International Labour Organization

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Social Protection Spotlight

Syria's Surviving Social Insurance System: Anchoring an Accelerated Recovery and why it Needs Support

Key points

- **Syria's social insurance system provides a critical institutional foundation for recovery.** Unlike many public systems that collapsed during the conflict, it continued collecting contributions and paying pensions, preserving one of the few remaining channels of trust between citizens and the State. This continuity makes it a strategic entry point for rebuilding broader social protection.
- **Recovery should build on what already exists rather than start from scratch.** Syria retains a functioning legal framework, a National Social Security Institution and accumulated governance and administrative experience. Protecting, modernising, and expanding this foundation is likely to be a faster, more credible and more cost-effective than designing an entirely new system.
- **Major social protection gaps still leave large parts of the population without effective income security.** Pension coverage remains low, most older persons are not covered, and there is still no national non-contributory social assistance mechanism to provide a minimum income guarantee. Closing these protection gaps is essential to prevent and reduce poverty, support dignity, unlock growth and maintain social cohesion during the much hoped for transition to greater stability.
- **Social insurance can help shift Syria from humanitarian dependence to sustainable national system.** For a fraction of the long-term cost of repeated emergency assistance, strengthening contributory and complementary non-contributory protection can provide more reliable income security while rebuilding State legitimacy and citizen trust.
- **However, the system faces both immediate financial sustainability challenges and long-term demographic pressure.** Liquidity constraints, high inflation, ageing, and patterns of early retirement are increasing costs without a corresponding expansion of the contributory base. Without urgent support and reform, these pressures could weaken the system's sustainability.
- **A phased reform agenda can transform social insurance into a cornerstone of Syria's new social contract.** Immediate liquidity support should be paired with legal reform, digital and MIS upgrades, stronger governance, expanding effective coverage to informal workers, and portability arrangements for returnees. Investing now would reduce aid dependency, and anchor recovery in long-term economic security.

Using what already exists to build a comprehensive system

Syria is at a critical turning point. After almost 14 years of conflict, institutional collapse, and widespread displacement, the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 has opened a fragile yet unprecedented policy window for national recovery (Syrian Arab Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, 2025). The needs remain immense: over 15.6 million Syrians still rely on humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 2026; UN, 2025), over

3.4 million displaced people have returned,[1] and around 90 per cent of the population is living in poverty (UNDP, 2025). Yet amid the devastation, something remarkable has survived: the national social insurance system.

A comprehensive social protection system is essential for Syria's recovery. Social protection covers people for ordinary lifecycle risks and systemic shocks, and the associated loss of income and healthcare access, and thereby prevents and reduces poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion. Beyond providing protection it can also rebuild trust between citizens and the State (Green & Janmaat, 2011; UNRISD, 2022). This lays the groundwork for a new, inclusive social contract.

Syria is not starting from scratch. While much of its tax-financed non-contributory system will need to be built anew, it has a well-developed policy and legal framework,[2] legacy databases from subsidy, disability and other programmes, and institutional knowledge.

However, the government's universal energy and bread subsidies are being gradually lifted, and the wide coverage of public sector jobs — remnants of the previous partisan regime — has been cut by the new authorities, leaving quite some vacuum in social provision (see Section 1.4 European Union Agency for Asylum, 2025; Karam Shaar, 2025; The Arab Weekly, 2025). In the near term, new non-contributory schemes will be needed to reach and support a majority of the population. These are needed to provide much needed income security and to ensure social cohesion is maintained during this transitional phase (that is, from fragility to stability).

Social insurance, (the contributory part of the social protection system) represents part of the sustainable, long-term solution. Unlike emergency and often temporary income support, social insurance systems often provide more comprehensive, higher-adequacy, more reliable income security. This often provides more policy space for combating inequality and poverty by redistributing resources from wealthier to poorer individuals through its collective risk pooling mechanism. What is more, social insurance's collective financing by workers, employers and the State embodies a shared solution to providing protection.

Critically, Syria's social insurance system never fully collapsed. Despite the period of recent conflict, it continued collecting contributions and paying out monthly pensions. However, this was not the experience everywhere in Syria because employers and their insured workers located in isolated provinces were able neither to contribute to nor benefit from social insurance schemes. Also, pensioners and survivors' benefits got interrupted. It remains in place today. While under strain, it is still functioning. But it needs urgent support. Like all of Syria, it has not come away from the conflict totally unscathed. All of this is compounded by large financial liabilities, related to previous government borrowing of reserves, that predate the conflict and even have a significant impact today and have resulted in serious sustainability concerns for the national system.

Syria's social insurance system nevertheless represents a form of institutional continuity, but it is now experiencing significant strain and is insufficiently recognised and assisted by development partners. With the right support, it can be strengthened to serve as a cornerstone of Syria's recovery. It can do this by ensuring financial sustainability, offering long-term protection, and forging a social contract between the State and citizens. The alternative—allowing the collapse of this system—would sever one of the last remaining threads of trust between the State and its people, making recovery infinitely more difficult and costly. It would also push an already-vulnerable population further into need.

A comprehensive legal framework for social insurance still exists

Before the conflict, Syria's social insurance's legal framework had been considered in the past decades as relatively advanced and inclusive compared to other social insurance systems in the Arab region, and is one that still exists today (see Figure 1). The system is administered by the National Social Security Institution (NSSI),[3] an independent public body affiliated with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.[4] The NSSI is legally responsible for collecting contributions, managing funds, and delivering long-term benefits to eligible retirees, workers and their dependents (see Figure 1).

The main laws governing social insurance include the foundational Social Insurance Law No. 92 (1959)[5] and its later amendments. While the legal framework is currently under review by the new government, its core elements remain intact. This offers a strong starting point for recovery and reform. However, social protection laws require periodic modernisation to match an evolving world of work to ensure protection for non-standard work

[1] 1.54m refugees returned (UNHCR, 2026) and 1.86m IDPs returned (see Comprehensive Overview of IDPs and IDP Returns Dashboard 19 3 2026
[2] See ISSA. 2022. Syria Country Profile.
[3] National Social Security Institution, Syrian Arab Republic
[4] Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Syrian Arab Republic
[5] Social Insurance Law no. 92/1959 and its amendments

arrangements, regulate new policy modalities such as portable entitlements, flexible contribution payments, and update rule-based parameter adjustments such as automatic indexation, for instance. All these reforms ensure provision is fit-for-purpose and fiscal sustainability while keeping the system responsive to ever-occurring structural change.

Mandatory coverage applies for a wide range of workers: civil servants, public sector employees, temporary/daily workers and some private sector employees. While certain categories are exempt from mandatory — such as unpaid family members working in family businesses — the legal intent of the existing legal provisions retains some broad and inclusive elements, with additional provisions for high-risk groups like domestic and casual workers under the Employment Injury scheme. Voluntary coverage is, however, available for any other category of worker including the self-employed.

Syria's legal architecture for social insurance has withstood the war. It is a functioning foundation on which a more equitable and sustainable social protection system can be rebuilt. It does not need to be created from scratch, but rather protected, modernised, and expanded.

Figure 1. Syria's social insurance system (excluding healthcare): Contributory cash benefits in force

Many Syrians still receive monthly social insurance payments

Recent analysis indicates that a substantial number of Syrians remain covered by the NSSI. In 2025, over 1.8 million individuals were actively insured; 40 per cent of which are women.[6] This coverage spans both the public and private sectors. This equates to about 27 per cent of the labour force.[7]

Despite years of war, the social insurance system in Syria supports people at vulnerable points in their lifecycle (see Figure 1, 2 and 3). In 2025, around 700,000 Syrian

[6] Data analysis results and projections of NSSI's actuarial assessment released in 2025 (valuation date: 31 December 2023).

[7] Authors' calculations based on ILOSTAT's modelled estimates of Syria's labour force for the year 2025. https://ilostat.ilo.org/data. Retrieved on 22/04/2026

beneficiaries received old-age, disability, survivors', and employment injury pensions and lump-sum indemnity benefits.[8] This is often the only reliable source of income for a household. The number of old-age pensioners is estimated to be around 320,000,[9] which equates to about 17 per cent of the population aged 60 and over directly receiving old-age pensions. In 2025, spending on old-age, disability, survivors', and employment injury pensions and lump-sum benefits totalled around USD 196 million; a significant increase from the USD 113 million spent in 2022, which represented 0.6% of the GDP.

Survivors' pensions, which cover spouses, orphans, and other dependents of deceased insured persons, constitute an essential component of the system. Orphans represent the largest group of survivors, followed by mostly widows. These benefits provide crucial financial support to families following the death of the insured income earner. This shows the social insurance system's reach beyond the individual contributor, helping to shore up wider family income security.

The overall picture demonstrates a functioning social insurance framework that covers over two million Syrians and their families. Challenges exist, but this is common in conflict-affected contexts. Meanwhile, this coverage plays a vital role in safeguarding livelihoods during key lifecycle risks such as retirement, disability, and the loss of a family provider.

Figure 2. key details of existing social insurance schemes

SOCIAL PROTECTION BRANCHES	BENEFITS PROVIDED	ELIGIBILITY AND COVERAGE	BENEFIT AMOUNT
OLD-AGE PENSION	Provides income security to workers when they retire upon reaching the qualifying age.	• **Normal retirement:** 60 (men) / 55 (women) with ≥15 contribution years • **Early retirement 1:** 55/50 (men/women) with ≥20 contribution years • **Early retirement 2:** No age condition, with ≥25 contribution years • **Maximum retirement age:** 65	• **Formula:** 2.5% × last year's insurable earnings × contribution years • **Min. pension:** minimum wage • **Max. pension:** 80% of reference earnings • **Unmet eligibility conditions:** lump-sum
DISABILITY PENSION	Provides financial support to insured persons who become disabled due to illness or injury and are unable to work. Paid until death.	• Age 16–65 (working-age insureds) • **Disability cause:** non-work-related illness or injury • **Contribution period:** ≥6 consecutive or ≥12 non-consecutive months • **Degree of disability:** ≥80% (total); ≥35% (partial)	• **Earnings-related disability** pension • **Min. pension:** minimum wage • **Max. pension:** 80% of reference earnings • **Unmet eligibility conditions:** lump-sum
SURVIVORS' PENSIONS	Provides financial protection to the dependents of a deceased contributor or pensioner. Paid to eligible dependents until death.	• **Death cause:** non-work-related death • **Eligible dependents:** Widow(er), children (until age limit), dependent brothers (until age limit), unmarried daughters and dependent sisters (until marriage) and parents (subject to legal conditions)	• **Formula:** last year's insurable earnings × [40% + (2% × contribution years)] • **Min. pension:** n/a • **Max. pension:** 80% of reference earnings • **Funeral grants also provided**
WORK-INJURY BENEFITS	Provides replacement income and medical care to workers who suffer work-related injury or occupational disease.	• **Cause:** work-related injury or occupational disease • **Degree of disability:** ≥80% (total); ≥35% (partial)	• Medical care • **Temporary disability:** replacement income until recovery • **Permanent total disability or death:** 75% of last year's insurable earnings • **Permanent partial disability:** pension relative to disability degree • **Unmet eligibility conditions:** lump-sum

All schemes are financed on a pay-as-you-go (PAYG) basis through contributions from employers and employees and are provided in accordance with national social insurance legislation.

[8] Syria TV 2025.

[9] Authors' calculations based on the results of NSSI's actuarial assessment released in 2025 (valuation date: 31 December 2023).

Figure 3. Syria's social insurance system is still delivering

Coverage, comprehensiveness and adequacy gaps nevertheless remain pronounced across Syria's social protection system.

The central point of this brief is that Syria's social insurance system continues to function and provide protection. However, substantial social protection gaps persist, highlighting the considerable reform challenge that lies ahead.

One conspicuous gap in comprehensiveness is that Syria still lacks an inclusive national non-contributory social assistance mechanism capable of providing a minimum income guarantee as part of its social protection floor. This remains a major concern given the scale of economic insecurity in the country, leaving many without recourse to income support to prevent or mitigate poverty and to ensure a minimum standard of living and basic dignity. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour is cognisant of this and aims to cover a large share of the most vulnerable households with social protection (Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 2026), potentially through the introduction of a national cash transfer scheme that can support social stability and foster social cohesion as the country transitions from fragility to greater stability (Syrian Arab News Agency, 2026).

For instance, more than four fifths of the elderly population enjoy no old-age protection and this lags behind the global average where worldwide, 79.6 per cent of people above retirement age receive a pension (ILO, 2024). Moreover, many branches of social protection remain completely absent from Syria's existing legal and policy frameworks. There are no child or family allowances, unemployment and paternity benefits. While sickness and maternity benefits are provided through an employer liability system, which, globally, are notoriously unreliable and often do not furnish effective provision.

For all long-term benefits, a significant proportion of pensions tend to cluster around the minimum pension level—linked, and for most cases equivalent, to the level of the minimum wage—reflecting the critical role played by pensions in providing a basic income for Syrian recipients. In recent years, due to exceptionally high inflation and repeated increases in the minimum wage, the salaries of a significant proportion of contributors have been declared at or near the minimum wage. As a result, a majority of newly awarded pensions are close to the minimum pension. This trend has a detrimental impact on the scheme's financial sustainability: as long as minimum pensions continue to constitute the majority of pensions disbursed, they are expected to absorb the effects of many parametric reforms, particularly those involving amendments to benefit formulas.

A system delicately poised and in urgent need of support to ensure financial stability

Immediate financial liquidity support and a well-defined reform process focused on prioritising parametric reform options are needed as recommended in the ILO's 2025 actuarial assessment. These reforms would include modifications such as when people retire, how much they contribute, or how benefits are calculated. Reforms that deliver immediate improvements to the scheme's liquidity position are needed now, otherwise pension disbursement could come to an unceremonious halt for over 700,000 Syrians in the near future. To protect and preserve the existing social insurance system, and to extend the coverage and adequacy of this system to more Syrians, urgent support is required.

Moreover, in recent years, the statutory minimum wage, public sector salaries, and pensions for all sectors have been increased through a trend of ad-hoc raises in response to high inflation[10] and shifts in government policy. Yet these increases still lag behind an incessant inflationary march. As a result, the total social insurance bill has increased and is expected to rise further. Yet, for many vulnerable recipients, these higher nominal payments have not kept pace with inflation, leading to a sharp decline in real purchasing power (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2026). Consequently, this reinforces demand for further pension increases, notwithstanding the resulting pressure on the sustainability of the fund. Conversely, employers may perceive social insurance contributions as already burdensome and view any further increases as detrimental to their competitiveness.

At the same time, the absence of sufficient reserves has limited the role of investment income as a stabilising source of financing. In contrast to more mature systems, the NSSI has not been able to develop or implement a diversified investment strategy, mainly due to the protracted macroeconomic instability associated with the conflict. As a result, available funds have largely been placed in low-yield deposits in private banks, prioritising capital preservation over returns, but offering limited support to the scheme's long-term sustainability.

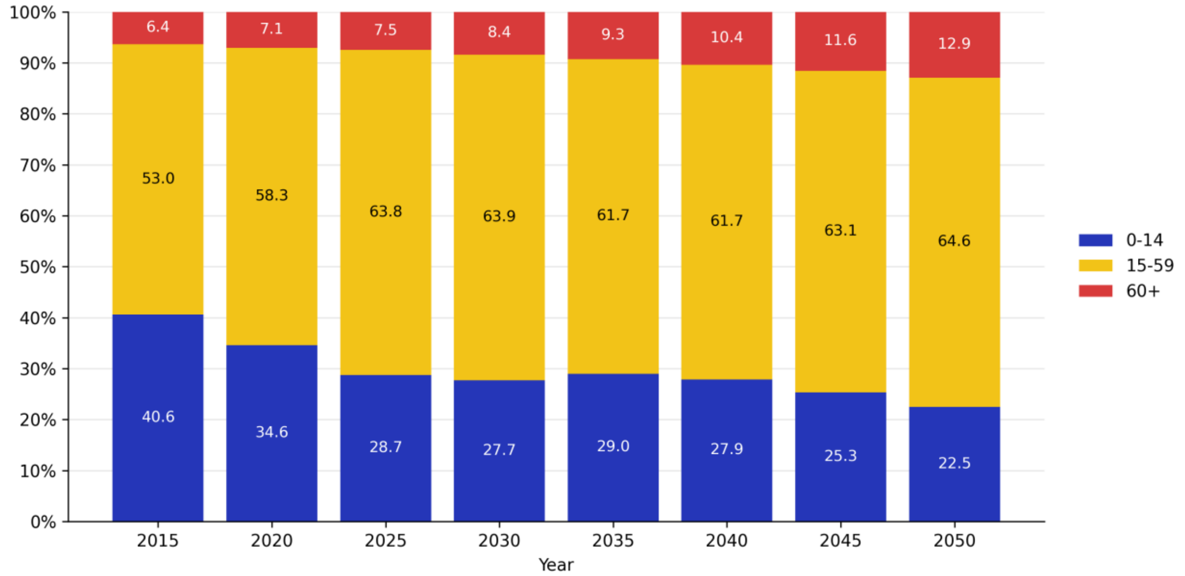
Additional pressures stem from the delayed settlement of government contribution arrears, the real value of which has been significantly diminished by high inflation during recent years. Furthermore, the system has assumed the responsibility of financing a range of social benefits, such as family allowances, marriage grants, and cost-of-living allowances. While socially important, these are not supported by dedicated contribution streams. This has introduced a further structural imbalance between revenues and expenditures, exacerbating existing financial strains.

From a demographic perspective, the system is expected to face increasing demographic pressures in the coming years. Syria's population is currently estimated to be around 25.5 million as of 2025 and is projected to grow to nearly 37.9 million by 2050.[11] Notably, the population is ageing: the share of those aged 60+ has gradually increased from 6.4 per cent in 2015 to 7.5 per cent in 2025, and is expected to nearly double to 12.9 per cent by 2050, while the working-age population (15–59) remains relatively stable between 2025 and 2050 (see Figure 4).

[10] Annual inflation rates averaged 31.1 per cent between 2011 and 2019, then rose sharply to an average of 96.5 per cent between 2020 and 2024 before dropping to an estimated 11.5 per cent in 2025 (World Bank, 2025, 2026)

[11] Authors' calculations based on the United Nations' World Population Prospects, 2024 Revision.

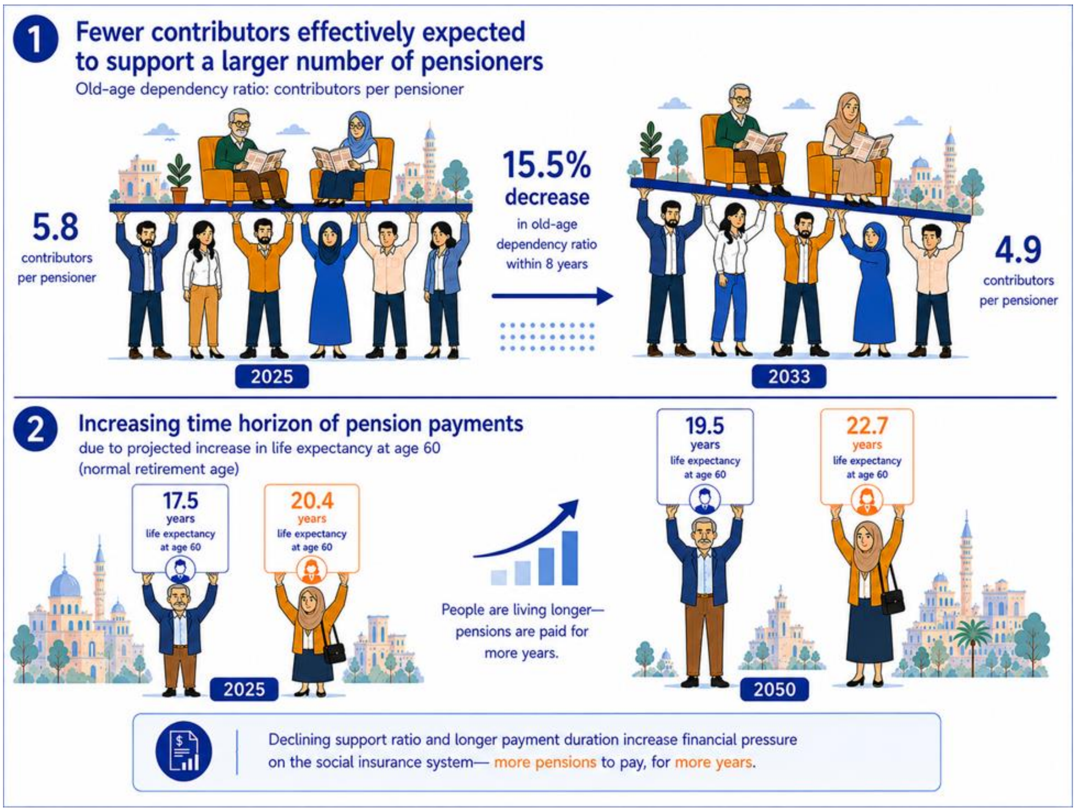
Figure 4. Historical and Projected structure of the population by age group, 2015-2050 (in percentage)



Source: Authors' calculations based on the United Nations' World Population Prospects, 2024 Revision.

Consequently, that national demographic situation presents a social insurance challenge. The old-age pension scheme's dependency ratio—number of active insured members to number of pensioners—is forecast to decline significantly from 5.8 in 2025 to 4.9 in 2033, thus increasing demographic pressures as depicted in Figure 5. This means the social insurance system will face rising benefit demands without a commensurate expansion of the contributory base to finance them. Increasing life expectancy may further intensify this pressure, as pension entitlements will not only grow in volume but also persist for longer durations. Together, these dynamics risk undermining the system's long-term financial sustainability.

Figure 5. Increasing demographic pressures on the social insurance system



From a scheme design perspective, retirement eligibility conditions and benefit provisions have also contributed to emerging financial imbalances. In 2025, the NSSI reported a noticeable increase in early retirement, much of which appears to be driven by voluntary termination of employment. This trend reflects the relatively permissive retirement provisions embedded in the current design framework. Specifically, the absence of a minimum age requirement upon completion of 25 years of contributions, the availability of early retirement at age 55 for men and 50 for women with at least 20 years of contributions, and the lack of actuarial reduction factors for early pensions collectively create strong incentives for early exit from the labour force.

These incentives are further reinforced by prevailing labour market practices, particularly the widespread under-declaration of wages in the private sector, where reported earnings often cluster around the minimum wage. As a result, newly awarded pensions tend to converge rapidly toward the minimum pension level, regardless of contribution history. Under these conditions, retiring earlier does not lead to a commensurate reduction in benefits, while significantly increasing the duration over which pensions are paid. This dynamic places additional strain on the financial sustainability of the scheme by

accelerating expenditure growth without a corresponding increase in contribution revenues.

Shoring up the social insurance system through a suite of much-needed reforms

The state of Syria's social insurance system gives pause for concern. Significant opportunities exist to strengthen the system's financial sustainability while modernising its design to provide adequate protection for a new era in Syria. The policy recommendations below draw on the first actuarial valuation conducted by the ILO in Syria in 15 years, and are intended to tackle these pressing challenges now.

Immediate, pressing reforms

- **Legal and parametric reforms, anchored in social dialogue.** Addressing the system's structural imbalances will require adjustments to contribution rates, benefit formulas, and eligibility conditions to strengthen both adequacy and financial sustainability. In this regard, a tripartite steering committee was established by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in late 2025, bringing together representatives of the NSSI, relevant public authorities, employer organisations, and trade unions, with a mandate to review the existing social insurance law. Following several months of deliberation, draft amendments were submitted in March 2026 for consideration at the ministerial and parliamentary levels. At this critical stage, an independent technical review of the proposed reforms would be instrumental to ensure that they adequately reflect the recommendations of the ILO's 2025 actuarial assessment. These should be appropriately adapted to national circumstances and policy priorities. Such a review would help strengthen the alignment of the reform package with international social security standards, while enhancing the system's financial sustainability, improving benefit adequacy, and expanding effective coverage.

- **Financial liquidity injection and equitable burden-sharing across stakeholders.** The findings of the ILO's 2025 actuarial assessment underscore the urgency of coordinated action to restore the system's short-term liquidity while advancing comprehensive reforms to both the financing and governance of the system. A transitional financing arrangement, anchored in continued support from the Ministry of Finance, will be critical to ensure uninterrupted benefit payments as reforms are phased in. At the same time, the NSSI should implement a sequenced reform package prioritising parametric measures with immediate impact on the scheme's liquidity position, including: the elimination of retirement without an age threshold after 25 years of contributions, a gradual increase in statutory retirement ages, and the progressive harmonisation of retirement ages between men and women. The latter will contribute to both sustainability and gender equity. The design and implementation of these reforms should be grounded in institutionalised tripartite social dialogue, ensuring that the costs and adjustments required are distributed in a balanced and equitable manner between the Ministry of Finance and social partners.

- **Modernisation of digital information systems and administrative processes.** Strengthening the administrative capacity of the NSSI requires a comprehensive modernisation of its digital ecosystem, addressing critical gaps in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure, data governance and management, and system integration. Current operations remain heavily reliant on paper-based processes, fragmented and decentralised Management Information System (MIS), and limited technical capacity, resulting in inefficiencies, weak data quality, and constrained service delivery. Priority actions should include a full diagnostic of existing systems, the standardisation and simplification of business processes across the benefit delivery chain, and the introduction of interoperable MIS architecture supported by clear governance frameworks. While digitisation—namely the conversion of paper-based records and manual workflows into electronic formats—constitutes an essential medium-term objective, the longer-term goal should be a sequenced digital transformation that reengineers processes, integrates systems. This will enable more integrated, efficient, and user-oriented service delivery.

- **Capacity building for the NSSI.** The NSSI requires capacity building support at all levels and across directorates, to implement the needed parametric, ICT and administrative processes modernisation reforms and to effectively manage the social insurance system.
- **Strengthened governance, financial and reporting mechanisms.** Strengthening these areas is crucial for a transparent and accountable fund that openly serves the population. This will support more credible, evidence-based policy decision making, enhance public trust in the institution’s performance, and bring the system closer in line with international good practice. Short- to medium-term priorities should focus on strengthening core data and reporting systems, including improving data quality through routine audits and internal consistency checks, and adapting the MIS to support evolving reporting requirements and periodic reviews. This should be complemented by aligning financial reporting practices with international good practice and establishing a more structured and transparent framework for financial management, including the development of a coherent investment strategy. Furthermore, governance arrangements should be reinforced through the institutionalisation of regular independent reviews. Most notably, this presupposes comprehensive actuarial assessments to assess the scheme’s financial position over the short, medium, and long-term, and to inform timely adjustments to funding, benefit design, and investment policies.

Longer-term, demographic opportunities and responsibilities also need to be incorporated

- **Cover the missing middle.** Social insurance needs to be extended to cover all workers, including those who are self-employed or in small and medium-size enterprises. This could be done through a package of governance and administrative reform measures, and design incentives involving contribution-subsidy schemes like Estidama++ in Jordan (ILO, 2026; See ILO & ISSA, 2025). Extending social insurance coverage is not only necessary to fulfil the right to social protection, but also economically rational. The informal economy represents a substantial source of untapped tax and contributory revenue that can expand coverage, strengthen social insurance finances, reduce future pressure on tax-financed benefits, and increase fiscal space for broader social investment and for the government to do more with more.
- **Inclusion of returnees, including the portability of social protection entitlements.** Syrian returnees need to be included in the social insurance system to access better protection. This requires regional social protection arrangements that enable the cross-border portability of accrued entitlements from prior countries of contribution, including Jordan, Türkiye, and much of Europe, to support smooth return and resettlement in Syria.

Ultimately, Syria is not starting from scratch. There is an existing system that can be sustained and strengthened. The discussion in this brief leads to a call to invest in a social insurance system that is already working, that is established and known. And despite its problems and with the right support, can help underpin part of Syria’s recovery. This is a crucial moment for investment to stabilise Syria’s social insurance system. For just a fraction of the cost of long-term humanitarian aid, supporting it now is a down payment on Syria's economic security and a concerted effort to ensure a future built on dignity, and a more economically secure Syria.

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