

Distr.  
LIMITED  
E/ESCWA/SDD/2018/Brief.2  
6 August 2018  
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

# **Policy Brief**

## **From the Ideal of Social Justice to the Concept of Inequality**



**United Nations**  
Beirut, 2018

---

**Note:** The present policy brief was drafted by Mr. William L'Heude, under the guidance of Mr. Oussama Safa, Chief of the ESCWA Social Justice Section, and under the supervision of Ms. Rania Al Jazairi, First Social Affairs Officer in the ESCWA Social Development Division.

18-00376

## CONTENTS

*Page*

Introduction .....	1
<i>Chapter</i>	
<b>I. INEQUALITY OF OUTCOME AND THE ARAB UPRISINGS .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>II. INEQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY IN THE ARAB REGION.....</b>	<b>4</b>
A. Social climate .....	5
B. Social characteristics: gender dimension.....	5
C. Household characteristics .....	6
D. Environmental diversities .....	8
<b>III. INEQUALITY OF AUTONOMY AS A NEW FRAMEWORK .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>IV. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>References</i> .....	12

### LIST OF TABLES

1. Income inequality in selected Arab countries .....	3
2. Probability of not entering school by socioeconomic and geographical background .....	7
3. Probability of reaching secondary school by socioeconomic and geographical background.....	7

### LIST OF FIGURES

1. Four pillars of social justice .....	2
2. Average years of schooling for women and men by country .....	6
3. Disaster occurrences in the Arab region, 1990-2015 .....	8
4. Political rights in MENA countries .....	10
5. Political pluralism and participation rights in Arab countries, 2015.....	10

## Introduction

The concept of social justice has recently regained significance among analysts, thinkers and institutions, given that demands for democracy and social justice were the main motivations behind the 2011 Arab uprisings. The contemporary understanding of this concept has its roots in political philosophy but also crosses into other disciplines, including sociology, psychology and law. Mainly influenced by John Rawls' Kantian approach, the concept of social justice was built on the universal definition of justice and became central to social contract philosophy and leftist economic discourse.<sup>1</sup> Earlier theories of justice, such as those developed by Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, tend to be based on cooperative grounds and on the assumption that all persons can gain from a social contract that establishes a just system. The key difference that John Rawls introduced was to underpin justice principles with demands for fairness.<sup>2</sup> According to Rawls, liberty essentially concerns basic personal and political freedoms.<sup>3</sup>

Achieving justice, meaning a socially just distribution of primary social goods, requires the application of two principles. The first principle demands equal basic rights for all, which has priority over the second principle that demands equal opportunities for all and that inequalities be regarded as unjust unless they benefit the worst-off.<sup>4</sup> In other words, equality of opportunity must be of the greatest benefit to the least advantaged.

There is no consensus on a single all-encompassing definition of social justice, but Jost and Kay's definition highlights the essential aspects of the concept. They assert that social justice is a state of affairs where social benefits and burdens are distributed in line with a specified allocation principle; procedures, norms and rules governing political and other forms of decision-making must preserve the basic rights, liberties and entitlements of individuals and groups; and human beings must be treated with dignity and respect by authorities and by other relevant social actors, including fellow citizens.<sup>5</sup> This definition calls upon other concepts of the theory of justice, namely distributive, procedural and interpersonal justice.

Early work on the topic of social justice tackled questions of distributive fairness and equity in the allocation of resources. Research on procedural justice addressed outcomes and the decision-making rules used to determine those outcomes. Under Rawls' approach, distributive justice is a prerequisite to procedural justice. While distributive justice ensures equal opportunities, procedural justice is an essential requirement for achieving social justice through the so-called 'voice effect' – the opportunity to express individual views during the decision-making process and to broaden people's choices – which significantly increases perceptions of fairness.<sup>6</sup> A third type of justice subsequently emerged, interpersonal justice, to include concerns about treatment by others in everyday life.

Today, the concept of social justice is understood as a normative concept centred on the notion of fairness, closely linked to the idea of just redistribution. Accordingly, in 2015, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) adopted the Tunis Declaration on Social Justice in the Arab Region at its twenty-eighth session. The Declaration defines social justice as equal rights and access to resources and opportunities for all, while focusing on removing barriers that hinder the empowerment of disadvantaged groups to participate in decisions that govern their lives. Social justice is therefore a concept that focuses on the principles of equality, equity, rights and participation (figure 1).<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> ESCWA, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Rawls, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Rawls, 1971.

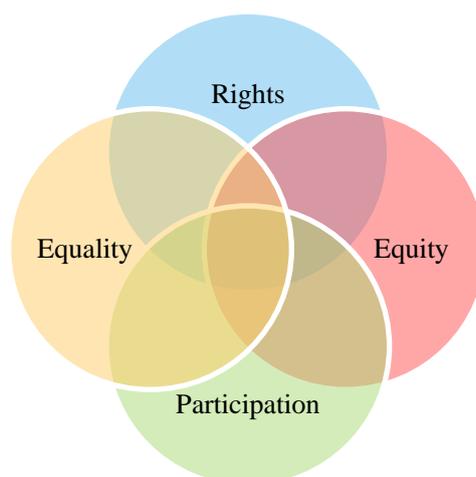
<sup>4</sup> Sen, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Jost and Kay, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.regionalcommissions.org/ESCWA28resEN1.pdf>.

**Figure 1. Four pillars of social justice**



The present policy brief focuses on a key component of social justice: the concept of inequality. It studies its manifestation in the Arab region, and concludes with policy recommendations on how to address this challenge at all levels to ensure basic rights and fundamental freedoms for all. The popular uprisings and political upheavals that swept through the Arab region in 2011 were a reaction to a host of factors, including inequality in access to services; high unemployment, especially among young people; political oppression; lack of participation in the decision-making process; significant income disparities; strained infrastructure; and institutional corruption. As stated by Stiglitz, it is important to remember that “inequality is cause and consequence of the failure of the political system”.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, understanding the factors that drive inequality in Arab countries has become a key concern.

The issue of inequality has long been central to the assessment of political risk and to the construction of more democratic and inclusive societies. Like the concept of social justice, definitions of inequality abound. However, for the most part, the egalitarian discussion has boiled down to two perspectives: equality of outcome and equality of opportunity.<sup>9</sup>

While equality of outcome focuses on results (how much income an individual earns, level of educational attainment, etc.), equality of opportunity is more concerned with whether individuals can undertake social and economic activity fairly and freely, without barriers or discrimination. Equality of opportunity is measured by many criteria and variables, such as access to education, access to occupation, social position, access to employment, and access to earnings.<sup>10</sup>

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underscores the issue of inequality. While many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) focus on equality of outcome, several targets highlight equality of opportunity. For example, SDG 10 on reducing inequalities includes target 10.2 on empowering and promoting the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status. Target 10.3 further links the two concepts by suggesting that equality of opportunity is a prerequisite for achieving equality of outcome, by ensuring equal opportunities and reducing inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in that regard.

---

<sup>8</sup> Stiglitz, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> UNDP, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Toshiaki, 2005.

This multiscale approach recognizes that curbing inequality of outcome and tackling inequality of opportunity are inextricably linked, and should therefore be addressed simultaneously. A recent ESCWA report<sup>11</sup> establishes a conceptual framework that links inequality of outcome and of opportunity to the concept of autonomy. It argues that inequality of autonomy (individuals' inability to make decisions on their life course) can substantively impact overall inequality.

## I. INEQUALITY OF OUTCOME AND THE ARAB UPRISINGS

For decades, most studies have concentrated on inequality of outcome: final inequality resulting from the economic, demographic and social process that generates the distribution of income. In the early stages of research on inequality, development frameworks largely focused on growth and distribution. Statistical research shows that inequality follows a natural trajectory as economies move farther away from agriculture towards industry, and then declines in later stages as capitalism matures.<sup>12</sup> The principal concern of such research is the nature of the relationship between income distribution and the long-term growth trajectory in developing nations.<sup>13</sup> Ncube and Anyanwu conclude that high or rising levels of income inequality have a negative effect on economic growth, and eventually increase both poverty and unemployment.<sup>14</sup>

In the Arab region, income inequality has often been measured using the Gini coefficient, which commonly yields overall moderate inequality in the Arab region compared with other regions. However, those findings contradict developments on the ground, notably the 2011 Arab uprisings, during which people protested mainly against inequality and a lack of social justice.

The Palma ratio, another tool for measuring inequality, indicates the income share of the top 10 per cent relative to the poorest 40 per cent of the population. In 2010, a Palma ratio below 1.4 indicated that a country was in the least unequal quartile, while a Palma ratio exceeding 2.8 placed a country in the most unequal quartile. Among Arab countries for which data is available over the period 2005-2013, Egypt and Iraq were the least unequal countries in the region, with respective Palma ratios of 1.2 and 1.1 (table 1).

TABLE 1. INCOME INEQUALITY IN SELECTED ARAB COUNTRIES

Country	Gini index (latest available)	Palma ratio (2005-2013)
Comoros	55.93 (2004)	7.0
Djibouti	44.13 (2013)	1.9
Egypt	51.3 (2012)	1.2
Iraq	29.54 (2012)	1.1
Jordan	33.66 (2010)	1.4
Lebanon	37 (2004)	..
Mauritania	32.42 (2014)	1.9
Morocco	40.72 (2007)	2.0
State of Palestine	34.46 (2009)	1.4
Qatar	40.4 (2013)	..
Sudan	35.39 (2009)	1.4
Tunisia	35.81 (2010)	1.5
Yemen	35.89 (2005)	1.5

Sources: Gini coefficient from United Nations University – World Institute for Development Economics Research, World Income Inequality Database 3.4. Available at <https://www.wider.unu.edu/database/world-income-inequality-database-wiid34>.

Palma ratio from UNDP, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> ESCWA, forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> Kuznets, 1955.

<sup>13</sup> Kuznets and Jenks, 1953; Lewis, 1954.

<sup>14</sup> Ncube and Anyanwu, 2012.

In 2017, Alvaredo, Assouad and Picketty attempted to measure inequality by using an innovative method of combining household surveys, national accounts, income tax data and wealth data to estimate income concentration in the Middle East for the period 1990–2016. According to their benchmark series, the Middle East appears to be the most unequal region in the world, with a top decile income share of 64 per cent compared with 37 per cent in Western Europe, 47 per cent in the United States and 55 per cent in Brazil. This is the result of considerable inequality between countries (particularly between oil-rich and population-rich countries) and of significant inequality within countries.<sup>15</sup>

## II. INEQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY IN THE ARAB REGION

The last two decades have seen increasing interest in the measurement of inequality of opportunity. According to an early academic contribution, inequality of opportunity is attained if the distribution of earnings is independent of circumstances.<sup>16</sup> Today, inequality of opportunity is examined in the context of human capability and through the notion of meritocracy, which is part of the concept of equity.

Building on Sen's pioneering capability framework,<sup>17</sup> inequality of opportunity rests on the idea that individuals should have similar opportunities: the freedom to choose one type of life over another. The novelty of this approach is that it no longer treats people as economic actors, given that equal incomes may not translate into a more equitable level of human capability and not all people convert income into wellbeing and freedom in the same way. Within the human capability approach, the primary objective of development should be the improvement of people's wellbeing and quality of life.<sup>18</sup> This echoes the notion of meritocracy, which means that positions in society and rewards should be distributed to reflect differences in effort and ability, based on fair competition. Two additional prerequisites underline this principle: all people must have access to those positions, and must have sufficient opportunity to develop the necessary ability and skills. In other words, within this framework, any disparity in opportunity must be removed. Inequality of opportunity should therefore be defined and measured in terms of the 'beings and doings' (being in good health, having loving relationships) valued by people, and of the freedom to choose and to act regardless of background.<sup>19</sup>

Circumstances should be differentiated from individuals' efforts or responsible choices. While inequality owing to circumstances beyond individuals' control is unfair, inequality resulting from factors that people can be held responsible for may be considered acceptable. Peragine argues that differences in individual outcomes which can be clearly attributed to differences in circumstances are inequitable and should therefore be compensated.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, advocates of equal opportunity postulate that public policies should only aim to eliminate such exogenous circumstances – or at least level the playing field –, while letting individuals bear the consequences of factors for which they can be held responsible.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, the contemporary formulation of inequality of opportunity implies that all individuals should have an opportunity to reach their full potential, without obstacles caused by exogenous circumstances. An equal and fair society is one where circumstances do not determine differences in life outcomes. Such circumstances, which constitute horizontal inequalities,<sup>22</sup> include social climate, personal heterogeneities, household characteristics and environmental diversities.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Alvaredo, Assouad and Picketty, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Roemer, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Sen, 1992.

<sup>18</sup> Sen, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Peragine, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Lefranc, Pistoiesi and Trannoy, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Stewart, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> UNDP, 2013.

In the Arab region, most instances of inequality of opportunity are in the field of education. Many studies analyse educational outcomes as the principal method of explaining the overall level of inequality of opportunity. Education is a fundamental dimension of wellbeing, since it is a key determinant of a person's capability.<sup>24</sup> This assertion is even truer for the Arab region, where "education is more than an intermediate input into income generation; it is often the most important measure of personal achievement and the path to social mobility".<sup>25</sup> Unequal opportunities to accumulate human capital therefore drive inequality in the region.

#### A. SOCIAL CLIMATE

The translation of incomes and resources into wellbeing outcomes can be influenced by a country's social climate. Societal conditions, such as public health and the quality of education systems, are likely to have an impact on individuals' capability. For instance, different features of the education system in the Arab region, such as the importance of private education and tutoring and access to universities through competitive examinations, are potential causes of high inequality of opportunity in education. For example, some studies show that wealthier families resort to private education to circumvent examination requirements that preclude access to preferred specializations.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the quality of primary education, particularly in public schools, and the link between human capital accumulation and employment remain weak in most Arab countries.

Moreover, horizontal inequity in health-care delivery affects many outcomes, such as wellbeing. In terms of early health care, wide disparities exist across Arab countries. In Yemen, only 47 per cent of births receive prenatal care compared with 99.1 per cent in Jordan. Yemen is also the Arab country with the highest rate of stunting: around 53.1 per cent of children aged 0-4 are stunted.<sup>27</sup> This is in line with the assumption that countries with the lowest rates of health care experience greater inequality.<sup>28</sup>

#### B. SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS: GENDER DIMENSION

Scholars have long made a case for going beyond inequalities of outcomes to examine those arising between individuals owing to their social groupings, such as age, gender or disability (personal heterogeneities). In the Arab region, individuals' characteristics play an important role in driving inequalities, especially in terms of education.

Over the past two decades, Arab countries have experienced some improvements in school enrolment and out-of-school children. However, those positive outcomes mask wide disparities between countries. Personal heterogeneities are still a great source of inequality in the region, especially between men and women in education. Women's average years of schooling are significantly lower than men's in the Maghreb and Mashreq (figure 2), but this is not the case for all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. In Oman for example, women complete on average one more year of schooling compared with men. This gender imbalance in favour of women is particularly noticeable at the tertiary level: GCC societies tend to be more conservative thus allowing men to study abroad but not women, who continue their university education at home.<sup>29</sup>

Concerning other gender-related issues, significant gaps remain in the Arab region in terms of economic and political participation. Even though the majority of Arab countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a lack of explicit reference to prohibiting gender-based discrimination in many Arab countries' constitutions and the existence of legal,

---

<sup>24</sup> Sen, 1985.

<sup>25</sup> Salehi-Isfahani, Hassine and Assaad, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Barsoum, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Krafft and El-Kogali, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Paes de Barros, Ferreira, Molinas Vega and Saavedra Chanduvi, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Bahry and Marr, 2005.

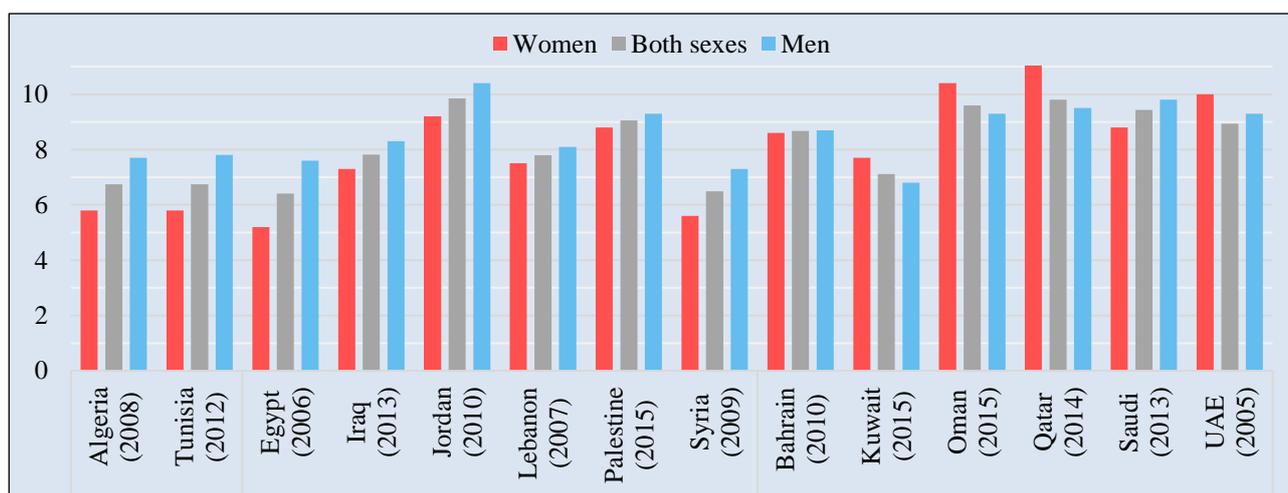
structural and cultural barriers severely limit women’s rights and their access to justice. The guardianship system, economic dependency and centralized justice systems are some factors contributing to a lack of women’s access to the justice system. Moreover, weak representation of women in the judiciary, the lowest in the world, hinders women’s ability to access justice.

Nevertheless, following the Arab uprisings, increased women’s representation in public life and new forms of participation have paved the way for legal reforms, such as the adoption of progressive electoral laws in several countries, including Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, the Sudan and Tunisia.<sup>30</sup> For example, in June 2016, the Tunisian Assembly of the Representatives of the People adopted a robust gender parity law governing municipal and regional elections.

### C. HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS

Studies have also identified inequality patterns originating from several household characteristics, like parental background in terms of social class and education, household income, and household geographic location. For instance, in relation to health issues, parental wealth is a key factor contributing to inequality of opportunity in child health in Morocco.<sup>31</sup> Child health is also affected by location in Egypt.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, high levels of inequality of opportunity in education are largely attributable to household wealth.

**Figure 2. Average years of schooling for women and men by country**



Source: ESCWA calculations based on UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Available at <http://uis.unesco.org/>.

Note: In this figure, country-level data only include the latest year available.

Intrahousehold distribution of income is also a crucial factor linking individual outcomes and opportunities with family income levels. For example, young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to access high-level positions.<sup>33</sup> In Egypt, family wealth is key to determining educational outcomes. Only 9 per cent of young people from families in the lowest wealth quintile are likely to attend university compared with 80 per cent from families in the highest quintile.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> ESCWA, 2015b.

<sup>31</sup> Assaad, Krafft, Hassine and Salehi-Isfahani, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Binzel, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Assaad, 2013.

The most vulnerable minors are rural children with illiterate parents in the lowest wealth quintile. In contrast, the most advantaged minors are urban children whose parents hold at least secondary qualifications and belong to the top wealth quintile.<sup>35</sup> Comparing several Arab countries shows that almost all most advantaged children, both boys and girls, enter school (table 2). Tunisian most vulnerable children have the lowest chance of not entering school (0 per cent for boys and 5 per cent for girls). However, in other countries, there are wide disparities between socioeconomic and geographical background and gender. For instance, 94 per cent of the most vulnerable girls in Yemen never enter school, compared with only 1 per cent for the most advantaged girls.

TABLE 2. PROBABILITY OF NOT ENTERING SCHOOL BY SOCIOECONOMIC AND GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Country	Most vulnerable		Most advantaged	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Egypt	17%	25%	0%	0%
Iraq	62%	76%	0%	0%
Jordan	1%	11%	0%	0%
State of Palestine	19%	34%	0%	1%
Syrian Arab Republic	9%	21%	0%	0%
Tunisia	0%	5%	0%	0%
Yemen	60%	94%	0%	1%

Source: Assaad, Salehi-Isfahani and Hendy, 2014.

Across all studied countries, almost all advantaged children enter secondary school, while few of the most vulnerable children reach secondary school (table 3). In Iraq, only 8 per cent and 3 per cent of the most vulnerable boys and girls, respectively, attend secondary institutions.

In several Arab countries, other household characteristics play a role in determining inequality of opportunity in education, especially regarding student test scores.<sup>36</sup> In Egypt, around 20 per cent of inequality of opportunity in wages is attributed to parents' background and geographic location,<sup>37</sup> with parental education accounting for 13 per cent of wage inequality of opportunity.<sup>38</sup> Fathers' and especially mothers' education seem to be important determinants of children's education access. It also affects inequality of opportunity within higher education by impacting the specializations that their children can choose.<sup>39</sup>

TABLE 3. PROBABILITY OF REACHING SECONDARY SCHOOL BY SOCIOECONOMIC AND GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Country	Most vulnerable		Most advantaged	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Egypt	54%	43%	100%	99%
Iraq	8%	3%	94%	96%
Jordan	52%	46%	91%	100%
State of Palestine	25%	31%	92%	93%
Syrian Arab Republic	17%	10%	93%	96%
Tunisia	41%	30%	100%	99%
Yemen	27%	4%	99%	99%

Source: Assaad, Salehi-Isfahani and Hendy, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Assaad, Salehi-Isfahani and Hendy, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Salehi-Isfahani, Hassine and Assaad, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Hassine, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Assaad, Krafft, Roemer and Salehi-Isfahani, 2016.

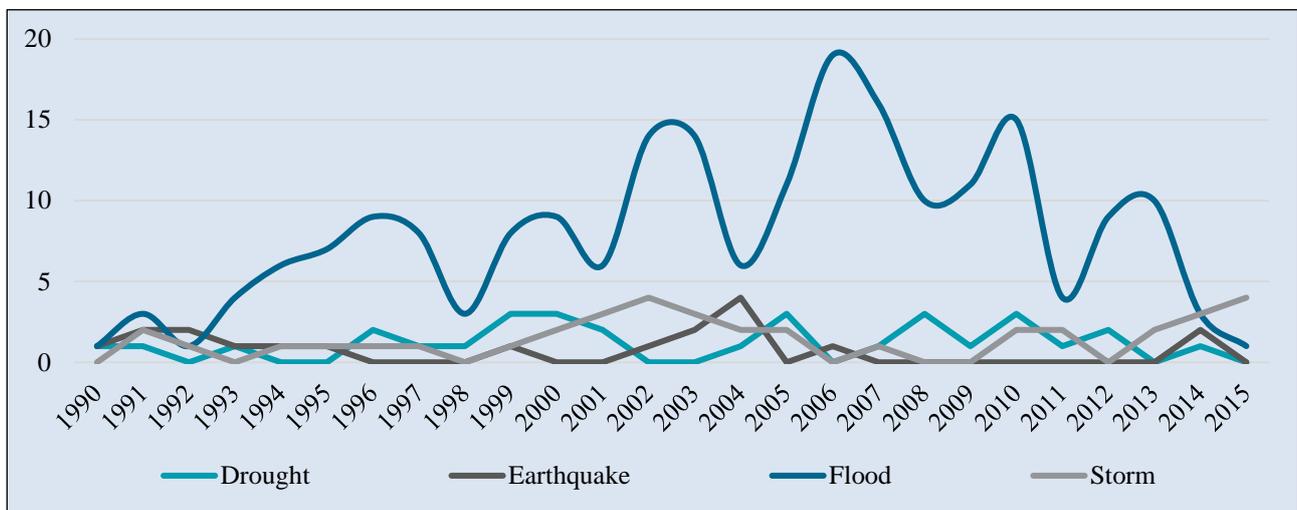
<sup>39</sup> Krafft, Elbadawy and Assaad, 2013.

#### D. ENVIRONMENTAL DIVERSITIES

Environmental diversities can also influence a wide range of outcomes. For example, in some countries, they can be a major determinant of what individuals can purchase with their income. The poorest countries of the region are particularly affected by adverse climatic conditions, such as droughts, floods and extreme temperatures (figure 3). The Arab Sustainable Development Report highlights an increase in reported occurrences of disasters in the region, notably floods (figure 3).<sup>40</sup> Large groups in Somalia and the Sudan have been affected by alternating periods of floods and draughts, rendering thousands destitute and homeless.

So far, research into which inequalities matter for wellbeing has focused either on assessing inequality of outcome or on inequality of opportunity. However, this emphasis has underestimated relational inequalities – inequality in voice and agency. It also ignores that improving socioeconomic indicators is highly dependent on the extent to which individuals are empowered to shape decision-making in a fair and transparent environment.

**Figure 3. Disaster occurrences in the Arab region, 1990-2015**



Source: ESCWA, 2015e.

### III. INEQUALITY OF AUTONOMY AS A NEW FRAMEWORK

The concept of autonomy refers to “the amount of choice, control and empowerment an individual has over their life”.<sup>41</sup> This notion emerged from an intergenerational shift from an emphasis on economic security towards increased focus on subjective wellbeing, quality of life and self-expression concerns.<sup>42</sup>

These values are also linked to rising demand for participation in decision-making. Autonomy draws on political, philosophical and psychological theories, and calls upon the capability approach of human wellbeing in the sense that the capability theory is geared towards the realization of opportunities for an autonomous life.<sup>43</sup> In an autonomous society, people cultivate and express their own preferences, ideas and abilities. Sen’s notion of agency, summarized as “what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important”,<sup>44</sup> is particularly relevant to this concept. Within this framework, equality of

<sup>40</sup> ESCWA, 2015e.

<sup>41</sup> Burchardt, Evans and Holder, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Inglehart, 1997.

<sup>43</sup> Claassen, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Sen, 1985.

autonomy indicates “whether people are empowered to make decisions and act on those decisions in critical areas of their lives”.<sup>45</sup> It was this specific indicator that was included in the analysis of perceptions of autonomy in the *Social Development Report on Inequality, Autonomy and Change in the Arab Region*.<sup>46</sup> The report defines and measures autonomy in the Arab world, comparing it with values for the rest of the world and for different countries and socioeconomic groups. It highlights a perceived autonomy gap in the Arab region, investigates its distribution among countries and groups, and underscores its implications for attitudes towards various forms of inequality in the region, mainly patriarchy, gender inequality, social and religious tolerance, preference for social justice and civic action. It defines autonomy as comprising two elements, one negative and one positive. The negative concept refers to the capacity to act autonomously: to be in control of one’s life and to have freedom to choose how to live. This is measured by the extent to which individuals feel that they are in control of their life. The positive value refers to the extent to which autonomy is desired, and is measured by how individuals value independence relative to obedience (self-expression). Based on those definitions, the report reveals the following:

- For the Arab region and other developing countries, the two autonomy variables do not move in parallel, unlike in developed countries. Society seems divided mostly by age group between young dreamers with aspirations for change but no power over events, and controllers who can influence events but have no desire to do so;
- Although Arab young people have less control over their life compared to older persons, there has been a recent rise in their self-expression;
- Self-expression translates into more social tolerance and a preference for equality, while life control translates into more political involvement. Such correlations are largest usually among the young and the educated. Nevertheless, results show a lower emancipative effect of education on self-expression in the Arab region compared with rest of the world (i.e., the most educated do not necessarily believe in self-expression);
- Progress has been made towards some progressive values, such as support for gender equality and greater civic involvement. However, the region remains ‘conservative’ in terms of democratic values (civic engagement, confidence in institutions), gender equality and social and religious tolerance compared with the rest of the world;
- Preference for democracy rose at first but eventually declined after the uprisings;
- Women in all Arab countries are much more pro-gender than men;
- The region’s preference for redistribution contrasts with its views on inequality.

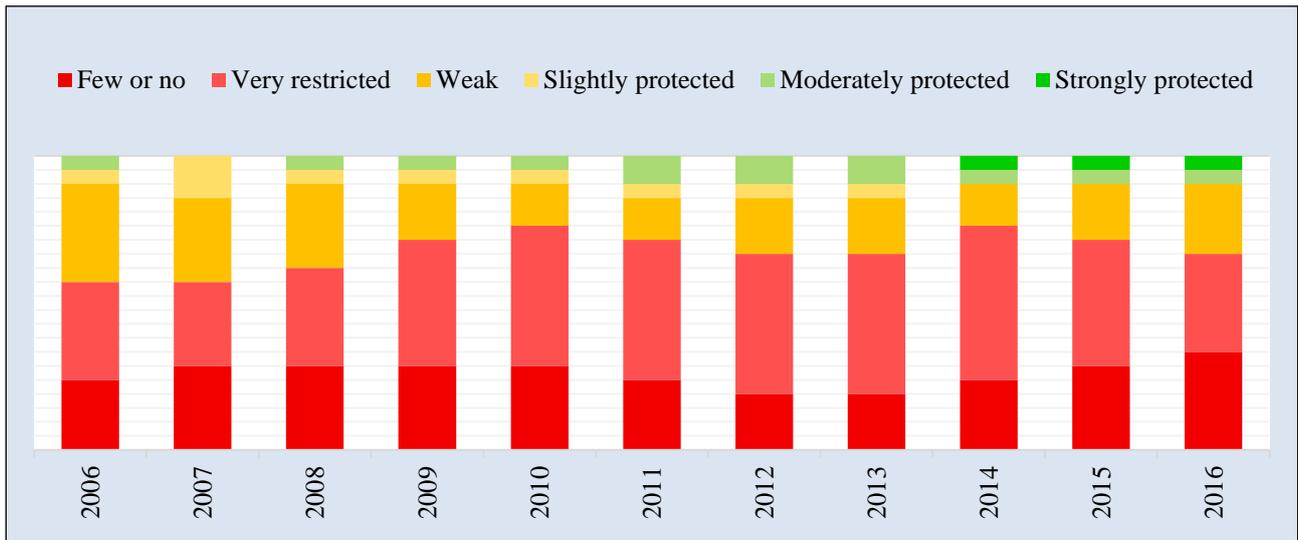
As mentioned, autonomy is closely associated with self-expression. The latter however cannot be manifested without civil and political rights. To assess political rights within a country, Freedom House has developed an indicator based on electoral process, political pluralism and participation rights, and the functioning of Government. An analysis of this indicator denotes that the MENA region has long been one of the worst-performing regions in terms of political rights (figure 4). In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, the region did not experience improvements in its citizens’ political rights. In 2016, while most countries had few, very restricted or weak political rights, only Tunisia enjoyed a wide range of political rights, including free and fair elections. The new Tunisian constitution of 2014 and electoral law were praised by observers for providing a credible framework that reflects the will of voters. Moreover, the Government, international organizations and non-governmental organizations have worked to increase the political participation of marginalized groups. Consequently, in 2016, Tunisia was the only country in the region considered ‘free’; other Arab countries were ‘partially free’ but the vast majority were ‘not free’.

---

<sup>45</sup> Burchardt, Evans and Holder, 2010.

<sup>46</sup> ESCWA, forthcoming.

**Figure 4. Political rights in MENA countries**

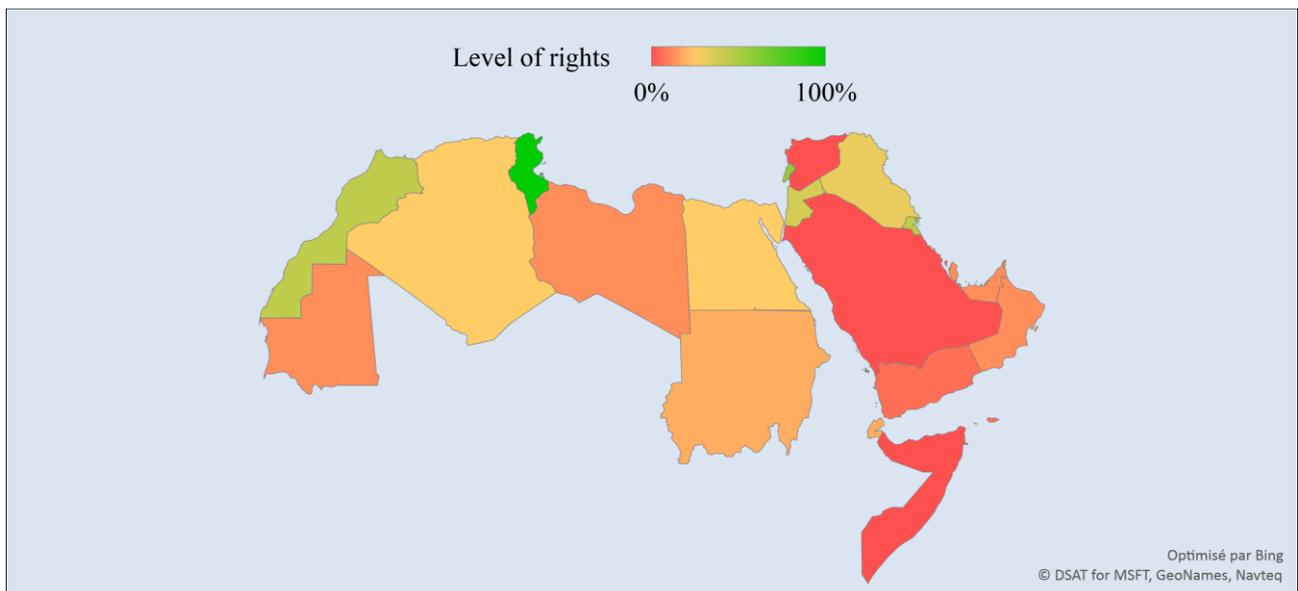


Source: ESCWA calculations based on Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2017. Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017>.

Note: Calculations cover all Arab countries except the Comoros and Djibouti.

The limitations of Arab countries in terms of citizens' political participation were highlighted by the 2015 World Governance Indicators (WGI). Using various indices developed by the World Bank, the African Development Bank, Transparency International and other non-governmental organizations, the 'voice and accountability' dimension of WGI captures perceptions of the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their Government, as well as freedom of expression, of association and of the press. In 2015, no MENA country except Tunisia was above the global average for 'voice and accountability'. The political rights indicator developed by Freedom House includes a subcategory that assesses political pluralism and participation rights in MENA countries (figure 5) – once again, only Tunisia provides its citizens with full and strong political participation rights.

**Figure 5. Political pluralism and participation rights in Arab countries, 2015**



Source: ESCWA calculations based on Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2017. Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017>.

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Social justice can only be achieved by combatting inequality at all levels. The assessment of inequality should target not only inequality of outcome and inequality of opportunity, but also inequality of autonomy. Interventions should focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized groups to ensure that no one is left behind in the development process. This should be undertaken in the context of a wider macroeconomic and social policy framework, which includes promoting employment, quality education for all, decent work and social protection, and instituting participatory modes of governance. Special attention should be accorded to the elimination of all discriminatory laws and practices against women and girls. The present policy brief provides the following recommendations towards ensuring more just and equal societies:

- Adopt relevant socioeconomic policies to reduce inequality in access to services and increase employment opportunities by targeting underprivileged areas at the national level;
- Adopt a progressive taxation system to prompt the redistribution of resources and extend social protection schemes and coverage to include all members of society by increasing state social expenditure and strengthening community-based social security organizations;
- Institutionalize a system of governance in public institutions based on meritocracy, fighting corruption and eliminating barriers to equal and fair access to social and economic resources and services;
- Improve access to quality education for all and ensure universal access to early health care, which greatly affects individual outcomes and undermines overall inequality;
- Eliminate *dejure* discrimination against women in laws and legislation in all fields, and ensure the enforcement of laws that promote gender equality and the empowerment of women;
- Observe political and civil rights, especially by ensuring freedom of expression and holding fair and free elections.

## References\*

- Alvaredo, F., Assouad, L. and Piketty, T. (2017). Measuring Inequality in the Middle East 1990-2016: The World's Most Unequal Region? Accessed at <https://wid.world/document/alvaredoassouadpiketty-middleeast-widworldwp201715/>.
- Assaad, R. (2013). Equality for all? Egypt's free public higher education policy breeds inequality of opportunity. *Is there equality of opportunity under free higher education in Egypt*.
- Assaad, R., Krafft, C., Hassine, N. B., & Salehi-Isfahani, D. (2012). Inequality of opportunity in child health in the Arab World and Turkey. *Middle East Development Journal*, 4(2), 1250006-1.
- Assaad, R., Krafft, C., Roemer, J., & Salehi-Isfahani, D. (2016). Inequality of opportunity in income and consumption in Egypt. In *Economic Research Forum Working Papers* (No. 1002).
- Assaad, R., Salehi-Isfahani, D., & Hendy, R. (2014). Inequality of opportunity in educational attainment in Middle East and North Africa: Evidence from household surveys. In *Economic Research Forum Working Paper Series No* (Vol. 834).
- Bahry, L., & Marr, P. (2005). Qatari women: a new generation of leaders? *Middle East Policy*, 12(2), 104.
- Barsoum, G. (2016). The public sector as the employer of choice among youth in Egypt: The relevance of public service motivation theory. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 39(3), 205-215.
- Binzel, C. (2011). Decline in social mobility: Unfulfilled aspirations among Egypt's educated youth.
- Burchardt, T., Evans, M., & Holder, H. (2010). Measuring inequality: autonomy-the degree of empowerment in decisions about one's own life.
- Claassen, R. (2010). The Place of Autonomy in a Capability Theory of Justice. *Draft Text for Presentation at Politicologenetmaal*.
- Hassine, N. B. (2011). Inequality of Opportunity in Egypt. *The World Bank Economic Review*, 26(2), 265-295.
- Inglehart, R. (1997). *Modernization and postmodernization: Cultural, economic, and political change in 43 societies*. Princeton University Press.
- Jost, J. T., & Kay, A. C. (2010). Social justice: History, theory, and research. *Handbook of social psychology*.
- Krafft, C., Elbadawy, A., & Assaad, R. (2013). Access within the Higher Education System: Evidence for More Inequality of Opportunity. *Is There Equality of Opportunity under Free Higher Education in Egypt?*
- Krafft, C., & El-Kogali, S. (2014, November). Inequalities in Early Childhood Development in the Middle East and North Africa. In *Economic Research Forum Working Paper Series No* (Vol. 856).
- Kuznets, S. (1955). Economic growth and income inequality. *The American Economic Review*, 1-28.

---

\* Issued as submitted.

- Kuznets, S., & Jenks, E. (1953). Shares of Upper Income Groups in Savings. In *Shares of Upper Income Groups in Income and Savings* (pp. 171-218). NBER.
- Lefranc, A., Pistolesi, N., & Trannoy, A. (2005). Inequalities of outcome vs inequalities of opportunities: are all western societies alike. *Rev. Income Wealth*.
- Lewis, W. A. (1954). Economic development with unlimited supplies of labour. *The Manchester school*, 22(2), 139-191.
- Ncube, M., & Anyanwu, J. C. (2012). Inequality and Arab spring revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East. *Africa Economic Brief*, 3(7), 8.
- Paes de Barros, R., Ferreira, F. H., Molinas Vega, J. R., & Saavedra Chanduvi, J. (2009). Measuring inequality of opportunities in Latin America and the Caribbean. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Peragine, V. (2004). Ranking income distributions according to equality of opportunity. *Journal of Economic Inequality*, 2(1), 11-30.
- Rawls, J. (1958). Justice as fairness. *The philosophical review*, 164-194.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1971). A theory of justice. Harvard Press, Cambridge.
- Roemer, J. E. (1998). *Theories of distributive justice*. Harvard University Press.
- Salehi-Isfahani, D., Hassine, N. B., & Assaad, R. (2014). Equality of opportunity in educational achievement in the Middle East and North Africa. *Journal of Economic Inequality*, 12(4), 489.
- Sen, A. (1985). Commodities and Capabilities.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1992). *Inequality Reexamined*. Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2000). Social justice and the distribution of income. *Handbook of income distribution*, 1, 59-85.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2003). Development as Capability Expansion, in *Readings in Human Development*, Fukuda-Parr, S. et al. (eds.). Oxford University Press.
- Stewart, F. (2001). *Horizontal inequalities: A neglected dimension of development*. United Nations University, World Institute for Development Economics Research.
- Stiglitz, J. E. (2012). *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*. WW Norton & Company.
- Toshiaki, T. (2005). The Difference between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome. Available at [http://www.esri.go.jp/jp/prj/int\\_prj/prj-2004\\_2005/macro/macro16/08-4-R.pdf](http://www.esri.go.jp/jp/prj/int_prj/prj-2004_2005/macro/macro16/08-4-R.pdf).
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2015). Concepts of Inequality. Development Issues No. 1.
- United Nations Development Programme (2013). *Humanity divided: Confronting inequality in developing countries*.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2015). *Human Development Report 2015: Work for Human Development*.

- United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2013). Social Justice and Participation Policy Brief. Social Development Division Technical Paper, No. 12. [E/ESCWA/SDD/2013/Technical Paper.12](#).
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2015a). Status of Arab Women Report: Access to Justice for Women and Girls in the Arab Region, From Ratification to Implementation of International Instruments. Center for Women, No. 1. [E/ESCWA/ECW/2015/1](#).
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2015b). Against Wind and Tides: A Review of the Status of Women and Gender Equality in the Arab Region (Beijing +20). Center for Women, No. 3. [E/ESCWA/ECW/2015/3](#).
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2015c). What Remains of the Arab Spring? Challenges Impeding the Achievement of Social Justice in the Arab region. [E/ESCWA/SDD/2015/3](#).
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2015d). From Government to Governance: How Will the Arab Region Meet the Goals of Sustainable Development in the Post 2015 Period? Emerging and Conflict-Related Issues Division Working Paper, No. 3. [E/ESCWA/ECRI/2015/WP.3](#).
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2015e) Arab Sustainable Development Report.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (forthcoming). Social Development Report (2): Inequality, Autonomy and Change in the Arab Region.