



Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

# **Age-Structural Transitions and Sustainable Development in the Arab Region**



UNITED NATIONS

الاستقوا  
ESCWA

@ 2017 United Nations  
All rights reserved worldwide

Requests to reproduce excerpts or photocopy should be addressed to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).

All other queries on rights and licenses, including subsidiary rights, should be addressed to: ESCWA, United Nations House, Riad El Solh Square, P.O. Box: 11-8575, Beirut, Lebanon.

E-mail: [publications-escwa@un.org](mailto:publications-escwa@un.org); website: [www.unescwa.org](http://www.unescwa.org)  
United Nations publication issued by ESCWA.

The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this booklet do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Mention of commercial names and products does not imply the endorsement of the United Nations.

*Demographic trends and prospects in the Arab region unequivocally reveal an upcoming increase in the percentage of older persons across the region. Despite substantial variations between countries, overall, the pace of population ageing in the region is considerably faster when compared with developed countries. Given that Arab countries register much lower levels of development and resources and weaker or lacking institutional structures, they will have to adapt more rapidly to this phenomenon. Such challenges must be addressed in addition to difficulties pertaining to all other groups, particularly young people and the active working age population, in a context of armed conflict, massive displacement, crises and environmental vulnerability in many countries.*

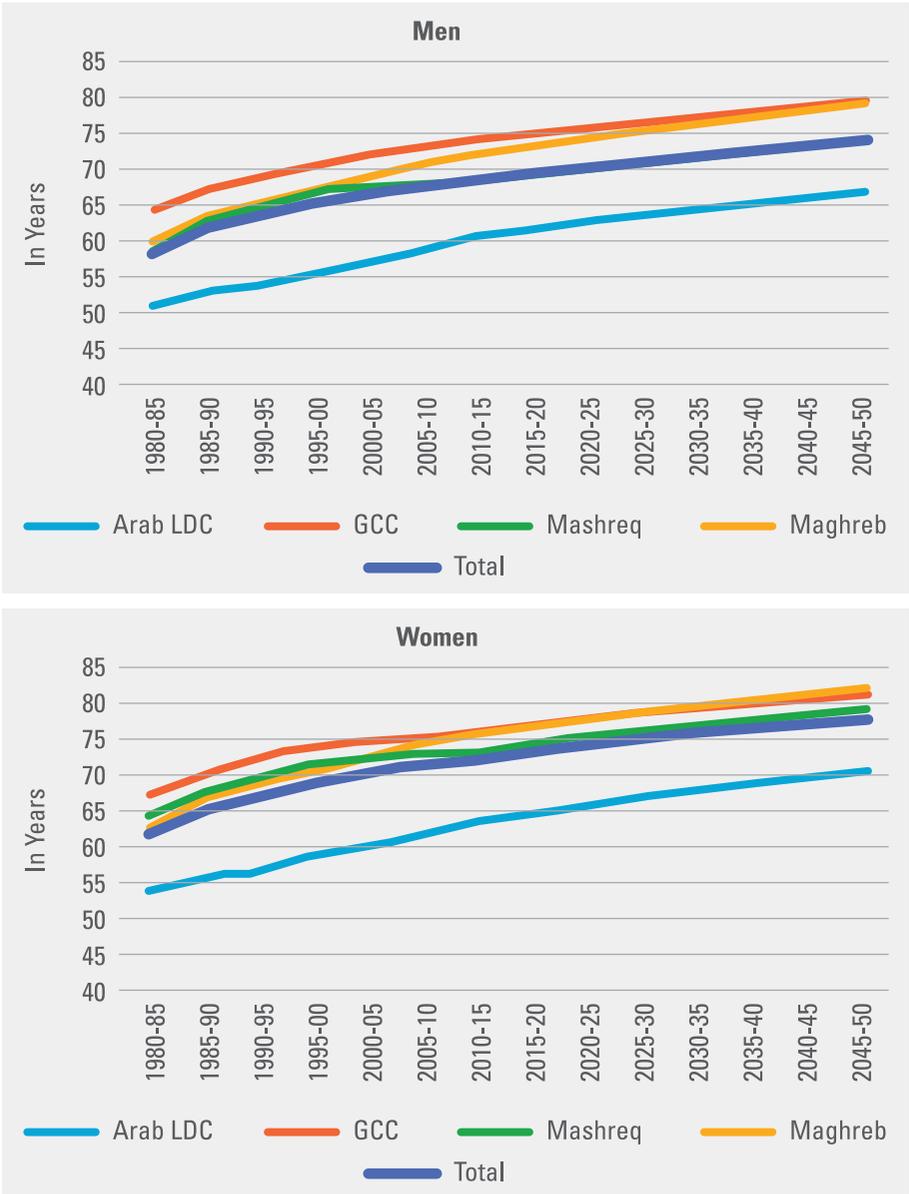
## **1. Demographic trends and prospects in the Arab region**

Over the past four decades, the Arab region has witnessed significant demographic changes. In general, the region has experienced a substantial decrease in the mortality rate, accompanied by a slower drop in the fertility rate. These common but differentiated trends have occurred at a varying pace in the four subregional groups of Arab countries.<sup>1</sup>

The mortality rate has decreased considerably as a result of medical and technological progress, as in all other regions. Most Arab countries have shown considerable progress in reducing the number of deaths from diseases and injuries for both children and adults. Life expectancy at birth has improved from 58.2 years in 1980 to 68.5 years in 2015 (ESCWA, 2016). This trend is forecasted to continue for all four country groups. Figure 1 reveals the significant gap, expected to slowly close, between Arab LDCs and the three other groups.

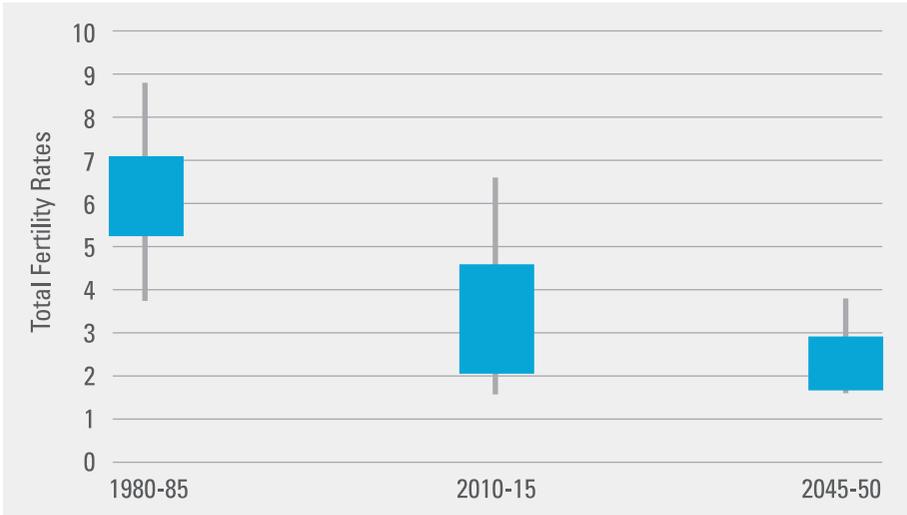
Following consistent efforts by Governments, the fertility rate has also decreased in the region, albeit more slowly than mortality. Despite significant variations between countries, the average fertility rate in 1980 stood at 6.1 children per woman (figure 2), which was considered exceptionally high (Courbage, 1999).

**Figure1.** Life expectancy at birth by subregions (weighted by population), 1980-2050



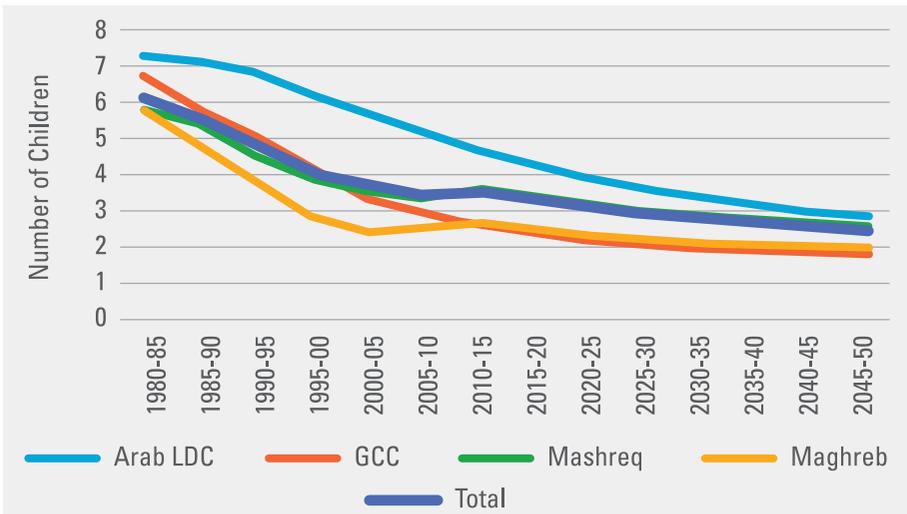
Source: United Nations (2015), medium variant.

**Figure 2.** Total fertility rates in all Arab countries, minimum, maximum and 20-60 per cent range, 1980-1985, 2010-2015 and 2045-2050



Source: United Nations (2015), medium variant

**Figure 3.** Total fertility rates in the Arab subregions, 1980-2050



Source: United Nations (2015), medium variant.

This rate decreased to 3.4 children per woman in 2015. Further decline is forecast across the four subregions with no exceptions, as shown in figure 3. By 2050, the fertility rate is expected to range in most countries between 1.7 and 2.9 children with several countries achieving below replacement fertility levels.

For further information see *Demographic Profile of the Arab Region: Realizing the Demographic Dividend*, [www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/demographic-profile-arab-region-2015-english.pdf](http://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/demographic-profile-arab-region-2015-english.pdf).

Regional demographic indicators hide important variations between countries. Box 1 provides an indication on these variations. It summarizes the demographic profiles of Iraq and Morocco as examples.

## **Box 1. Demographic profiles of Iraq and Morocco**

### Demographic profile of Iraq

In 2015, Iraq had a population of 36.423 million, expected to rise to 83.652 million by 2050. Urbanization is rapidly increasing, resulting in a huge human settlement shift towards cities. In 2015, 24.847 million people resided in urban areas, compared with 10.919 million in rural areas. By 2050, 55.653 million will live in cities and another 15.683 million in rural settings. Moreover, conflict resulted in the forced internal displacement of nearly 3.5 million in 2014.

Life expectancy at birth stood at 69.19 years in the period 2010-2015. However, projections indicate increases over the coming decades: in 2050, life expectancy at birth will rise to 74 years, with a marked difference of 4-5 years between women and men. Fertility in Iraq is one of the highest in the region, standing at 4.64 children per woman in the period 2010-2015, with an anticipated decline to 3.17 children per woman by 2045-2050.

Iraq has a dominant young age structure. In 2015, children (0-14 years) constituted 41 per cent of the total population, and young people (15-24 years) made up 19.6 per cent. By 2050, these rates will drop to 33.1 per cent and 18.2 per cent, respectively. However, a noticeable increase will occur in the proportion of the active working-age group (25-64 years) and older persons (65 years and above). The former will increase from 36.4 per cent in 2015 to 42.9 per cent by 2050, and the latter from 3.1 per cent to 5.9 per cent over the same period.

## Demographic profile of Morocco

The population of Morocco stood at 34.378 million in 2015, and is expected to increase by nearly 10 million people by 2050, reaching 43.696 million. More people were living in rural areas up to 1990. In 1995, however, this trend was not only reversed, but the urbanization rate also significantly increased. In 2015, there were 20.439 million people residing in urban areas compared with 13.516 million in rural settings. By 2050, the urban population is expected to reach 31.721 million, compared with a rural population of 11.163 million.

Morocco has achieved noticeable advances in two central demographic indicators. Firstly, life expectancy at birth stood at 73.61 years in 2010-2015, and is projected to rise significantly by almost seven years by 2045-2050, reaching 80.54 years. A small gap of around two years exists between women and men - a trend that is expected to continue until 2050. Secondly, and equally important, is the impressive decline in the fertility rate that stood at 2.56 children per woman in 2010-2015, and is expected to approach replacement levels (2.13 children per woman) by 2025-2030. Fertility will continue to drop and reach 1.88 children per woman by 2045-2050.

In 2015, the age structure was dominantly young, whereby children (0-14 years) and young people (15-24 years) comprised 27.3 per cent and 17.7 per cent of the total population, respectively. However, owing to longevity and ongoing declines in fertility, the age structure will undergo significant transformation in the future, reflected in the relative decrease of children and youth populations to 18.8 per cent and 12.7 per cent by 2050, respectively, but more importantly in a spike in the proportion of older persons (65 years and above). In 2015, they represented 6.2 per cent of the total population, and are expected to increase to 17.3 per cent by 2050. This demographic change makes Morocco one of the fastest ageing societies in the region, along with Lebanon and Tunisia.

**Source:** ESCWA, National Demographic Profiles (E/ESCWA/SDD/2015/Technical Paper.9) and parliamentary documentation (forthcoming).

Despite significant variations between countries, this situation has resulted, on the one hand, in a youth bulge that researchers and policymakers are addressing to maximize potential benefits and reduce related negative externalities; while, on the other, the old age population is steadily growing.

## 2. Ageing in the Arab region: a result of age-structural transition

The demographic transition occurring in most countries, although at a varied pace, is resulting in different age structures. The following defines four age structures (Leahy and others, 2007):

1. The very youthful age structure where two-thirds or more of the population is under 30;
2. The youthful age structure where, despite the initiation of a demographic transition, over 60 per cent of the population is under 30;
3. The transitional age structure where 45-60 per cent of the population is under 30;
4. The mature age structure where less than 45 per cent of the population is under 30, and up to a quarter is above 60.

Different levels of demographic transition can be seen in Arab countries. In some, such as Iraq, Mauritania, Palestine, the Sudan and Yemen, the demographic transition has not started yet. Their populations' age structures are very youthful. Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic have youthful structures. In most other countries, the demographic transition has been faster, presenting transitional age structures. The United Arab Emirates is the only Arab country where a mature age structure existed in 2015. By 2050, the populations of most Arab countries are expected to show mature age structures. Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar and Tunisia will be in the mature age structure category by 2030, followed by Libya, Morocco and Saudi Arabia by 2050.

The observed changes in age structures are mainly due to fertility rates, which vary considerably between countries. The fertility rate registered in very youthful countries in 2010-2015 was above four children per woman. Although the fertility rate is expected to decrease over time, it will remain above the replacement-level of 2.1 child per woman in 2045-2050.<sup>2</sup> The two youthful countries, namely Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic, had a fertility rate of between three and four children per women in 2010-2015. It is expected to decrease below the replacement level in 2045-2050 in the Syrian

Arab Republic, and in 2050-2055 in Jordan. The situation is very different in countries presenting a transitional structure. In 2010-2015, the fertility rate was equal to or slightly higher than the replacement level in Bahrain, Kuwait and Tunisia, and under the replacement level in Lebanon and Qatar. In the United Arab Emirates, which is already a mature country, the fertility rate was under the replacement level in 2010-2015.

Several conclusions, which will undoubtedly entail broader development policy implications, can be drawn from the examination of the age structure of Arab populations.

While the 0-14 group of children and adolescents is proportionally decreasing in all Arab countries, the proportion of the population aged 65 and above is growing in all countries, with no exceptions. However, the pace varies significantly between countries. A minor increase in the latter is foreseen in very youthful countries, namely Iraq, Mauritania, Palestine, the Sudan and Yemen until 2050, and a larger increase is expected in most other countries. In Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the old age group is expected to grow over six fold between 2015 and 2050. Three Arab countries, namely Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia, will be ageing in 2030 based on the definition that considers a society relatively old when the proportion of its population aged 65 and above surpasses 8-10 per cent (Gavrilov and Heuveline, 2003). Ten other countries, namely Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic and the United Arab Emirates will follow in 2050.

The major difference between countries is observed at the level of the active working age group. A proportional decrease of this age group is expected to start in Bahrain, Lebanon, Qatar and Tunisia in 2030. Its decline is foreseen in Kuwait, Oman and the United Arab Emirates from now onwards. Although at a different pace, the active working age group is however expected to continue growing until 2050 in all other countries. Very youthful countries will register the largest growth.

If not properly addressed, these trends will result in a complex situation, as ageing-related issues will not only aggravate existing development challenges, but will also create new ones. This will consequently complicate the advancement of older persons' rights and wellbeing, and influence the realization of the demographic dividend that a demographic transition may offer.

**Table 1.** Changes in population age composition in Arab countries

Country	Age	1980	2015	2030	2050
Kuwait	0-14	40.5	22.3	20.8	17.2
	15-24	17.7	13.4	14.0	11.5
	25-64	40.2	62.3	60.2	57.5
	65+	1.6	2.0	5.0	13.8
Jordan	0-14	49.0	35.5	29.3	23.7
	15-24	19.6	19.0	18.6	15.2
	25-64	28.2	41.7	46.8	49.7
	65+	3.2	3.8	5.3	11.4
Egypt	0-14	40.0	33.2	29.6	25.7
	15-24	19.2	17.3	18.3	15.5
	25-64	36.2	44.3	45.4	48.4
	65+	4.6	5.2	6.7	10.4
Lebanon	0-14	39.0	24.0	19.3	14.3
	15-24	20.6	19.5	11.4	11.5
	25-64	35.0	48.4	55.2	50.9
	65+	5.4	8.1	14.1	23.3
Libya	0-14	47.8	29.8	22.4	18.7
	15-24	17.5	15.9	17.4	12.4
	25-64	31.9	49.7	52.8	52.8
	65+	2.8	4.5	7.4	16.1
Oman	0-14	45.1	20.5	20.6	16.0
	15-24	17.6	16.3	14.7	10.5
	25-64	34.6	60.6	59.0	55.5
	65+	2.7	2.6	5.7	17.9
Morocco	0-14	43.4	27.2	23.4	18.8
	15-24	21.8	17.7	15.7	12.7
	25-64	31.5	48.9	50.3	51.2
	65+	3.3	6.2	10.6	17.3

Country	Age	1980	2015	2030	2050
Qatar	0-14	33.7	15.5	14.4	12.2
	15-24	20.1	14.6	11.5	9.7
	25-64	44.7	68.7	69.9	64.4
	65+	1.5	1.2	4.1	13.8
Sudan	0-14	47.0	40.5	35.6	30.1
	15-24	18.8	19.9	19.4	18.0
	25-64	31.3	36.2	40.8	45.8
	65+	2.9	3.3	4.1	6.1
Saudi Arabia	0-14	44.5	28.6	22.6	18.7
	15-24	17.5	15.6	16.1	12.5
	25-64	35.0	52.9	54.6	53.4
	65+	3.0	2.9	6.7	15.3
Tunisia	0-14	41.7	23.4	21.0	17.4
	15-24	20.9	15.6	14.3	11.6
	25-64	33.5	53.4	52.3	51.4
	65+	3.9	7.6	12.4	19.6
Palestine	0-14	49.9	40.2	35.7	28.8
	15-24	19.2	21.7	19.1	17.3
	25-64	28.7	35.1	41.2	47.0
	65+	2.3	3.0	3.9	6.9
Mauritania	0-14	45.3	40.0	35.8	31.1
	15-24	19.8	19.5	19.5	18.0
	25-64	32.0	37.3	40.5	44.9
	65+	2.9	3.2	4.1	5.9
Syrian Arab Republic	0-14	48.7	37.1	28.6	21.8
	15-24	19.8	20.0	17.9	14.9
	25-64	28.6	38.8	47.6	51.8
	65+	2.9	4.1	5.9	11.5

Country	Age	1980	2015	2030	2050
Bahrain	0-14	34.6	21.5	16.1	13.5
	15-24	22.1	15.2	14.0	10.0
	25-64	41.2	60.9	63.2	59.4
	65+	2.1	2.4	6.7	17.2
United Arab Emirates	0-14	28.0	13.9	12.4	11.7
	15-24	18.2	12.7	11.0	8.4
	25-64	52.4	72.2	70.3	63.6
	65+	1.5	1.1	6.3	16.3
Iraq	0-14	46.8	41.0	37.7	33.0
	15-24	18.0	19.6	19.5	18.2
	25-64	31.1	36.4	39.4	42.9
	65+	4.1	3.1	3.5	5.9
Yemen	0-14	49.4	40.3	33.7	25.2
	15-24	18.0	22.1	20.0	17.0
	25-64	29.8	34.9	42.7	51.8
	65+	2.8	2.8	3.6	6.0

Source: UN-DESA, World Population Prospects, The 2015 Revision.

### 3. Challenges ensuing from age-structural transitions in the Arab region

Little information is available on the situation and conditions of older persons in the Arab region, as development efforts and measurement tools have mainly focused on young people and economically active groups, since both remain a matter of deep concern. Socioeconomic indicators that can describe the situation of older persons in the region reveal a bleak picture. Illiteracy rates are high among older persons, especially older women, exceeding 90 per cent in several Arab countries including Algeria, Djibouti, Iraq, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan and Yemen (ESCWA, 2014). Non-communicable diseases are rising at alarming rates, and the number of people with dementia is increasing. The health system and care delivery services are under pressure as infectious diseases persist, mainly in the least developed countries. This puts into question the opportunity of ageing in good health (ESCWA, 2014).

In a context of prevailing and increasing poverty in many Arab countries, social protection in general, and particularly social schemes, present serious weaknesses. Except for some health schemes, most social security schemes lack universality as their coverage remains modest; are contributory; and are linked to formal employment despite widespread informal sector employment in the region (ESCWA, 2011). Furthermore, their financial sustainability was called into question a decade ago in view of the foreseen growing ageing population (Robalino, 2005).

Table 2 sets out data on the proportion of older women and men, above statutory pensionable age, receiving an old-age pension. It clearly shows low rates of effective old-age coverage. When disaggregated by sex, the data illustrates the huge gaps in coverage between men and women in the region.

Challenges related to ageing also arise from current transformations and expected changes in family dynamics, which play a central role in the care of older persons. The number of institutionalized older persons is insignificant in the region, not exceeding 1 per cent of the whole old age group (ESCWA, 2014). However, family support to older persons is being challenged by the following three main factors: women's increased economic participation following increased demand for labour; the migration of younger adults; and limited family resources. It is important to note that family support does not necessarily lift older persons out of poverty when families themselves suffer from limited financial resources.

**Table 2.** Old-age coverage: old-age pension beneficiaries

	Total	Male	Female	Year
Bahrain	40.1			2011
Egypt	32.7	61.7	8	2008
Iraq	56			2007
Jordan	42.2	82.3	11.8	2010
Kuwait	27.3			2008
Libya	43.3			2006
Mauritania	9.3			2002
Morocco	39.8			2009
Oman	24.7			2010
Syrian Arab Republic	16.7			2006
Sudan	4.6			2010
Tunisia	68.8			2006
Yemen	8.5			2011

**Source:** [www.social-protection.org/gimi/gess/ShowTheme.action?th.themeld=10](http://www.social-protection.org/gimi/gess/ShowTheme.action?th.themeld=10).

In addition to ensuring an enabling environment, which would allow the adult population to age healthily and lead a dignified life, the demographic trends described above raise major concerns related to realizing the demographic dividend while old age dependency is increasing, not only because of the growing number of older persons but mainly because of their highly precarious socioeconomic situation.

Furthermore, questions arise on the attention, efforts and investments that are, and can be, allocated to the old age group, while most Arab countries are currently directing their focus towards issues related to youth bulges and large children age groups.

The rights and development of children in the Arab region are threatened by numerous challenges. Several child-related challenges persist, including disease, hunger, lack of access to clean water and sanitation, child labour

and violence, particularly against girls and young women. School dropout remains an issue despite considerable gains in the education sector. The youth group is also facing challenges pertaining to education, mainly high illiteracy rates, dropout from primary education, education quality deterioration, and mismatch between education curriculums and the labour market's skill demands. This group faces a persistent lack of decent job opportunities and continues to suffer from underemployment. Youth unemployment rates in the region are the highest in the world, reaching 28 per cent in the Middle East and 30 per cent in North Africa in 2013, and particularly affecting young women. In over half of Arab countries, young people are almost entirely excluded from participation in parliament and local government. Only 50 per cent have knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases. Along with health, employment remains a key preoccupation for the working age group in the region, especially since progress in reducing unemployment is modest and the rate remains the highest in the world at 11.1 per cent in the Middle East and 12.3 per cent in North Africa over the period 1991-2013. Similarly, labour force participation is the lowest in the world mainly owing to the extremely low participation of women, at 19 per cent in the Middle East and 24 per cent in North Africa in 2013 (Al Jondi, 2015).

## 4. Recommendations

To achieve sustainable development in the region, it is crucial for Arab countries to follow development approaches that address the issues of the various age groups in an integrated and constructive manner. It is highly recommended for Arab countries to adopt a life course approach in analysis and policymaking to best manage and benefit from age-structural transitions. This approach enables policymakers to consider the potential of each age group, and the inputs required to help them reach their potential.

For more information see *Population and Development Report, Issue no. 6, Development Policy Implications of Age-Structural Transitions in Arab Countries*, [www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/e\\_escwa\\_sdd\\_13\\_2\\_e.pdf](http://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/e_escwa_sdd_13_2_e.pdf)

Complex development challenges related to various age groups are prevailing in highly unstable environments, as many Arab countries are witnessing armed conflict, war and massive displacement. Furthermore, the whole region is experiencing considerable environmental challenges, including water scarcity, long-term damage to ecosystems, air pollution, deforestation and land degradation, which further complicate efforts to boost economic growth and employment.

Failing to fully integrate a population dimension in development policymaking thus exacerbates the vulnerability of specific population groups that are less capable of developing coping mechanisms.

For more information see *Population and Development Report, Issue no.7, Overcoming Population Vulnerability to Water Scarcity in the Arab Region*, [www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/arab-population-vulnerability-water-scarcity-2015-english.pdf](http://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/arab-population-vulnerability-water-scarcity-2015-english.pdf).

Consequently, development policymaking that considers population age structures and their foreseen transitions must be promoted from an integrated human rights-based approach, taking into account the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Timely and appropriate efforts undertaken in the context of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can help mitigate the negative consequences of foreseen changes and difficulties in Arab societies and possibly generate opportunities, not only through the realization of the demographic window of opportunity, where it is still open, but also by empowering future older populations and guaranteeing them a dignified life.

## References

- Al Jondi, S.G. (2015). *Employment and Decent Work in the Arab Region*. International Labour Organization.
- Courbage, Y. (1999). Economic and political issues of fertility transition in the Arab world. *Population and Environment*, vol. 20, No. 4, pp. 353-379.
- ESCWA (2011). *Sustainability of Social Protection Systems in the ESCWA Region*. Unpublished document.
- ESCWA (2013). *Ageing in the Arab region: trends, implications and policy options*. E/ESCWA/SDD/2013/ Technical paper. 15
- ESCWA (2013). *Population and Development Report, Issue no. 6, Development Policy Implications of Age-Structural Transitions in Arab Countries*. E/ESCWA/SDD/2013/2.
- ESCWA (2015). *Demographic profile of the Arab region: realizing the demographic dividend*. E/ESCWA/SDD/2015/Technical paper. 12
- ESCWA (2015). *Population and Development Report, Issue no.7, Overcoming Population Vulnerability to Water Scarcity in the Arab Region*. E/ESCWA/SDD/2015/4.
- Gavrilov, L.A., P. Heuveline (2003). *Aging of population*. In Paul Demeny and Geoffrey McNicoll, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Population*. New York, Macmillan Reference.
- Leahy, E. and others (2007). *The Shape of Things to Come: Why Age Structure Matters to a Safer, More Equitable World*. Washington, DC: Population Action International.
- Robalino, D.A., and others (2005). *Pensions in the Middle East and North Africa: Time for Change*. World Bank.
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2015). *World Population Prospects: the 2015 Revision*, custom data acquired via website.

## Endnotes

1. The twenty-two Arab countries are divided into the following four major groups:
  - (a) Arab Least Developed Countries (Arab LDCs): Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen;
  - (b) Member States of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates;
  - (c) Arab Mashreq countries: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syrian Arab Republic;
  - (d) Arab Maghreb countries: Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia.
2. Replacement-level fertility is defined as the level of fertility required to sustain population size in the long term.

