



**Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS)**

**Background Paper**

Round Table Session (8)

**The Social Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Need to Develop  
the Palestinian Social Protection Sector**

**In Palestine.**

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## 1. Introduction

*“Let’s imagine a world in which no child needs to work to help its parents, in which no mother has to go back to work the day after delivering her baby, in which no older person has to continue to work until he or she dies, and in which no person with a disability is forced to beg on the street”<sup>1</sup>.*

This statement of Valérie Schmitt, Deputy Director of Social Protection Department at ILO, in 2019, marking the ILO 100th anniversary, highlights the importance of social protection for socially marginalized and poor groups. In the "Post-Corona World", the need for social protection, unquestionably, has increased greatly, especially in countries that lack an effective and integrated system of social protection, like Palestine.

Like other countries of the world, Palestine has been affected by COVID-19 pandemic which has left unprecedented deep economic and social impacts (high rates of poverty and unemployment, shortage in the care for the elderly (CfE) and people with disabilities (PwD), especially among the poor and marginalized groups that have no social protection, like Women, the elderly, and PwD.

The current crisis has rekindled debate on the pressing need for an effective and comprehensive social protection system in Palestine. Such a system becomes a top priority, considering the Palestinian government’s inability to handle the enormous adverse economic impacts of the pandemic, concurrent with severe fiscal crisis and political impasse, which has led to the inability to pay public employees’ salaries in full since April. Besides, there are some questions raised following the pandemic, about laws related to social protection, like the Palestinian Labour Law, that need an answer. Such questions include: Is worker/employee’s infection with the virus, especially during working hours, considered a work injury or not? Is it time to strictly enforce the labor law provisions relating to minimum wage? end of the service? ... etc.)

Other countries' experiences show that countries that have robust and effective social protection systems in place are better prepared to respond to the pandemic and mitigate its impacts. Serious and responsible dialogue on the Palestinian social protection system and its enhancement is particularly important at this stage and is considered an urgent national priority.

The background paper at hand aims to set the scene for an in-depth discussion and responsible dialogue, that is based on careful consideration of the crises we are facing, about this sensitive yet crucial socio-economic issue. Such an endeavor is highly relevant and timely, particularly at this crucial and serious political stage, in which the "livelihood of the Palestinian people" is used as an economic weapon to pacify them and eliminate any real chance for establishing a sovereign Palestinian state based on 1967 borders with Jerusalem as its capital. No doubt, the recent "deal of the century", "annexation plan," and "normalization" deals have sounded alarm bells about an imminent and unprecedented political threat, which require a different, urgent, and responsible response from Palestinians at different levels; political, economic, and social. Such response should focus on enhancing people’s resilience and steadfastness to confront these plans.

This paper is the first in a series of five discussion papers and roundtable sessions, that will attempt to address all the aspects and pillars of establishing an inclusive social protection system that responds to the current Palestinian developmental stage and social needs. The planned series will provide a candid platform for scientific discussion involving all segments of the society, partners, and stakeholders. The current paper is organized within three main

sections. The first is a presentation of the major economic and social impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in Palestinian society - which continued to increase at an alarming rate during the past three months-. Then the “Social Protection System” as a concept is defined through a brief review of its evolution and development in recent history, followed by an overview of the social protection reality in Palestine and how it handles the negative social impacts of the pandemic. The paper concludes with several questions that arise from the preceding in-depth analysis. Each of these pillars will be the topic of one of the coming four Roundtable papers, to be discussed in the near future.

## **2. The Negative Impacts of COVID-19 on Marginalized Groups in Palestine**

COVID-19 first emerged in China in late 2019, and in Palestine by March 2020, in a new pandemic which took the world by surprise. Since the onset of the pandemic, more than 50 thousand Palestinian cases were recorded in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip - including East Jerusalem-, causing nearly 400 deaths, hundreds of thousands have been placed in quarantine, an almost total lockdown for three months, and partial and temporary closures. On top of that, the huge economic losses incurred have led to an increase in poverty and unemployment rates, and food insecurity in the Palestinian society has hit new highs. Additionally, the pandemic has exposed major gaps in the Palestinian social protection sector, where large social sectors and groups have been, and remain, without any social protection coverage.

In this section, we review some weaknesses and vulnerabilities of these groups, which have endured the health, economic, social, and psychological effects of the pandemic. We will focus specifically on the poor, workers, people with disabilities, the elderly, and women.

### **2.1 The Poorest**

The Covid-19 crisis, and the subsequent declaration of the state of emergency and closure of all economic activities, led to a large increase in the number of the poor and unemployed in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The pandemic has led to the creation of “new poor”. Dawood al-Deek, Undersecretary to the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), stated that “more than 100,000 Palestinian households will fall below the poverty line, as a result of COVID-19”, and because breadwinners of these households in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip lost their source of income. In the same context, the World Bank estimates a 30% increase in the West Bank's poor households against a 64% increase in Gaza Strip households.<sup>2</sup>

Results of a PCBS survey of the impacts of COVID-19, focusing on the lockdown period, published early Oct 2020, showed that 42% of Palestinian household's income declined to half at least during the lockdown period between March 5th and May 25th, 2020. Around 31% of Palestinian households did not have income resources to cover household expenditures during the lockdown period. According to the survey, 61% of households are worried about not having enough food, while 58% of households reported that they usually borrow money or buy on credit to cover the household's consumption needs, including food.

The PCBS results are consistent with those of micro field studies undertaken by researchers. For example, one study done during the period between 10-16/5/2020, surveyed 59 small-

scale farmers, marginalized farmers, herders, fishermen, small traders, ...etc. One out of three respondents reported poor or borderline food consumption levels and reported the need to borrow food. One out of four respondents skipped meals or ate cheap or cheaper food. Additionally, the respondents consumed fruits and legumes less than three times a week. Some respondents reported that some commodity prices (meat, eggs, and dairy products) rose significantly. They have reported that food prices increased compared to previous weeks and compared to the time prior to the pandemic.

## 2.2 Workers

The Palestinian government's latest agreement signed with the private sector was necessary, stipulating that during March & April 2020, private sector employers would continue paying at least 50% of workers' salaries for no less than NIS 1000, provided that the remaining amount will be paid following the crisis. However, , according to the Palestinian Ministry of Labor the agreement does not cover self-employed workers, estimated at 50,000, in addition to about 20,000 workers aged fifty years and more, who were banned from returning to their work in the Israeli market. Compliance with the agreement provisions was weak in vulnerable economic sectors, like private educational institutions and kindergartens, employing 10,000 workers".<sup>3</sup> A recent plan published by the MoL stated that "In addition to people with pre-existing health conditions and the elderly, young people who are vulnerable to higher rates of unemployment, are at risk too. Older workers are also more prone to unemployment compared to younger workers. Unprotected workers are more vulnerable than workers protected with social protection mechanisms, and are prevented from accessing their remote workplaces and returning to their families." Minister of Labor, Dr. Nasri Abu Jaish, and Shaher Saad, Secretary-General of the General Federation of Palestinian Trade Unions, launched a fund for supporting Palestinian workers in the local market, with an initial portfolio of NIS 40 million, benefiting 35,000 workers in the West Bank.

That agreement drew criticism from some Palestinian political figures and parties, like Mr. Tayseer Khaled, PLO Executive Committee member, who stated: "The Ministry of Labor (MoL) and the Palestinian Federation of Trade Unions failed to agree on moderate solutions that would preclude further deterioration of the living conditions of all workers..." In any case, the agreement was not adhered to regardless that it is unfair to the rights of the working class and contradicts with Article 38 of the Palestinian Labor Law, which states that "The work contract shall not be terminated in the event of the issuance of an administrative or judicial decision closing the installation or temporarily halting its activity for a period of time not exceeding two months".<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the impact of the pandemic on working women, the MoL plan indicates that since the majority of workers who continue to work under the new circumstances are males, it is more likely that women stay home with their children. The percentage of female workers, who are at the core of the fight against the pandemic, are high in most affected sectors. Yet, they lack access to social protection and suffer the disproportionate burden of care in the economy because of schools' shutdown. In addition, women are more likely to be laid off without being paid their compensations or have any guarantees to find new jobs. In light of the above, the MoL plan concludes that there is an urgent need for interventions to mitigate the impacts of the state of emergency, affecting "thousands of people who were already unemployed and about 290,000 workers, including: more than 120,000 workers in the local market, those at risk of losing their jobs, and 170,000 Palestinians working in the Israeli

market, 50,000 of whom are in informal employment, and 120,000 workers employed by Israeli employers on a formal basis”.

Regarding Gazan workers, Sami Al-Amsi, president of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions in the Gaza Strip, claimed that the losses to workers affected by COVID-19 pandemic exceeded USD 50 million in the Gaza Strip, against USD 180 million in the West Bank. Al-Amsi said: “Gazans and workers suffer from a 14-year-old siege on Gaza, the rising unemployment rate to high levels even before the Pandemic”. Adding that “following the Corona breakout, the jobs of some 2,000 kindergarten workers were severely affected. Similarly, workers in the tourism and restaurants sectors and big markets, day labor, about 15,000 drivers, were affected, raising the number of labor force affected by the pandemic to 170,000 in the West Bank, and 140 thousand in the Gaza Strip, 40 thousand of which were directly affected”.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Gaza’s Trade Union announced that 15-20 thousand Palestinian workers have lost their jobs because of the lockdown of the economic facilities. According to a PCBS press release dated Sept 2019, the unemployment rate in the Gaza Strip, reached 45%. However, a statement issued on 4/12/2020 by the Popular Committee for Breaking the Siege on the Gaza Strip mentioned that the real rate in Gaza exceeds 60%.

### **2.3 People with Disabilities (PwD)**

According to the final results of the PCBS Census 2017, the number of PwD totaled 90,000, comprising 2.1% of the Palestinian population. By type of the most common disabilities among the population, the report shows that 1.1% of the population suffer from mobility/physical and hand impairment disability, 0.7% suffering from a visual disability, 0.5% suffering from auditory disability, 0.4% suffering from communication disability, and finally, 0.4% suffering from memory and concentration disability.<sup>6</sup>

*PwD is considered one of the vulnerable groups most affected by the Pandemic.* A UN report stated that “some PwD may have difficulties in implementing safety measures to avoid contracting the virus, including personal hygiene and recommended frequent cleaning of surfaces and homes...cleaning homes and washing hands frequently can be challenging, due to physical impairments, environmental barriers, or interrupted services. Others may not be able to practice social distancing or cannot isolate themselves as thoroughly as other people, because they require regular help and support from other people for everyday self-care tasks.”<sup>7</sup>

A survey done by Starts of Hope Society for the Empowerment of Women with Disabilities and the Social and Economic Policies Monitor –Al Marsad<sup>8</sup> in March-April, included 350 women and girl with disability, showed that “No official body, whether at the level of a ministry or a department, has contacted any woman or girl with a disability in order to examine their needs, or to check on their conditions in light of the emergency, whether in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip”. Second, the survey revealed that there are several cases of women with disabilities who were cut off from cash assistance provided by the MoSD, which further deteriorated their living conditions. Some civil society organizations communicated with some women and girls with disabilities receiving their services, but to a limited extent: 15 women and girls with disabilities out of 350, or only 4.2%, only 5 women with disabilities (one in the West Bank and the rest in the Gaza Strip). The survey showed that there are several violations related to labor law even though the majority of women and girls with disabilities do not work or are unemployed. The survey also documented the dismissal of a worker with a disability for health causes with the start of the emergency state. In addition, the non-payment of wages of three workers with disabilities by their employers, other than a

number of workers who don't know if they will be paid or not, despite the fact that nearly two months had passed since the start of the crisis. "Violations in the area of work and the economic effects were not limited to wage workers; it has also affected the vulnerability and income of a number of disabled workers who are self-employed".

A study (May 2020) of a sample surveyed by the YMCA in the West Bank, covered people with mental disabilities (PwMD) who were discharged from shelter facilities which had to close. As reported by parents or family members of PwMD who were discharged from Al-Ihsan Charitable Society, around 68 used to receive "full care services", 51 PwMD benefited from "shelter services", and 8 received medical rehabilitation services, such as physiotherapy and functional therapy. They also reported facing some behavioral and health problems, interruption in receiving the various services that the Society used to provide. For example, 31 surveyed families stated that "their children are crying and screaming loudly constantly". Also, 25 families stated that "their children suffer from nervous tantrums and anger at home, which they translate into vandalism at home." Finally, 12 of the families reported that their children showed "frequent aggressive behaviors that escalate to beating others".<sup>9</sup>

## 2.4 The Elderly

The population of Palestine is considered "young" as the largest age group of the total population in Palestine consists of children aged 14 years and less, making the base of the "age pyramid" (39%), followed by the youth aged 15-29 years (making up about one-third of the population, (29%), and at the top of the population pyramid comes the elderly (aged 60 years and above), making less than 5%.<sup>10</sup> The percentage of the elderly in the Palestinian society (about a quarter a million) is relatively low compared to other age groups of the population and compared to many other countries. Also, they do not add big pressure on the health, social and economic systems... etc.

However, the elderly, especially those who do not receive a pension and do not have any form of social protection, or access very limited protection, suffer from neglect by caregivers, whether formal or informal. Post-pandemic, the situation worsened dramatically, especially in light of their need for preventive medical materials, in addition to their regular health and dietary needs (for example, there was a shortage of "nutrients" that some elderly people get from the directorates of the Ministry of Health), not to mention the huge psychological pressure. The preventive measures taken to control the pandemic increased feelings of loneliness and isolation, especially because of the "social distancing" measure (avoiding contact with relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances to avoid the contagious virus), not to mention the "enormous fear" of the elderly of contracting the virus, so many stopped going to places of worship, which is a very vital religious activity with health, social and psychological benefits to them, add to that stopping all forms of social gatherings, whether bitter or happy, as much as possible.

The negligence of the elderly by formal caregivers combined with a drop in informal aid provided to them (like family support). This can be attributed to the changing social ethics and morals (deepening individualism and selfishness, and diminishing collective, family, and solidarity values), and because of the deterioration of economic conditions. The Violence in the Palestinian Society Survey 2019, showed that 22% of the elderly were subjected to medical negligence by a household member (24% for elderly females and 19% for elderly males). Another factor adding to the marginalization suffered by this social group is their

weak political participation and limited impact compared to other social groups. In addition, the wide societal belief that “the elderly caregiving is the responsibility of the state”, also contributes to societal neglect of this marginalized group, which is now at the top of the list of population groups especially threatened by the virus and in need of social protection.

Among the indications of the lack of official support for the elderly is the limited number of care centers for the elderly in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, especially governmental ones. As reported by Mr. Dawood Al-Deek, "There are 21 elderly care centers in the West Bank, only one is a government facility affiliated with the Ministry, which is Beit Al-Ajdad for Elderly Care in Jericho (with a capacity of 60 guests), and 20 elderly care centers affiliated with civil society institutions and charities."<sup>11</sup>

A press release by PCBS on the occasion of the International Day of Older Persons (1/10/2020), confirms the marginalization and negligence of the elderly. “Among 353 deaths in Palestine caused by COVID-19, there are about 75% of deaths among the elderly”, while the number of active cases among the elderly in Palestine reached 3,237 persons. On difficulties faced by the elderly, the statement indicated that 39% of them have at least one difficulty or disability, the most common of which was the mobility difficulties (24%), followed by sight difficulties (22%). The percentage of abject poverty among them reached 16% of the total number of the elderly in Palestine. In addition, the percentage of elderly participation in the labor force was around 14%. Finally, the statement indicated that elderly females make up more than a third of the total number of females in Palestine, with 48% only of them married. All of the above highlight the multi-faceted marginalization suffered by a significant proportion of the elderly: an elderly female, with at least one disability.<sup>12</sup>

## **2.5 Women**

Compared with other Arab countries, the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on Palestinian women, who were already marginalized, is chronic and stark. Although Palestine has achieved gender equality in education, the female participation rate in the labor force is only 19% compared with 29% for Arab women and 69% globally.<sup>13</sup> In 2019, unemployment among women in Palestine was 41%, while it did not exceed 21% among men. No doubt, the impact of the pandemic is strong, negative, and far-reaching.

A flash survey conducted by UN-Palestine Women in April 2020, surveyed a large sample of 301 entrepreneur women in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The survey found that 95% of Palestinian women owners of MSMEs was negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as they reported. In the same context, Mrs. Samira Hulileh, Chairwomen of the Business Women’s Forum (BWF), said that “a large proportion of “entrepreneurial” projects (98%) were forced to shut down”, with women at the center of a real crisis. This is especially true for those heading their households all alone”.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding working women, some 25% of women working for the private sector do not benefit from any “payment protection”. This means that the government and public sector agreement - mentioned earlier- does not cover them, whether in terms of receiving 50% of the salary, nor the illegality of arbitrary dismissal. In fact, based on the most recent Census results, real figures (the study sample is not representative) of young working women (aged 15-29 years) who work based on “verbal understandings” rather than a written contract with the employer, reach 41%, i.e. only 56% of young employed women nationwide have a written employment contract with the employer, whether for a limited or unlimited duration.

Additionally, the employment chances of Palestinian women who were unemployed before the pandemic are extremely limited. First, because unemployment rates, particularly among women, have been on the rise. Second, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and the emergency state on the Palestinian economy is huge. Female unemployment in Palestine reaches 41%, higher than the Arab average (about 17%) and 34 percentage points higher than the global average (6%). The discrepancy between these figures is large, which reflects Palestinian women's obvious low participation in the labor force and economic activity.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, those who have a job are concentrated in middle or lower level occupations in a form of wage discrimination (the average daily wage of Palestinian females in 2018 was NIS 95, which represents 70% of male's daily wage of NIS 135.3). Finally, much of what has been said above about the severe economic suffering of Palestinian women as a result of the pandemic applies to a worse degree to women-headed households. While the PCBS statistics indicate that 11% of households in Palestine are headed by women, at least 21.1 of households that receive MoSD' assistance are headed by women (mothers, grandmothers, or daughters) either because of the husband's absence or physical or mental disability.

### 3. What is a "Social Protection System"?

According to the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, social protection entails “preventing, managing, and overcoming situations that adversely affect people's well-being”. It consists of “policies and programs intended to reduce poverty and vulnerability by promoting the efficiency of labor markets, reducing people's exposure to risks, and enhancing their capacity to manage economic and social risks, such as unemployment, exclusion, sickness, disability, and old age”. The most common types of social protection systems include the following:

- **Social Security:** Social Insurance mitigates risks associated with unemployment, ill-health, disability, work-related injury, and old age, such as health insurance or unemployment insurance. Social security schemes are assistance programs that protect beneficiaries from catastrophic expenses in exchange for regular payments of insurance premiums. Health insurance, for example, is a common way of reducing risk in the event of shocks, given that health care costs can be very high. However, an individual with low income may not be able to afford insurance. Some argue that insurance schemes should be complemented with social assistance.
- **Social Safety Nets** is when resources, either cash or in-kind, are transferred to vulnerable individuals or households with no other means of adequate support, including single parents, the homeless, people with disabilities, or the most destitute. These programs consist of all forms of public works, governmental and non-governmental, that are designed to transfer resources, either cash or in-kind (e.g. food transfers), to eligible vulnerable persons. These may include food stamps”<sup>16</sup>
- **Labor Market Interventions** those are the policies and programs designed to promote employment, the efficient operation of labor markets, and the protection of workers. Such as income support and “active labor market” policies, through increasing the ability of the unemployed to find jobs and increasing their productivity and earnings, and contribute to solving social problems that often accompany high unemployment. Also, “active labor market” policies include a wide range of activities to stimulate employment and

productivity such as “Employment services, which include counseling, placement assistance, job matching, exchange of workers, and other related services to improve the functioning of the labor market. In addition to “Job Training”, and Youth Training, and finally, “Direct Employment Generation” through the promotion of SMEs to increase labor demand. A common issue in implementing successful labor market interventions is how to include the informal economy, especially that most informal workers are not covered by social security schemes, occupational safety and health measures, ...etc.

While the third package of policies entails selective and non-obligatory interventions (aiming at strengthening the workforce and enabling its integration in production depending on the political vision and resources of any country), social security differs from social safety nets or state or private institutions assistance. While the poor and the needy benefit from assistance programs without incurring any financial liability, a person becomes eligible for a social security scheme in exchange for premiums he/she pays and benefits from so long as they meet certain conditions.

#### **4. The Social Protection Sector in Palestine**

The Palestinian social protection sector involves a fragmented combination of governmental and non-governmental institutions, the private sector and international institutions as well. The sector multi-actors include a group of ministries and state institutions {the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD, which is the first provider of social protection services, the Foundation for the Care of the Families of Martyrs and Wounded, the Prisoners and Executives Affairs Authority, the Ministry of Labor (MoL), and the Palestinian Fund for Employment (PFESP)} and non-governmental institutions (Al-Zakat committees, charities, The Palestinian Red Crescent, credit institutions, and the private sector (whose role in the field of social protection and social responsibility is still unclear), in addition to international and UN institutions which carries out various economic and social programs.

The Palestinian social protection sector has a charitable relief nature, that lacks institutionalization of robust institutions that provide high-quality services. The prolonged Israeli occupation has weakened State institutions, also impeded by the outdated legislation and laws needed for regulating the sector. Add to that the "weak targeting standards", "shortage in human capital", and the predominance of a "competitive" atmosphere, and the overlapping responsibilities of the different partners/actors. Another problem is the lack of coordination between all actors and being characterized as “seasonal” or limited to specific purposes or times. Also, the limited financial resources constitute a major problem, as the Palestinian governmental and non-governmental institutions depend on external assistance to finance projects and activities. Moreover, the sector’s infrastructure is inadequate and does not respond to the growing needs of the population, and facilities (whether treatment centers, rehabilitation and shelter houses, and training centers) are concentrated in cities, neglecting villages, camps, and remote and marginalized areas. Partially, these gaps can be identified in one of the major social protection programs in Palestine; the Cash Assistance Program run by the MoSD. Despite progress made and its vitality to thousands of people in need, the said program is inadequate and cannot respond at all times to the growing and constantly changing needs of the poor and the marginalized social groups, especially in light of the increasing poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity rates in the "post-Corona-stage”.

#### **4.1 Social Protection in Palestin: A system or just programs?**

During his speech at the Global Social Protection Week – organized by the ILO, held in Geneva in Nov 2019, Dr. Ahmad Majdalani, Minister of MoSD, answered this question confirming that the Palestinian social protection sector consists mainly of a combination of programs rather than a comprehensive system, saying “developing a comprehensive and integrated social protection system is not optional. It is a must. We are seeking to transform the sector from programs to a complete system, ... we have achieved concrete progress, and still working toward establishing a national social protection system that protects all the segments of the society throughout their life spans.” He stressed “the Palestinian government is working on developing a social protection system that responds to the 2030 sustainable development agenda, specifically with regard to the eradication of poverty. The system will be based on developing appropriate social protection schemes and measures nationwide, setting minimum limits, enhanced health coverage of the poor and vulnerable by the set goal year”. He added “the PA has incorporated this goal within the Social Development Sector Strategy 2017-2022, and will work on achieving it on a gradual basis.” The minister also elaborated “priority is given to the elderly and people with special needs. Free health insurance is accessible to all households registered in the ministry’s database, reaching 106,000 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.”<sup>17</sup>

#### **4.2 Social Security Law**

As mentioned earlier, social security is only one essential component of any country’s social protection system. In Palestine, however, there is still no approved Social Security Law. Social issues and cases, like retirement/pension and work, are dealt with through special laws. Since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, many attempts were made to develop and implement a Social Security Law, all in vain.

Following the establishment of the PNA in 1994 as a result of the Oslo I Accord, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) started drafting various laws including social security laws. The discussion of social protection for workers and employees was not covered by the public employees’ law since the date of establishing the first legislative council, which was culminated in 2003 by the promulgation of a Social Insurance Law. Yet, the latter law covered work injury insurance, old-age insurance, disability, and natural death insurance. The law mandated the establishment of the Public Institution for Social Security to the Minister of Labor. However, the President of the Palestinian Authority rescinded the law on 23/8/2007.<sup>18</sup>

The second attempt to pass a Palestinian social security law was in 2016. Following years of studies, discussions, and dialogue, and despite the immense opposition, a draft decree on social security was presented and approved in Oct 2016 with amended provisions.<sup>19</sup> Between October 2016 and June 2018, the PA worked on bringing the law into effect, forming a social security Fund with a Board of Directors headed by the Palestinian Minister of Labor, whose decision on 4/6/2018 was the spark that led to a new crisis and protests lasting for several months. Eventually, a presidential decision was issued in June 2019 to rescind the law, which prompted the Minister of Labor to bring the file to the Constitutional Court, a step seen by trade unions, defending the interests of workers, as a draw back from his position.<sup>20</sup>

The divergent interests and visions of the parties and individuals opposing the law were obvious in the slogans of the protests, which became very obvious, in the fall of 2018. Some

emphasized the need for the law provided it is amended, others called for its abolition, and a third group found in the protest movement an opportunity to annul the law without explicitly declaring their position. These divergences and the lack of a unified one stand was reflected in the positions of the national and community protest leaders and activists.<sup>21</sup> There were some unions which supported passing the law in the way it was issued in the first place, like the president of the General Union of Banking and Financial Workers, who declared “it could be not the best, however, it is an achievement that should be built on sustained for safeguarding and protecting the rights of workers and ensuring they enjoy a decent life.”<sup>22</sup>

This controversy and conflict have affected the protest movement and the discussions about social security in the Palestinian society. It has led to failing the second attempt to promulgate a Palestinian law on social security in a decade time, depriving around one million Palestinian workers of the public and private sectors and the workers inside the green line from any protection or support what so ever, left to face their own destiny. Having said that, we should ask: will the COVID-19 pandemic lead to dusting off this fateful challenge to trigger the (third) societal dialogue on the much-needed social protection system, its provisions, and implementation mechanisms?

## **5. Concluding observations**

It is not surprising at all that following the outbreak of the pandemic in the Palestinian territories, increasingly voices are heard calling for re-opening discussion of the social protection law, including a social security law 1) to improve what needs to be improved in the law, 2) to establish what can be established 3) and to design an integrated process and establish foundations for a comprehensive system, especially that the experiences of other and neighboring countries have proven that societies that have a strong and effective social protection system are more able to cope with shocks and crises.

In his statement, three weeks following the discovery of the first Covid-19 cases in the West Bank, Palestinian Labor Minister Nasri Abu Jaish, stressed the importance of having a social security law in such difficult times and conditions that the Palestinian people are witnessing. Confirming, he said, “had we had a Social Security Law approved in Palestine, we would not have faced the layoff problems associated with the declaration of the emergency state.” He added “a good example of social security, is the experience of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and how it helped protect its workers during the current crisis”, noting the Jordanian government decision where the employer pays the salary of 14 working days only, and the social security system covers the remaining 14 days salaries immediately”.<sup>23</sup>

Palestinian economists and academics generally agree on the importance of social security, not only to mitigate the economic impacts of the pandemic but also to enroot the principles of social justice and human rights. This imperative needs to garner more attention and intensive concerted efforts of all stakeholders, to establish one of the most important pillars of the sovereignty of the State of Palestine that responds to the needs of its citizens.

## Questions and Pillars for Discussion

1. What are the prospects and resources available to strengthen the social protection sector in Palestine?
2. What gaps in the Palestinian social security sector were exposed by the COVID-19?
3. Does the Cash assistance program run by the MoSD, have any efficient component that can be used for combating Covid impacts on vulnerable and marginalized groups? How can we develop this component?
4. What can be done to help the most affected groups by the pandemic impacts, especially the elderly and PwD who were deprived of a pension salary?
5. How can we establish a social protection system in Palestine? What is the starting point? what are the priorities?
6. How can dialogue on the Palestinian social protection law be started and built, to ensure achieving concrete and consistent results?
7. How can we develop a coordination mechanism between the different arms of the social protection sector (governmental, non-governmental, private sector, and international organizations)?

<sup>1</sup> Valérie Schmitt, 2019. Social protection : Looking back, preparing the future International Labour Organization. [https://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/fs/WCMS\\_644910/lang--ar/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/fs/WCMS_644910/lang--ar/index.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Social Development 2020. Ministry of Social Development (MoSD). 2020. "A Study of the Social Impacts of the Corona Pandemic in Palestine and its Implications for Governmental and non-governmental Policies and Interventions.". Ramallah, Palestine MoL 2020. Response Plan to Mitigate the the Covid-19 Pandemic Impacts on Workers"

<sup>3</sup> Raialyoum "Tayseer Khaled: 30/4/2020." في الاول من أيار ... الطبقة العاملة الفلسطينية تعيش هذا العام تحديات غير مسبوقه

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