

Government Fund to Help Syria's Poorest

Author: [IWPR](#)

(09-Jan-09)

The Syrian government's decision to set up a "poor fund" is an unprecedented step to help the most vulnerable sections of society who have been hard hit by inflation and other economic problems in recent years.

The scheme has been welcomed by many potential beneficiaries, although some people are sceptical about whether it will be a success.

"The fund will help the poorest families with the lowest incomes, those who cannot meet their basic needs," said Linda Abdul-Aziz, project director for the new Social Aid Fund.

Abdul-Aziz noted that the fund was still at the planning stage, and the government had yet to decide on the mechanism for providing assistance and the criteria for selecting beneficiaries.

A wide-ranging survey of poor families has been launched across most of the country to determine what the next steps should be.

Thousands of poor families rely on basic foodstuffs distributed by charity organisations; others survive by begging.

The issue has become a live issue in Syria. Last month, for example, several official and pro-government media outlets carried reports on the growing phenomenon of homeless people in Damascus as a reflection of rising poverty levels.

Food costs have increased dramatically in the past two years, with the retail price of rice, wheat and sugar almost doubling.

Ali Balan, director of planning at the ministry of social affairs and labour, said aid would start being distributed from mid-2009, once the findings of the first phase of the survey – which ends in April – had been evaluated.

Balan said that aid would initially be offered to the very poorest families, who survive on donations from charity groups, Balan said. Subsequently, support may be offered to slightly less needy families on limited incomes.

Households in which one or more of members have public-sector jobs will not be eligible.

Before awarding assistance to families, officials will look into "the employment status of their members and whether they receive any income from agricultural land", he said.

Officials expect the current survey to be the most comprehensive ever conducted in Syria. A similar one in 2003 failed to provide accurate information on underprivileged social groups.

The official news agency SANA noted that the new survey would help decision-makers devise new policies and programmes in order to create more job opportunities and support lower-income groups.

The data will help government draft the next five-year social plan, which will focus mainly on reducing the unemployment rate, which has reached around 15 per cent.

Recently, the social affairs and labour ministry opened registration centres in the provinces where poor families are being interviewed by social workers on their income sources and property.

Many of those potentially eligible for the support scheme are already harbouring high hopes,

Mohammad Badgenki, a 30-something who begs on the streets of Aleppo and sleeps outside, heard about the registration centres from a friend.

"I hope the government gives me shelter and an allowance," he said. "It's been ages since I ate meat. I've almost forgotten the taste."

Yasir Saqr, an unemployed man in his forties, is also hopeful that the authorities will help him support his family.

"Anything we get would be better than nothing," said Saqr, who lives with his wife and eight children in a two-room makeshift house in the coastal city of Latakia.

As news of the aid project spread through announcements on television and by word of mouth, many families began to believe they would get government support the moment they submitted information at the official centres. Rumours circulated that that monthly payments of some 150 dollars would be offered to all poor households.

Some, however, were reluctant to take part in the survey. Abu Mazin Muna, a father of six, said he was disappointed in the government's plan and refused to register when social workers informed him he would not receive any help because he owned a small parcel of land.

"It's unfair... I too can barely feed my family," said Muna, who lives in a poor neighborhood in Latakia.

Officials said seminars were held across Syria to stress that the social fund had its limits while urging people to come into the registration centres.

According to director Abdul-Aziz, "People have misunderstood the aim of the fund. They thought it was

going to raise living standards for Syrian citizens in general, whereas it is only going to help those in greatest need.”

Some economists believe the fund will be paid for out of savings made when the government cut subsidies on heating fuel and basic foods last year, the idea being to redirect assistance to target the most underprivileged.

Economist Ibrahim Othman argues that the policy may prove counterproductive, since lifting subsidies allowed prices to rise, thus creating more rather than less poverty.

“All these decisions to help the poor only exist on paper at the moment,” said Othman. “In the mean time, poverty has increased.”

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

Location: Syria

Focus: Syria

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/government-fund-help-syrias-poorest>