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Inequality and Polarization in the Arab World

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This policy perspective examines why levels, changes and determinants of inequality are at the heart of the development agenda and feature prominently in the concerns of the Arab region. Among the reasons it lists is that excessive inequality is harmful for poverty reduction policies. In other words, the lower the level of income inequality, the greater is the capacity to convert economic growth into poverty reduction. Policy makers who are interested in maximizing the poverty reducing impact of economic growth may thus be seeking changes in the income distribution that reinforce, rather than counteract, the poverty effect of economic growth. Another reason is that greater equality may itself be a social objective in its own right, perhaps considered as one of the dimensions of social welfare. This may be due to the fact that inequality is often linked to the prevalence of social exclusion, to unfair distributions across groups or regions, and to low trust in institutional systems. Such circumstances tend to give rise to social disruptions and concerns for policy makers. Concerns about inequality may go beyond income inequality to other dimensions such as inequality in access to public services and labor market opportunities. This policy perspective focuses some features which characterize inequality and polarization in some Arab countries in the light of some recent studies bout the level and the patterns of inequality and polarization in selected Arab countries.

Introduction

Levels, changes and determinants of inequality are at the heart of the development agenda and feature prominently in the concerns of the Arab region. There are several reasons for this.

First, it is commonly argued that excessive inequality is harmful for poverty reduction policies. For instance, for any given growth rate in average income, the rate at which poverty is reduced is almost always higher with lower income inequality. To put it differently, the lower the level of income inequality, the greater the capacity to convert economic growth into poverty reduction. Policy makers who are interested in maximizing the poverty reducing impact of economic growth may thus be seeking changes in the income distribution that reinforce, rather than counteract, the poverty effect of economic growth.

About the authors

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The second reason is that greater equality may itself be a social objective in its own right, perhaps considered as one of the dimensions of social welfare. This may be due to the fact that inequality is often linked to the prevalence of social exclusion, to unfair distributions across groups or regions, and to low trust in institutional systems. Such circumstances tend to give rise to social disruptions and concerns for policy makers. Concerns about inequality may go beyond income inequality to other dimensions such as inequality in access to public services and labor market opportunities.

It is not the purpose of this brief to offer an exhaustive review of the substantial body of research on inequality related issues. The emphasis is instead on some features which characterize inequality and polarization in some Arab countries in the light of some recent studies bout the level and the patterns of inequality and polarization in selected Arab countries.

Overview of Inequality Level

The growth in micro-raw data availability in developed countries (since the 1970s) and more recently in many developing countries is one of the main drivers behind the renewed interest in distributive analysis. In a large number of countries, significant efforts have been made to improve the quality, the coverage and the comparability of the different datasets. These efforts have also provided arguments for making those increasingly abundant data more accessible.

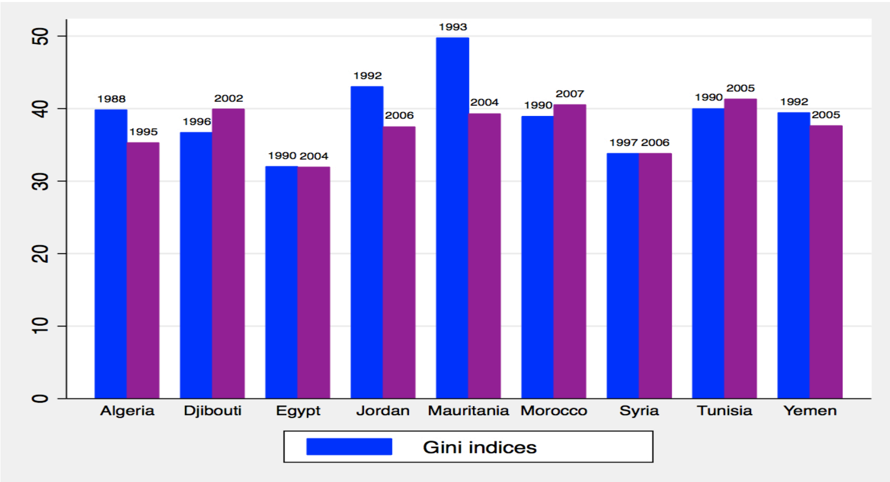
Despite the importance of inequality in the state of development of Arab countries, the issue has received relatively little research interest. Our knowledge and understanding of inequality in the Arab region has thus remained limited. Part of the reason is certainly the political sensitivity of the issue of inequality (Bibi and Nabli, 2010).

In recent ERF papers, Bibi and El-Lahga (2010a, 2010b) have used the best accessible data on household expenditure in the region to characterize the trends, profile and determinants of inequality in selected Arab countries. Some efforts have also been made by the authors to harmonize the different datasets and to make them comparable. However, a satisfactory treatment of data would have involved tackling issues that were beyond the scope of their paper. This means that the findings of this study should be taken with some caution.

As can be seen in Figure 1, most countries in the Arab region display a relatively high level of expenditure inequality, as measured by the Gini index. Inequality has decreased between the 1990s and the mid 2000s in some countries but not in all. Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia are countries where inequality has remained roughly stable; the greatest falls appear to be in Jordan and in Mauritania. Similar inequality trends are observable in Figure 2, which shows the income share of the bottom quintile, and in Figure 3, which displays the ratio of the top decile income share to the bottom decile income share. The most unequal countries are Tunisia, Morocco and Djibouti, with the most equal ones being Egypt and Syria – this is shown in Figure 4. The average income share of the 20th poorest is around 6 percent.

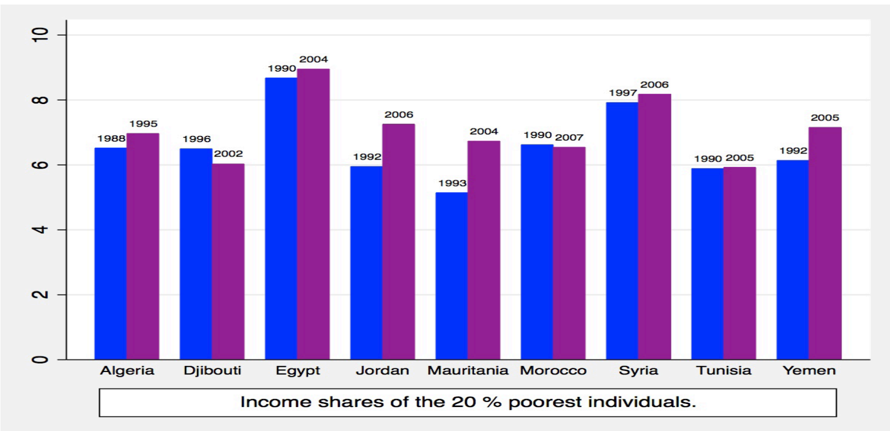
The extent of national inequality can be explained by intra and inter-regional disparities in income distributions. Bibi and El-Lahga (2010c) find for instance significant disparities between urban and rural areas in almost all Arab countries, and especially in Morocco and Yemen. At the end of the 1990s, rural-urban

Figure 1: Gini Indices of the Distributions of Household per Capita Expenditures, Selected Countries



Source: Authors' calculations based on Bibi and El Lahga (2010a, 2010b)

Figure 2: Income Shares of the Bottom 20% Individuals, Selected Countries

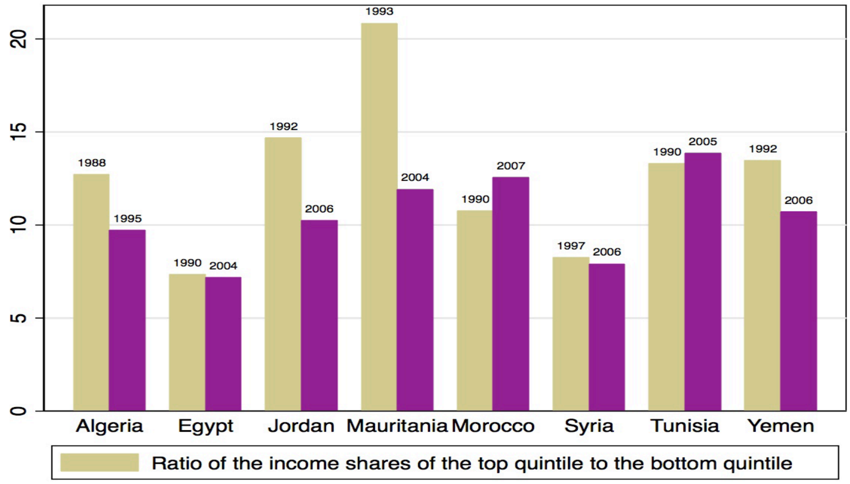


Source: Authors' calculations based on Bibi and El Lahga (2010a, 2010b)

disparities accounted for about 22 percent of total inequality in Morocco and about 40 percent in Yemen. Such disparities are unusually high in the income distribution literature. They are suggestive of significant differences in circumstances and opportunities for individuals living in the different regions of these countries. Further evidence on the regional distributions of job opportunities, access to infrastructure and availability of public services would be useful to understand the drivers behind these important regional income disparities.

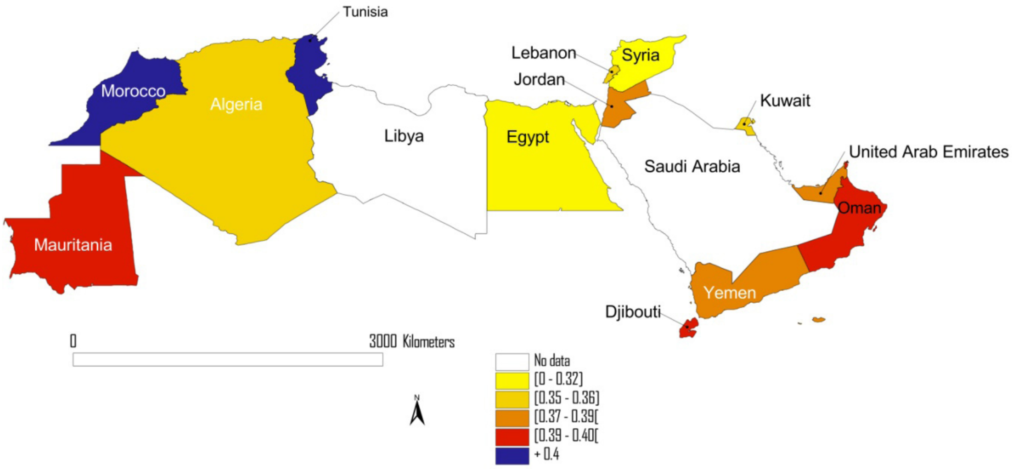
Figure 5 shows that population weighted poverty rates (as measured by the percentage of the population living with less than US$2 a day in 2005 purchasing power parity) have witnessed a sharp decline be-

Figure 3: Ratio of the Income Shares of the Top Quintile to the Bottom Quintile, Selected Countries



Source: Authors' calculations based on Bibi and El Lahga (2010a, 2010b)

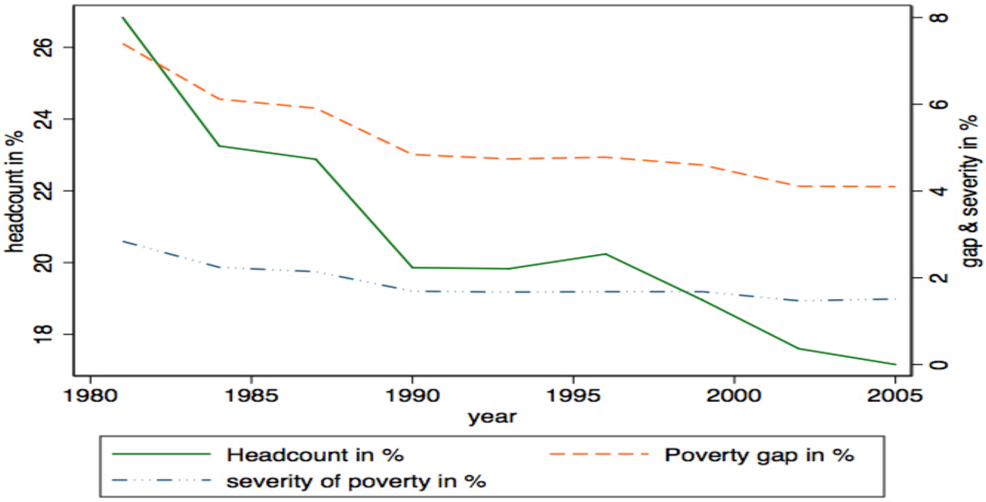
Figure 4: Most Recent Estimates of Gini Indices, Selected Countries



Source: Authors' calculations based on Bibi and El Lahga (2010a, 2010b)

tween 1981 and 2005, whether they be measured as headcount indices, poverty gap indices, or poverty severity indices. They proportion of poor people in the MENA region has fallen from an estimated 26% in 1980 to less than 18% in 2005. Given the above, it would seem that lower inequality would have led to an even greater fall in poverty. As mentioned above, not only may the patterns of income inequality deserve attention in their own right, but they also matter because they limit the effectiveness of poverty reduction efforts. One challenge for Arab Countries is indeed to implement comprehensive policy reforms to increase both the growth rate and its degree of pro-poorness.

Figure 5: Evolution of Poverty Indices in MENA, Using a $2/day Poverty Line



Source: World Bank, PovcalNet (http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/jsp/index.jsp) Database.

As stated above, all these inequality rankings across the Arab countries should be taken with some caution. In reality, several issues are involved in the household surveys used to perform the "expenditure based" inequality comparisons between Arab countries. These issues are related to

1. survey coverage which may vary from a country to another (and even over time within a given country);
2. how well is the stratification within each country so that the population in slum areas is well represented in the surveys;
3. how imputations of in-kind consumption and durable goods are done;
4. etc.

If these issues are not properly addressed, they could potentially make inequality comparisons between Arab countries both noisy and biased.

Further, it is increasingly admitted that inequality comparisons based solely on the distribution of monetary attributes (such as income, consumption, expenditure and earnings) may provide a distorted picture about the distribution of welfare across the countries under comparisons. In view of Sen's capabilities approach on the one hand, and of the disincentive effects and problems of adverse selection that are associated with ex post redistribution of income (or expenditure through food subsidies, for instance), it has been argued that it may be more desirable for governments to be concerned about ex ante equality of opportunity rather than ex post equalization of monetary outcomes. While a wide array of policies for provision of public goods is available in several Arab countries to deal with such problems of inequality of opportunity, we are not aware of sound studies in the region that aim to assess the effectiveness of these policies in reducing inequality in its both monetary and non-monetary dimensions.

Finally, even if we omit the issues related to data harmonization across the Arab countries and the multidimensional nature of inequality, the use of cross-sectional surveys (i.e., surveys which observe households at a particular point of time) could provide distorted rankings of "expenditure based" inequality. Relying on Schumpeter's (1955) argument, the distribution of incomes is like the rooms in a hotel – always full but not necessarily with the same persons. This means that two societies with the same cross-sectional income distribution may have different level of social welfare depending on the mobility of the population across the different parts of the income distribution. This had led several authors to argue that income inequality owing to a rigid socio-economic system --where each person stays in the same position year after year-- may be more a cause for concern than the same level of income inequality associated with great mobility, i.e., with the opportunity for everybody (regardless of class, race, region, creed or gender) to climb up through the income distribution. For all this, panel (or longitudinal) data, i.e., surveys which record living standards information on the same sample of households observed over multiple time periods, are needed for measuring mobility and for understanding the dynamics of inequality. It is therefore important that the Arab countries start to collect panel data to monitor the dynamic of inequality and social welfare.

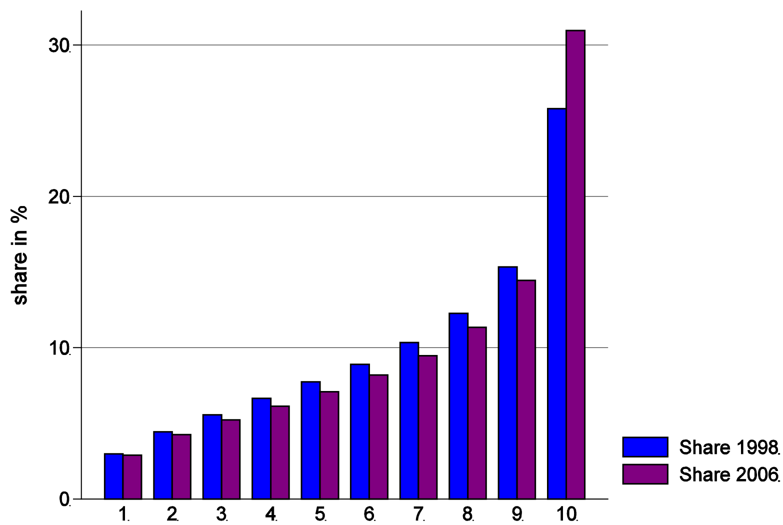
Yemen: An Unequal and Polarized Country

Except for World Bank (2002) and UNDP (2007), we are not aware of in-depth studies of inequality in Yemen. Bibi, Duclos and El-Lahga (2011a) have attempted to fill this gap. They show inter alia that the assessment of the change in inequality between 1998 and 2006 is sensitive to the choice of inequality indices. The change in inequality depends in particular significantly on whether the selected inequality measure is more sensitive to the income share of the poorer or to that of the richer individuals. When greater weights are assigned to those income share changes that occur at the upper end of the income distribution (inequality measures "focused on the rich"), overall inequality has risen by about 14 percent between 1998 and 2006. When greater weights are assigned to the bottom income shares, increases in inequality do not exceed 1.8 percent.

This suggests that distributional changes in Yemen over the last 13 years have affected relatively more the upper part of the distribution than the bottom part. This is indeed confirmed by examining the decile shares displayed in Figure 6; this shows that the shares of the lower 9 deciles have decreased between 1998 and 2006, to the benefit of the share of the upper decile.

The middle class, defined here as comprising the 3rd to the 8th decile, has also witnessed an important decline of around 5 percentage points in its income share between 1998 and 2006, suggesting a substan-

Figure 6: Expenditure Shares in Yemen by Decile



Source: Authors' calculations based on World Bank, PovcalNet Database tial fall in the relative economic importance of that middle class. This suggests that there may also have been a rise in polarization in Yemen.

Conceptualized and defined by Esteban and Ray (1994), income polarization has recently gained importance in the economic literature. Income polarization captures the extent to which a population is clustered around poles, and how distant from each other these poles are. Though related, the concept of polarization is different from that of inequality. A population displaying high inequality, with few persons appropriating most of total income, may yet not be a polarized society if most people are concentrated around a single income pole. While the measurement of inequality focuses on the differences between individuals' income, the measurement of polarization is sensitive both to the distances between income poles and to the importance of these poles.

One conjecture that motivates the study of polarization, and that is particularly relevant in the context of Arab countries, is that the more polarized a society is, the more prone it will be to social unrests and perhaps civil conflicts. Quoting from Esteban and Ray (1994),

Why are we interested in polarization? It is our contention that the phenomenon of polarization is closely linked to the generation of tensions, to the possibilities of articulated rebellion and revolt, and to the existence of social unrest." (p. 820)

In view of the recent protests in Yemen, it might seem relevant to check whether polarization has been on the rise using the most recent available household data. Bibi, Duclos and El-Lahga (2011a) do this using a relatively large class of polarization indices. Applied to 1998 and 2006 Yemenite micro-data sets, they find that the trend in polarization is similar to that of inequality. An important finding, however, is that regional — and especially urban-rural — disparities are substantial in Yemen and raise serious distributional concerns. The country has over time become a more unequal and more polarized society in at least three dimensions, namely across the urban/rural divide, across regions, and across levels of educational/human capital. (Interestingly enough, the divide between the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (the Southern region) and North Yemen appears small and unimportant for explaining levels of inequality and polarization in Yemen.) One important challenge for Yemen would therefore be to attack socioeconomic and regional disparities to contain the recent trend of increasing inequality and polarization.

Syria: Large Regional Disparities

During the 1997 to 2007 period, Syrian real expenditures per capita grew by only 1.6 percent per year on average. Average expenditure per capita increased by 2.6 percent between 1997 and 2004 and decreased by 0.86 percent between 2004 and 2007. Growth has also varied across the five Syrian regions and the urban and rural areas. Expenditure growth was larger in urban than in rural areas over 1997-2007; it was negative in urban areas and positive in rural areas between 2004 and 2007. Middle and Coastal regions have witnessed the highest growth in mean expenditure, followed by the Southern and Northern regions. The East of the country (known as the poorest region) experienced a negative growth rate for the whole period of about -1.42 percent.

Inequality varied between 1997 and 2004, with a significant increase in the Gini index from 34 percent in 1997 to 37 percent in 2004, and a fall back to around 34 percent in 2007. One way to understand the determinants of inequality and how it changes over time is to follow Morduch and Sicular (2002) who have suggested regression-based models to decompose inequality. The basic model uses a Mincer income-generating function to regress any proxy of welfare (income, expenditure, wages, etc., adjusted, if need be, for differences in individual needs, family composition, and prices faced) on household characteristics (age, education, household size, location, etc.). Then, the regressors timed by their coefficient estimates are treated as income sources in the factor decomposition approach of Shorrocks (1982).

The only application of this methodology in the Arab word is provided by Adams (2001), who uses it to decompose inequality in nonfarm income and agricultural income. The independent variables used are linked to the size of land owned and rented, the households' demographic structure, education, region of residence, and other equipment owned. The estimation results show that the income differences that can be attributed to household size, age and education variables are rather small; this leads to small contributions of these factors to overall inequality.

The error terms in such regressions are deemed to capture the effect on living standards of factors that are not observable in household surveys, such as natural ability, chance, and so on. These residual terms often account for a large part of income dispersion, leading in some cases to decomposition results that leave about 70 to 90 percent of total inequality unexplained by observed characteristics. Bibi, Duclos and El-Lahga (2011b) follow the methodology of Wan (2002) in accounting for the contribution of the constant term and of the error terms to overall inequality in Syria. They find that inequality in Syria is largely explained by an unequal distribution of household endowments and by large regional – and especially urban-rural – disparities in living standards. Differences in the demographic composition of Syrian households contribute significantly to the overall level of inequality. Public policies taking into account family composition and regional disparities (those that are favorable in particular to rural areas and to the North-Eastern region) would therefore seem to be potentially useful in addressing welfare inequality in Syria at the upper end of the income distribution (inequality measures "focused on the rich"), overall inequality has risen by about 14 percent between 1998 and 2006. When greater weights are assigned to the bottom income shares, increases in inequality do not exceed 1.8 percent.

United Arab Emirates: Assessing the Fairness of Redistributive Policies

Since 1972, the government of the United Arab Emirates has implemented a social welfare system that aims to increase the incomes of the low-income population. The program includes support to farmers, directs transfers to improve housing conditions, and other indirect transfers. In 2001, the welfare law was amended to provide aid for widows, divorced women, the disabled, the elderly, and others with special needs. In addition, the federal government provides financial aid, in the form of regular monthly transfers, to the poorest families. Since the recent 2006 amendment of the law, which increased the budget allocated to social spending by 75 percent, the value of overall welfare program benefits has ranged between 1 and 2 percent of GDP.

From a policy maker's perspective, it is natural to wonder about the redistributive effects of the Emirati welfare system on living standards. It is conventional to assess the distributional effects of public policy by computing the change in distributional statistics that the policy induces. Such a change can come from three effects. First, the redistributive policy can affect the average welfare of the population. Second, it may alter the distribution of welfare between those of initially unequal welfare status. Third, it may fail to treat alike those of initially similar welfare status. These three effects can be understood as corresponding to average income effects, vertical equity effects, and horizontal equity effects.

Horizontal inequity is a long-established equity concept in the welfare economics literature, though it is a concept that has received less attention than vertical equity. Different rationales have been advanced to support it.

First, the search for vertical redistribution, which is a key and explicit objective of many programs and policies, is generally undermined by the presence of horizontal inequity since such inequity pulls equals apart. Hence, a desire for horizontal equity can simply derive from an aversion to inequality, without invoking a separate normative basis for horizontal equity.

Second, horizontal equity can be argued to be an ethically more robust moral criterion than vertical equity. Depending on one's ethical attitude towards distributive fairness, the importance of vertical equity can vary considerably, but the principle of horizontal equity would appear to remain essentially invariant across analysts. This has led several authors to advocate a separate moral treatment for horizontal equity. Horizontal equity would then be treated and assessed separately from vertical equity, and would form a welfare and policy criterion on its own.

Few studies exist on horizontal equity in the Arab countries. Bibi, Duclos, and El-Lahga (2011c) have studied it in their analysis of the redistributive effects of the Emirati welfare system on living standards, attempting to estimate the magnitude of horizontal and vertical equity induced by the system.

Bibi, Duclos, and El-Lahga (2011c) have in particular contrasted the effectiveness of the current Emirati welfare system with that of a counterfactual system that would target transfers to the less well-off conditional on their socio-demographic characteristics (these being correlated with their true though unobservable welfare status). The principal findings are:

1. The current transfer system is less effective than the counterfactual socio-demographic targeting transfer in producing vertical equity (as measured by the fall in the Gini index and in other inequality measures that is induced by the two systems).
2. The counterfactual policy generates greater horizontal inequity than the current transfer system.
3. The vertical gains from the counterfactual policy would seem large enough to offset the higher violations of the horizontal equity principle that it generates, irrespective of the preferences for vertical equity and of the aversion towards horizontal inequity.

Policy Recommendations

Examining the trend and patterns of inequality in the Arab region, a few important findings seem to emerge.

1. The poverty reduction strategies in the Arab region would be more effective if lower inequality were achieved. Reducing levels of inequality would thus seem appropriate as a way to enhance the effectiveness of current and future anti-poverty programs.
2. Regional disparities, in particular urban-rural ones, explain much of the inequality in the distributions of welfare in the region. Regional development strategies, including the development of non-agricultural income-earning opportunities in the rural areas, would in most likelihood be useful in pushing inequality down.
3. Socio-demographic factors, including differences in family composition, appear to account for a significant degree of inequality in some countries, suggesting that the design of public policy should take such factors into account.

Avenues to reduce inequality certainly need to take account of country-specific socio-economic environments. A few general parameters for informing policy action in the Arab region would, however, read as follows:

- Unemployment rates in the Arab region are among the highest in the world. Existing employment is also rather unstable and ill-remunerated, especially in the informal sector. This is coupled with limited access to credit, lack of health care coverage, limited social security and employment protection guarantees, as well as deficiencies in governance. Income growth for the most deprived could be supported through labor market reforms and policies that buttress the income generating activities of those with lower human capital, those with informal and unstable employment, and those living in marginalized regions.
- Important disparities in infrastructure and access to public services exist in many countries of the region. Filling those gaps would help reduce the feelings of social exclusion and improve the human and physical capital of those poorer people who typically live in lagging regions. That would be particularly effective at improving the long-run distribution of opportunities, which is key to the long-run distribution of welfare.
- Access to micro-raw data is essential for guiding policy, supporting the quality of governance of public institutions, and understanding the distribution of inequality and inequities. In view of the centrality of inequality in the social and economic development of Arab countries, it is surprising to see how little attention this point has received. Inaccessibility of micro-raw data and excessive political sensitivity to issues related to poverty, inequality, and to the effectiveness and equity of redistributive programs have hindered the development of research capabilities as well as the production of evidence-based policy advice. It is important that governments and development stakeholders change this state of affairs by facilitating access to household-level data and encouraging research in distributional issues.
- More generally, greater democracy and openness would help correct inequalities in their various dimensions. Economic inequality originates in part

from inequalities of influence and power, lack of accountability, excessive corruption of the political elite, and institutional non-transparency. These inequalities being complementary, actions on any one of them will tend to decrease the others as well. Action on these dimensions would also reduce growth-adverse rent-seeking behavior and improve the overall efficiency of the economic system.

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