



Introduction

There is increasing agreement among social development experts that the empowerment of marginalized social groups can best be promoted through “their effective engagement in economic, social and political life, the provision of adequate resources and assets and the flexibility to exercise choice and control over their rights and well-being”.¹ This brochure examines key issues related to the empowerment of three marginalized social groups in the Arab region,² namely youth, older persons and persons with disabilities, with a view to informing the intergovernmental debate at the global level.

I. EMPOWERMENT OF YOUTH

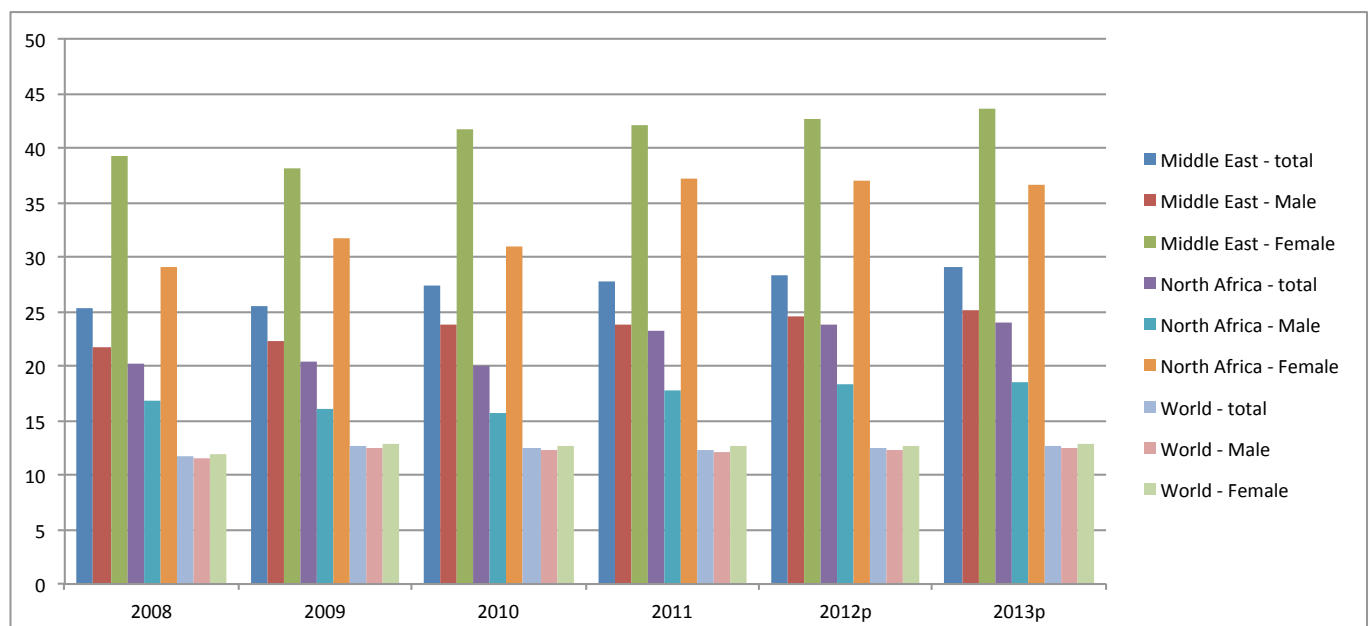
Youth are at a critical, transitional stage of their lives, moving from childhood to adulthood, from economic dependency to work, and forming families of their own. Evidence shows that if these transitions have positive outcomes, they set a stable foundation for benefits which extend across the life course. However, a negative

outcome, such as difficulty in finding decent work or in being able to integrate into adult society, can lead to negative long-term consequences such as poverty, alienation and rebellion.

The unrest witnessed in many Arab countries in recent years has highlighted the precarious and marginalized situation of young people across the region. Youth represent a large share of the Arab region’s total population – almost one fifth. They are a key group, not only because of its size, but also because progress in education across the region in recent years turned this generation of young people into the best-educated in the history of the region, bringing new ideas, immense energy, and making use of new technologies and experiences to reach out, network and find solutions to social development challenges.

Therefore, young people in the region are not only subjects of development – requiring support to make the transitions in their life – but also actors in development, providing new solutions and bringing high levels of energy and commitment to the improvement of their societies. To date, many Arab countries have made

FIGURE. YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA AND THE WORLD, 2008-2013



Note: “Middle East” includes the Islamic Republic of Iran in addition to the countries of the Mashreq and the Arabian Peninsula.
Source: International Labour Organization, Global Employment Trends for Youth 2013: A Generation at Risk, table A2 p. 80.

insufficient progress in empowering young people. They have never been treated as a separate group requiring a specific focus, but have instead been involved in a general sense in broad development plans. Moreover, their participation has not been valued in governance and political processes, nor in civil society.

On the socioeconomic front, the situation of Arab youth has been characterized by the highest levels of youth unemployment and underemployment in the world (figure 1), low levels of return to education and marginalization in the social sphere, resulting in low levels of volunteerism and participation. The development potential of this age group is underused, which also leads to discontent and social conflict.

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has sought to redress this situation through engaging with its member countries and building their capacities to develop youth-centred national policies to unleash the potential of youth. As recommended in global social development reports,³ ESCWA has also emphasized the importance of taking a participatory approach to engage youth in developing and implementing these policies. It has stressed the importance of the national-level implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth in providing a holistic approach to youth concerns, focusing not only on the economic needs of young people but also on their broader well-being, social integration and political participation. As this group will remain an important one in the years to come, ESCWA will continue to work with its member countries to assist them in designing and implementing adequate policies which will result in a richer human capital and an empowered generation, able to fulfil its potential and play a critical role in the development of the Arab countries and region.

II. EMPOWERMENT OF OLDER PEOPLE

As the Arab population ages, an increasing focus on the situation of older persons is required to ensure that they are able to age in dignity. Achieving this goal in the Arab region will require a focus on the multidimensional concerns of older persons, including their access to social protection and empowerment.

Ageing is already well underway in the Arab region. The absolute number of persons aged 65 and above has more than doubled over the past three decades, increasing from almost 6 million in 1980 to 14.4 million in 2010, making up 4.1 per cent of the total population

of the region. By 2050, the number of older persons is expected to increase to 70.4 million, representing 11.7 per cent of the total population.⁴ The ageing process is thus taking place at a faster pace than in other regions. However, it is also taking place in a period when most Arab countries are at a lower level of socioeconomic development than those countries which have already undergone this process of ageing. Arab countries have a smaller time frame and fewer resources to adjust to the consequences of ageing populations, increasing the social, economic and health challenges faced by some countries, and risking to outstrip the capacity of existing mechanisms of social and welfare support.



© Jeanette Dietl - Fotolia

Research carried out in the framework of the second review of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing⁵ and preparations for the 20-year review of progress of the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development in the Arab region have found that, although some Arab countries have developed national policies on ageing, many are still largely unprepared to meet the challenges posed and faced by older persons. Social protection systems are generally based on employment in formal sector activities, thus excluding the majority of people from access to such benefits. Women, given their weak formal labour market participation, are de facto excluded from these benefits and are thus particularly vulnerable to old-age poverty. Even those who receive these benefits are often forced to supplement their incomes through continued employment beyond legal retirement ages.

Aware of these challenges, a few Arab countries have undertaken initiatives aimed to improve the situation of older persons. For example, Jordan, Lebanon, and Libya have participated in initiatives such as the World Health Organization (WHO) Age-friendly Cities initiative, and most countries take strong stands against the issue of elder abuse. Meanwhile, many social structures give a privileged position to older persons to participate in decision-making processes. These structures have also been supplemented by specific initiatives aiming to promote the engagement of older persons in economic and voluntary activities, such as microcredit initiatives for older women. However, in general, benefits provided to older persons still tend to be welfare-based, rather than rights-based, and negative images of older persons abound. Finally, despite their potential as factors of community stability and contributors to peacebuilding, the older persons are further marginalized by ongoing conflicts in the Arab region, while humanitarian response plans often fail to integrate the specific needs of this group.

In the Arab region, caring for older persons is a moral duty and obligation rooted in customs, traditions, and religious values and principles. However, this concern should be complemented by a proactive development approach to dealing with older persons and to tackling issues of concern to them. Further work is needed to ensure that older persons are integrated into poverty reduction plans and decent work policies; that they are able to participate in society and remain active and productive for longer; and that better health services and social protection are provided for all persons, particularly

older persons. These achievements would not only benefit older persons but also, given their accumulated experience and knowledge, the whole society.

III. BUILDING THE BASELINE INFORMATION FOR POLICIES TO EMPOWER PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

In September 2013, the United Nations General Assembly convened a high-level meeting on disability and development, and adopted an outcome document aimed to promote a disability-inclusive development agenda towards 2015 and beyond. This marked an intergovernmental milestone in terms of integrating the long-standing disability-related work of the United Nations, including the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, into the ongoing discussions on the post-2015 development agenda.

In the outcome document of that meeting, representatives of Member States make a commitment to “improve disability data collection, analysis and monitoring for development policy planning, implementation and evaluation, taking fully into account

“More than 1 billion of us live with disabilities. We must remove all barriers that affect the inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities in society, including through changing attitudes that fuel stigma and institutionalize discrimination”

Ban Ki-moon, Message on the International Day for Persons with Disabilities, 3 December 2013

regional contexts”⁶ Several recent global reports addressing disability challenges in the context of the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals and the post-2015 agenda stress the lack of accurate data as a key obstacle for the formulation of national policies to empower persons with disability.⁷

At the regional level, several ESCWA reports have also highlighted the lack of accurate and comparable disability data, including in the key areas of education, employment, health and social protection. Some estimates of disability prevalence rates in ESCWA member countries vary from as low as 0.4 per cent in Qatar⁸ to 4.9 per cent in the Sudan,⁹ in striking contrast



with an estimated 15 per cent of the world population (more than one billion people) living with disabilities.

The estimated lower prevalence rates in the Arab region may arise from several factors, including the use of inconsistent definitions and lack of accurate data that meet international standards. One ESCWA report, for example, calls for the following: (a) the development of a clear regional definition in line with international standards; (b) systematic data collection and analysis; (c) the establishment of monitoring systems that involve key stakeholders; (d) the publication of periodic reports.¹⁰

In order to address these challenges, ESCWA and the League of Arab States are preparing a major study on disability in the Arab region, which will provide the first comprehensive compilation of regional disability data and country profiles. The study will also explore key trends related to disability in Arab countries, including

disability prevalence, institutional and legal frameworks, and access to education and employment. The full report is due to be published during the first half of 2014, and will thus come at an opportune time, given the closure of the Arab Decade for Persons with Disabilities in 2013 and ongoing intergovernmental discussions on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the post-2015 development agenda.

Besides offering baseline information for the formulation of national policies to empower persons with disabilities, this regional study could also provide a regional contribution to a periodic United Nations global report on disability and development, as recommended in a recent report of the Secretary-General.¹¹ Such a global report would, in turn, contribute to the monitoring of goals and targets in the post-2015 development agenda.

Endnotes

- 1 Report of the Secretary-General, Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all (E/CN.5/2013/3).
- 2 The Arab region comprises the following 22 countries: Algeria; Bahrain; the Comoros; Djibouti; Egypt; Iraq; Jordan; Kuwait; Lebanon; Libya; Mauritania; Morocco; Oman; Palestine; Qatar; Saudi Arabia; Somalia; the Sudan; the Syrian Arab Republic; Tunisia; the United Arab Emirates; Yemen.
- 3 See, for example, Report of the Secretary-General, Implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth (E/CN.5/2013/7*).
- 4 ESCWA, the demographic profile of the Arab countries. E/ESCWA/SDD/2013/Technical Paper.14
- 5 See Report of the Secretary-General, Second review and appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002 (E/CN.5/2013/6).
- 6 General Assembly, Outcome document of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the realization of the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed development goals for persons with disabilities: the way forward, a disability-inclusive development agenda towards 2015 and beyond, paragraph 4 (i) (A/68/L.1).
- 7 See, for example, Report of the Secretary-General, Mainstreaming disability in the development agenda: towards 2015 and beyond (E/CN.5/2013/9); and Report of the Secretary-General, Keeping the promise: realizing the Millennium Development Goals for persons with disabilities towards 2015 and beyond (A/65/173).
- 8 Qatar Statistical Authority, Population, Household and Establishment Census 2010, Doha.
- 9 Sudan Central Bureau of Statistics, Fifth Population and Housing Census 2008, Khartoum.
- 10 See ESCWA, Proposed methods to combat poverty among persons with disability (E/ESCWA/SDD/2011/IG.1/4(Part I)), p. 10.
- 11 Report of the Secretary-General, Realization of the Millennium Development Goals and internationally agreed development goals for persons with disabilities: a disability-inclusive development agenda towards 2015 and beyond (A/67/211).