

**Policy Recommendations adopted by the 38th COMCEC Session on
“Effective Social Assistance Provision and Socioeconomic Empowerment in light of
COVID-19 Pandemic in the OIC Member States”**

The 37th COMCEC Session agreed on “Effective Social Assistance Provision and Socioeconomic Empowerment in light of COVID-19 Pandemic in the OIC Member States” as the theme for the Exchange of Views Session of the 38th Session of the COMCEC and requested COMCEC Poverty Alleviation Working Group (PAWG) to come up with concrete policy recommendations on this topic and report them to the 38th COMCEC Ministerial Session. Along with the issues related to social assistance delivery during COVID-19 Pandemic, the PAWG also considered the challenges and possible policy options related to moving to integrated monitoring and information systems in social assistance delivery. In this framework, the Working Group came up with the following challenges and recommendations for facilitating the adoption of integrated systems in the OIC Member Countries. Considering the common challenges given below on social assistance systems of the OIC Member Countries, the 38th COMCEC Ministerial Session adopted the following policy recommendations:

CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS FOR SOCIAL ASSISTANCE DELIVERY DURING COVID-19

- *The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic erased several years of efforts in poverty alleviation. The economic contraction has been relatively slower in the OIC Member Countries, however the impact on poverty has been drastic.*
- *The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant increase in poverty and in the number of individuals facing hunger in the OIC Member Countries.*
- *The policy response in terms of economic support and debt relief have been relatively slower among the OIC Member Countries than in the rest of the world.*
- *There is a negative relationship between the coverage of social assistance and adequacy of social assistance among the OIC Member Countries.*
- *As the number of beneficiaries increases, total transfer amount received by all beneficiaries as a share of total welfare decreases, causing resource constraints in the OIC Member Countries.*
- *Social assistance protection tools are not sufficiently diverse among the OIC Member Countries. While social insurance and labor market support programs are frequently rely upon by many governments, such tools are less common across the OIC Member Countries.*

- *Social assistance programs were not adequately supported with labor market policies, such as wage subsidies, training and subsidized work time in more than half of OIC Member Countries during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Such labor market policies increase the effectiveness of social assistance by containing unemployment and protecting job matches between the workers and employees.*

CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS WITH RESPECT TO ADOPTION OF INTEGRATED SOCIAL ASSISTANCE SYSTEMS

- *With climate change and global warming at alarming levels, natural disasters at a higher frequency and catastrophe levels are expected worldwide.*
- *Within countries, the poor and fragile sections of the population are typically those who are more exposed to the negative effects of the shocks. Thus, governments need flexible and fast social assistance delivery systems to respond to sudden shocks and protect the most fragile segments of the society.*
- *While there is a clear trend among the governments around the world to move to integrated systems, adoption of such systems vary greatly across the OIC Member Countries.*
- *Integrated monitoring and information systems in social assistance are most common across the OIC Member Countries in the MENA Region and Asia Region and least common across members in the Africa region.*
- *While most OIC members exhibit strong political commitment for adopting fully integrated monitoring and information systems in social assistance delivery, few member countries have effective systems that feature dynamic inclusion of beneficiaries and a single data platform.*
- *Lack of social registries and existence of unique national identity numbers significantly reduce the speed at which countries can build the basic blocks of integrated systems in social assistance delivery.*
- *Individual data privacy laws, which are crucial requirements of well-functioning integrated systems, are still at infancy stage in some member countries.*
- *Lack of technical infrastructure and know-how is the main challenge against building integrated systems.*
- *Targeting errors, economic uncertainty and coordination problems across government institutions and difficulty of reaching out to minority groups are other important challenges faced by member countries in building effective social assistance programs.*

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the challenges and problems discussed above, a set of general policy recommendations are as follows:

a. General Recommendations

- *Launching staff exchange and training programs between member countries with different levels of integration in social assistance systems. Staff exchange and training programs can facilitate coordination across members and allow learning from each other's experience. These programs should be designed at technical levels and policy levels.*
- *Setting the integrated social protection as the main policy priority.*
- *Determining the detailed structure of existing social assistance by identifying which organization has what datasets, how they use them, to what purpose, as well as data sharing tools between different programs.*
- *Identifying the financial, human, and organizational resources currently devoted to the social assistance programs and possible expansion into an integrated framework.*
- *Investing in data infrastructure, technical skills and human resources to enable better targeting, delivery, and provision of services and cash payments.*
- *Identifying the population groups in need of social assistance that the existing programs fail to reach.*
- *Promoting a better coordination between different organizations and institutions responsible for running social assistance programs in a collaborative governance structure at both local and national level.*
- *Identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each existing program at the stages of outreach, assessment, provision and management.*
- *Determining the sources of the shortcomings of each program in ensuring dynamic inclusion of the groups insufficiently covered by the existing structures such as rural poor, women, informal workers etc.*
- *Identifying all the available datasets that should be connected with social programs such as civil registries, tax records, address registers, birth certificates and income status.*

b. Recommendations for the countries with low level of interoperability and multiple programs

- *Improving the delivery of the existing programs by introducing digital data interface, digital payment systems with better client interfaces.*
- *Expanding the scope of interoperability between existing programs through data sharing, multiple checks and dynamic data adjustment in a single beneficiary registry or developing binary interoperable data platforms.*
- *Addressing the insufficient outreach towards the groups that the existing programs fail to cover by complementing on-demand system with administer-driven tools and by tailoring specific outreach strategies for each group that has special circumstances.*
- *Developing a single registry system that keep track of “who gets what, when and how”.*
- *Designing a common grievances system that allows adaptive social protection and dynamic feedback provided by clients.*
- *Developing a single payment gateway that keeps data on all transactions that is accessible by all organizations.*
- *Exploring the methods to connect the social protection databases with other institutional databases that can lead to a further integration into a more holistic structure.*

c. Recommendations for countries with high level of interoperability but without a fully integrated beneficiary system

- *Developing the existing interconnected data platforms into a single beneficiary system by identifying the most crucial obstacles (such as, institutional barriers, insufficient data sharing and lack of technical infrastructure).*
- *Designing methods to provide all existing and potential beneficiaries with unique IDs, which are typically obtained from social registries, in order to make outreach and assessment of needs more efficient and effective.*
- *Ensuring that there is a single payment gateway, a working client interface, grievances platform, and data analytics platform with access to all databases of social assistance programs.*
- *Creating tools to fully exploit the existing databases (paper or digital) which can be turned into an effective social registry.*
- *Designing small scale pilot implementation of fully integrated system, validating the results and expanding to national level.*

d. Recommendations for countries with an integrated beneficiaries system

- *Developing methods to improve the outreach of the social programs by designing specific programs for each social group and expanding the horizon of dynamic inclusion.*
- *Developing additional data platforms to increase effectiveness, accuracy and validity of the existing social assistance data.*
- *Providing a fully collaborative environment among all institutions and organizations in the sphere of social assistance.*
- *Developing sophisticated digital monitoring systems, intelligent early warning tools to better identify the people who need social assistance.*