. For each policy proposed, an assessment is needed to demonstrate that the benefits of this policy is fairly shared among social groups, and that such policy does not negatively impact the well-being of these groups. During implementation, monitoring and impact evaluation need to guard against and address the differentiated impact of such policies.
- Ensuring that intermediary actors and intervening arrangements foster equality among social groups and are responsive to differentiated needs and higher risks of vulnerable groups.
- Ensuring a wide participatory engagement in the identification of well-being challenges and priorities, in formulating policies and measuring their differentiated impact.

### **III. Pre-requisites and enablers: The How**

This section discusses three important shifts that are needed to support the adoption and successful implementation of governance and policy reforms guided by the equity framing.

These shifts are:

- A knowledge and framing shift recognizing the large disparities in well-being among social groups, and linking the disparities to their root causes of bad governance, of denial of social justice, and of ineffective whole of government policies.
- A value and a paradigm shift recognizing the centrality of fairness for well-being, and for achieving national development. Also, a paradigm shift pushing well-being equity as a whole of government development goal and as a performance measure of good governance and societal success.

- A policy shift translating the adoption and implementation of equity lens in a whole of government policies and intersectoral actions (that are anchored on social justice) with highest impact on achieving well-being equity.

It should be noted that the above value shift is contested on many fronts. For example, the use of terms such as equity and social justice are plagued by misinterpretations and ideological stands. The term “Social Justice” is either misinterpreted as a charity notion, or frowned upon as a socialist call for redistribution. It should be clearly explained that the concern with distribution is not a call for ‘redistribution’. Indeed, the concern with distribution captures the realization that significant inequalities across social groups are detrimental and need to be prevented or catered for. However, such concern does not call for shifting the gains from those who are better off to the less privileged. In other words, the concern with well- being distribution translates into a call to continue to promote well- being for EVERYONE, alongside preventing or catering for the inequalities. The prevention of inequalities is anchored on fairness in distribution of opportunities, as well as efforts to cater for the existing mal-distribution.

The concept of equity has also been critiqued as being closely linked to a misconceived notion of human rights: “The notion of “rights” is a mere term of entitlement .... It is merely an assertion of desire and a declaration of intention to use the language of rights to acquire said desire”.<sup>11</sup> Also it has been argued that:

“The program of social justice inevitably invokes claims for government provision of goods, paid for through the efforts of others...”.<sup>11</sup>

Such contestations should not be ignored and they demand a serious engagement in an informed debate.

Furthermore, the knowledge and framing shifts need to be evidence based. There are serious conceptual and analytical impediments in building such an evidence base. For example, the conceptualization of well-being, while improving significantly, remains elusive. Also, the available information base and the needed analytical capacities are quite limited and constrained.

The enablers of the policy shift include supporting conceptual and knowledge capacities of policy and decision makers, as well as providing space for policy dialogue for completing policy cycle and linking the different stakeholders. This space secures a socially inclusive framework for

policymaking and enables non-state actors to participate and contribute to well-being equity. It also encourages research actors to change their focus from identifying problems to proposing feasible solutions. Another important enabler is in supporting informed public demand for fair social policies.

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