



A View from the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

Social Justice Matters

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Introduction

Policymakers and development practitioners have spent decades working to make the Arab region a “better place”. Yet, the demands for social justice, freedom and dignity have revealed the fragility of the prevailing social contracts. They have asserted that despite improvements on several social and economic fronts, societies in the region are still far from being equitable, fair and just. The missing links between economic growth, equality and participation call for a rethink of the development paradigm in the region and a better understanding of the meaning and ramifications of social justice.

This pamphlet aims to provide general information and raise awareness on social justice and related challenges in the Arab region, and sheds light on what ESCWA is doing to address them. It is intended for policymakers and practitioners, civil society organizations and activists,



researchers and mainstream media as well as anyone seeking fundamental information on this topic.

The meaning of the social justice concept

Contemporary thinkers have addressed social justice as an offshoot of distribution. One of the most influential protagonists of this idea was John Rawls, whose book – A Theory of Justice – advanced the idea of justice as fairness and was central to his philosophy of the social contract. Some theorists have further developed this notion by linking it to what needs to be distributed

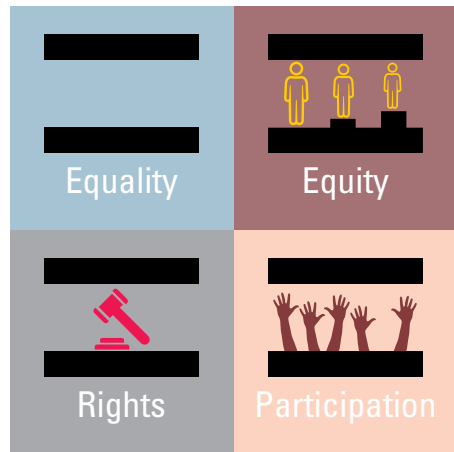
and the patterns of distribution. Others have argued that social justice requires the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression.¹

In 2006, the United Nations interpreted social justice as “the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth...”, this process must assure that

“growth is sustainable, that the integrity of the natural environment is respected, that the use of non-renewable resources is rationalized, and that future generations are able to enjoy a beautiful and hospitable earth”.² It then identified six key “fault” lines that can severely impair the pursuit of social justice and peace. These include the inequalities in the distribution of income and assets; in access to employment opportunities; to knowledge; to health; and to social security; as well as in opportunities for civic engagement and participation.³

In 2014, ESCWA succeeded to reach regional consensus on a definition of social justice, which includes *equal rights and access to resources and opportunities to all men and women, paying particular attention to the removal of barriers that hinder the empowerment of disadvantaged*

The Four Pillars of Social Justice



groups to fulfil their potential to participate in decisions that govern their lives. In this definition, social justice is centred on the principles of *equality, equity, rights and participation*.⁴

Achieving social justice is a core commitment to realize the internationally agreed upon goals

Most UN documents and summits on social development emphasize the principles of justice, equity, democracy, participation, transparency, accountability and inclusion as indispensable for the promotion of development and human dignity, and the maintenance of peace and security. These provisions have led the United Nations General Assembly, in 2007, to proclaim 20 February as the **World Day of Social Justice (WDSJ)**. The observance of WDSJ is designed

to support efforts of the international community in poverty eradication, the promotion of full employment and decent work, gender equity and access to social well-being and justice for all.⁵ The most explicit international commitment towards social justice⁶ is probably the **ILO 2008 Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization** which reflects the broad consensus among the three ends of production (governments, employers and workers) on the need for a strong social

dimension to globalization, namely through the Decent Work Agenda, to achieve improved and fair outcomes for all.



The pursuit of social justice has also considerable impact on the achievement of the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.

Although the term social justice is not explicitly mentioned in the declaration of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the concept is fundamentally imbedded in the document through emphasis on such principles as human

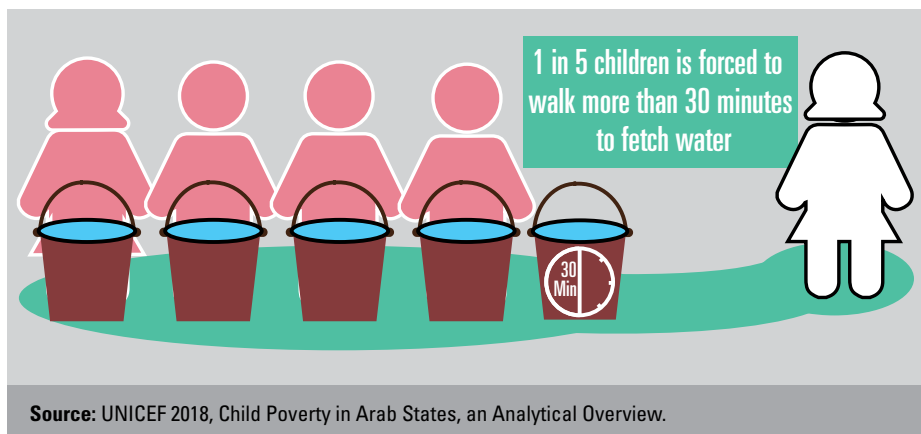
rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality, non-discrimination and promising to leave no one behind.⁷ Moreover, the SDGs include critical commitments to ending poverty and hunger, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, achieving gender equality, reducing inequality, promoting decent work for all, combating climate change and its impacts, and other such impediments to social justice. It is important to note here that **Goal 16** is fundamental to achieving social justice through reaffirming the intricate roles of peace, inclusion, access to justice including social, economic, environmental, cultural and political justice, and accountable institutions as prerequisites for sustainable development.

The quest for social justice in the Arab region: navigating murky waters

The principle of “leaving no one behind” is one of the key challenges that the Arab region faces. Despite significant progress, the needs of specific social groups such as children, women, youth, persons with disabilities, older persons, migrants and refugees are not addressed to the extent they should be. Across the region, gaps in health outcomes, unequal access to economic opportunities and environmental goods, widening disparities in income, wealth and education and the absence of meaningful venues to voice grievances remain.

Children in the Arab region bear the brunt of social injustice⁸

- One in four children in the Arab region experiences acute poverty.
- 52.5 million children (44.1 per cent) in Egypt, Iraq, Morocco and Yemen suffer from moderate poverty. Rural children, those in households where the head has no or little education, and those living in low-income families are most at risk of being multidimensionally poor.



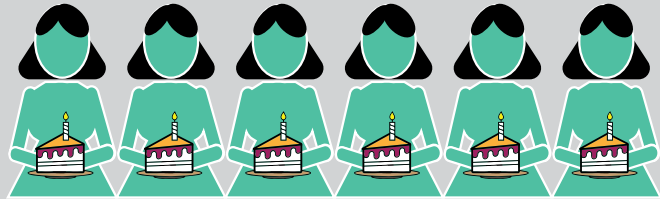
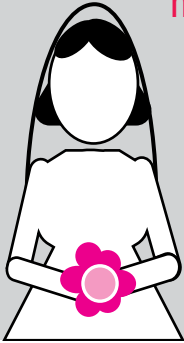
- One-third of children in the region suffer from acute housing deprivation, living in houses with primitive flooring and dealing with overcrowding of more than 4 people to a room.
- 45 per cent of children experience acute water deprivation and one in five children is forced to walk more than 30 minutes to fetch water.
- Children living in rural areas are 5 times more likely to be acutely deprived in sanitation than those living in urban areas.
- One in four children experiences acute nutrition deprivation (i.e. not meeting norms on breastfeeding practice or experiencing wasting).
- One quarter of children aged 5 to 17 are not enrolled in school or have fallen two grades behind.
- One in seven girls in the Arab region

is reportedly married before her 18th birthday.⁹

Much left to do on social policy

- Ten countries of the region have an estimated 116.1 million (40.6 per cent) poor persons, of which 38.2 million (13.4 per cent) live in acute poverty, particularly in rural areas.¹⁰
- Average health expenditure remained stagnant between 2000 and 2014, at around 2 per cent of GDP, compared to 6 per cent in OECD countries in 2013.¹¹
- Financing health care is covered for the most part by government insurance schemes and out-of-pocket expenditures, which account for 55 and 32 per cent of total health expenditure respectively,¹² keeping in mind that public health schemes, in most cases, benefit public and other formal sectors, leaving the large

1 in 7 girls in the Arab region is reportedly married before her 18th birthday



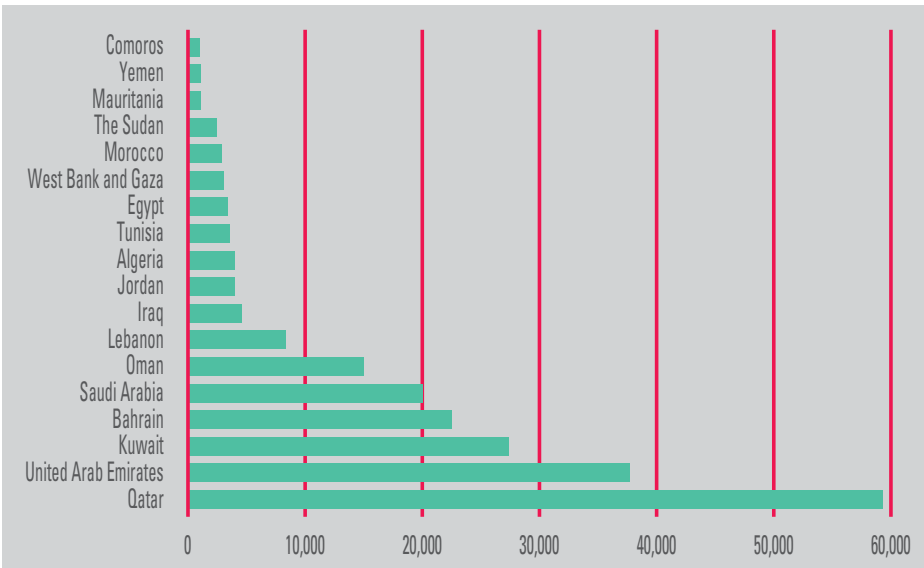
Source: ESCWA, 2015. Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in the Arab Region: Dynamics, Challenges and Policy Options (E/ESCWA/ECW/2015/2).

informal workers population without health coverage.

- Labour market in the region is marred with high unemployment (10.2 per cent) with variations between countries. High unemployment is sustained in part by the low female participation rate, standing at 20.9 per cent.¹³
- Public expenditure on social protection (excluding health) in the Arab States, is at 2.5 per cent of GDP, with significant variations between countries, ranging from 0.4 per cent in the Syrian Arab Republic to 9.2 per cent in Kuwait.¹⁸
- Public spending on education decreased from 5.5 per cent of GDP in the 1990s to 4.5 per cent of GDP in the 2000s.¹⁴
- Despite gains in the adult literacy rate, which improved from 55.2 per cent in 1990 to 78.1 per cent in 2013, it remains below the world average of 85.2 per cent.¹⁵
- ILO estimates that the coverage of old-age pensions is only 27.4 per cent¹⁶ due to the low share (32.9 per cent) of active contributors in the total labour force and the concentration of women in informal jobs or unpaid family work.¹⁷
- The Arab region is characterized by considerable disparities in terms of wealth and economic performance (figure 1).
- Income inequality in the region is lower than in the rest of the world. However, the income gap is widening between the top percentile (p90) and the bottom two (p25 and p50).¹⁹
- In Egypt, wage inequality decreased between 1988 and 1998 but later increased for all education groups. In Jordan, Tunisia and Egypt, wage inequality is the highest among the most educated.²⁰

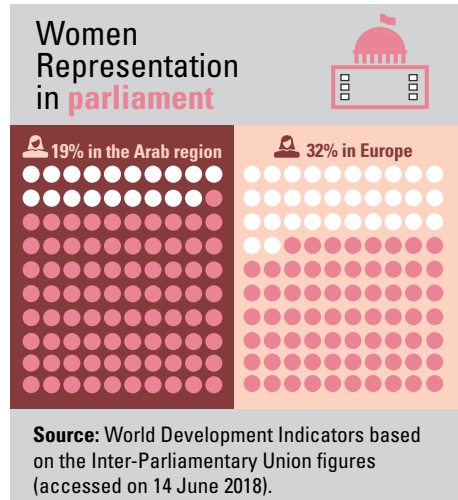
Progress masks rising inequality on many fronts

Figure 1. GDP per capita (\$) in selected Arab countries, 2016

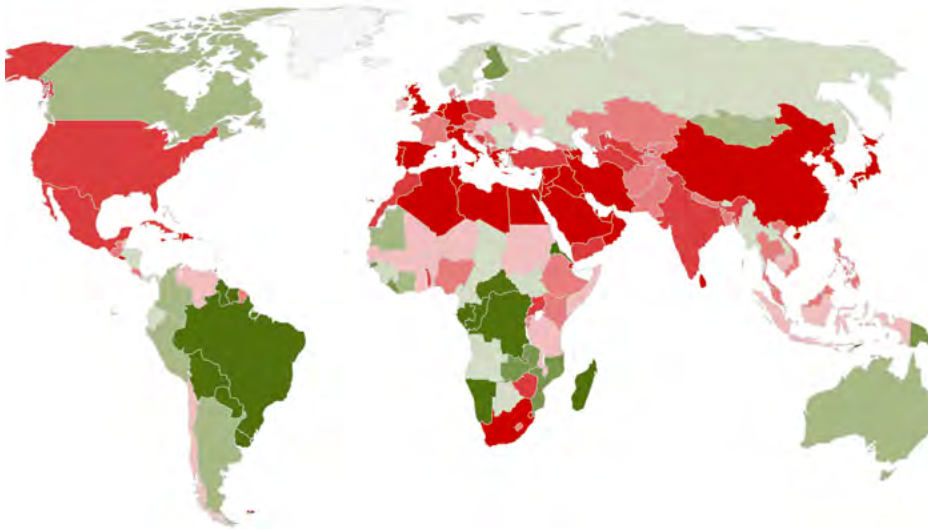


Source: World Bank, “World development indicators”, DataBank. Available at <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators> (accessed on 14 June 2018).

- Under-5 mortality rate dropped from 78 to 36 per 1,000 live births between 1990 and 2015, outpacing the world average of 43 deaths per 1,000 live births.²¹ However, access to health is marked by inequality of opportunity within countries and across the region and is determined by such factors as wealth, geographic location and the structure of the insurance markets.
- Women in the Arab region held 19 per cent of parliamentary seats in 2017, compared with 23 per cent in LDCs, 24 per cent in Sub-Saharan Africa and 32 per cent in Europe. There were considerable variations across countries of the region, with the proportion ranging



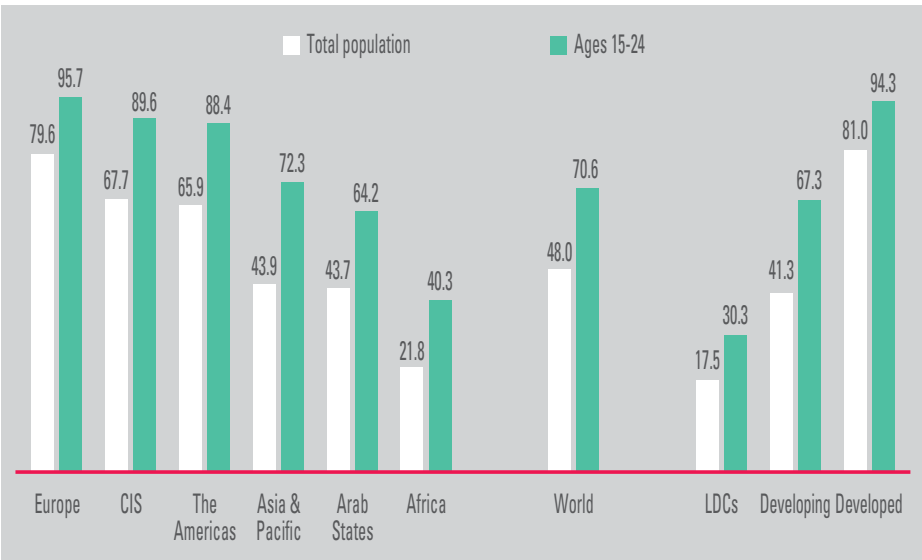
from 0 per cent in Yemen and Qatar to 31 per cent in Tunisia.²²



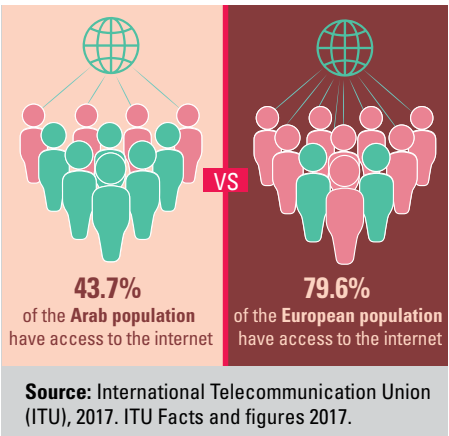
Source: Global Footprint Network. Available at <http://data.footprintnetwork.org/#/> (accessed on 6 August 2018).
Note: Map showing per-person Ecological Footprint and Biocapacity.

- Gender distribution of GNI shows women's limited earning and economic participation. The estimated male-to-female ratio of GNI per capita in the Arab region stood in 2015 at 4.4.²³
- The proportion of the population across the Arab region with access to improved sanitation and to an improved water source stood at 79.2 and 84 per cent, respectively, with high disparities between urban and rural areas.²⁴
- Many countries in the region are ecological net debtors, meaning that they use more resources than what is renewably available to them (see map).²⁵ The current use of water and energy resources will more likely put future Arab generations at an unequal footing in accessing these resources.²⁶
- Social justice is also affected by people's unequal access to Information and Communication Technologies. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimates that 43.7 per cent of the Arab population have access to the internet compared to 79.6 per cent in Europe (figure 2), with women having lower internet penetration rates than men (39.4 per cent vs. 47.7 per cent).
- Similarly, mobile broadband subscriptions in the Arab region stand at 47.2 per cent, while Europe and the Americas recorded subscription rates of 85.2 per cent and 86.3 per cent, respectively.²⁷

Figure 2. Proportion of individuals using the internet by age, 2017



Source: International Telecommunication Union, ICT Facts and Figures 2017 (Geneva, 2017).



marginalization and limited opportunities in achieving fair and equal outcomes. In Egypt, for example, 41.9 per cent of persons with disabilities are literate compared to 78.2 per cent of persons without disabilities.²⁸

- Persons with disabilities are also less likely to be employed. In Morocco, the employment rates for men with and without disabilities aged 15-64 are 25.3 and 71.8 per cent, respectively.²⁹
- Women with disabilities are at a double disadvantage because of their gender and disability and have limited access to adequate housing, health, education, vocational training and employment. For example, the literacy

The road to social justice not yet travelled for special social groups

- By large, persons with disabilities in the region continue to face significant

rate among women with disabilities in rural Egypt, is only 18.8 per cent while in Morocco only 6.7 per cent of women with disabilities are employed compared to 15.9 per cent of women without disabilities.³⁰

- Despite a surge in institutional infrastructure to support the ageing agenda, older persons in the Arab region continue to suffer from high illiteracy rates, especially older women, and high rates of poverty.
- In the absence of comprehensive social security systems, many older persons are forced to work beyond retirement age out of social and economic necessity.
- Despite strides in streamlining the needs of older persons in public health initiatives, the mental health and nutrition of older persons are not given due consideration in policies and programmes, and specializing in geriatric care remains low.³¹
- Social justice remains elusive for 20 per cent of the Arab population, constituting the youth aged 15-24 years. In 2017, youth unemployment reached 27.3 per cent (23.8 and 39.9 per cent for males and females, respectively), twice the global average, representing a large untapped human potential in the region.³²
- Fewer job opportunities have forced many to engage in informal or poor-

quality work or to migrate, particularly highly educated and skilled youth. In 2017, 30 per cent of Arab youth viewed the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as the best country to live in because it is safer and holds more career opportunities.³³

- Arab youth have disproportionate access to tertiary education. The mean enrolment rate at the tertiary level in the region is only 25.8 per cent.³⁴ This is particularly worrisome for Arab skills, which need to be upgraded in order to respond to labour market demands in the 4th Industrial Revolution.
- Feelings of insecurity have translated into a bleak perception about youth future: 86 per cent of youth in the Levant are pessimistic about the future of their countries compared to 46 per cent in North Africa and 7 per cent in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).³⁵

Contesting injustice: People's voice

- Social justice cannot be achieved without breaking the barriers of fear and ensuring the participation of all people, in all spheres and levels of society. Yet, the Arab region scores low (a score of -1.1) on the World Bank's voice and accountability index, which ranges from -2.5 to 2.5.³⁶
- While self-expression translates into more social tolerance and a preference for equality, life control translates into more political involvement. ESCWA found a lower

emancipative effect of education on self-expression in the Arab region compared to the rest of the world (i.e. the most educated do not necessarily believe in self-expression).

- Progress was made towards some progressive values—support for gender equality and rise in civic involvement. However, the region remains “conservative” on certain dimensions—democratic values (confidence in institutions), social and religious tolerance, etc. as compared to the rest of the world.³⁷

The ripple effect war has on social justice

Wars, severe economic decline and the collapse of essential public services in Arab countries affected by conflict have taken their toll on social justice, leaving millions of people to fend for themselves amidst threats to their lives, well-being and dignity.

- Seventy-years on, the Palestinians for whom peace and self-determination are key to achieving justice, still face occupation.
- Countries affected by conflict are seeing a rapid regression of gains made in past decades, which creates “the lost generation” of young people lacking the right skills for the workforce.
- 13 million Syrians or 7 out of 10 people are in need of some form of humanitarian assistance as a result of hostilities, large-scale displacement, destruction of livelihoods and limited access to basic goods and services.³⁸ Indiscriminate attacks on densely populated areas, have resulted in the destruction of civilian infrastructure, particularly health facilities, schools, water networks and markets.
- 69 per cent of the population in the Syrian Arab Republic is estimated to be living

13 Million Syrians

are in need of some form of humanitarian assistance as a result of



Hostilities



Large scale displacement



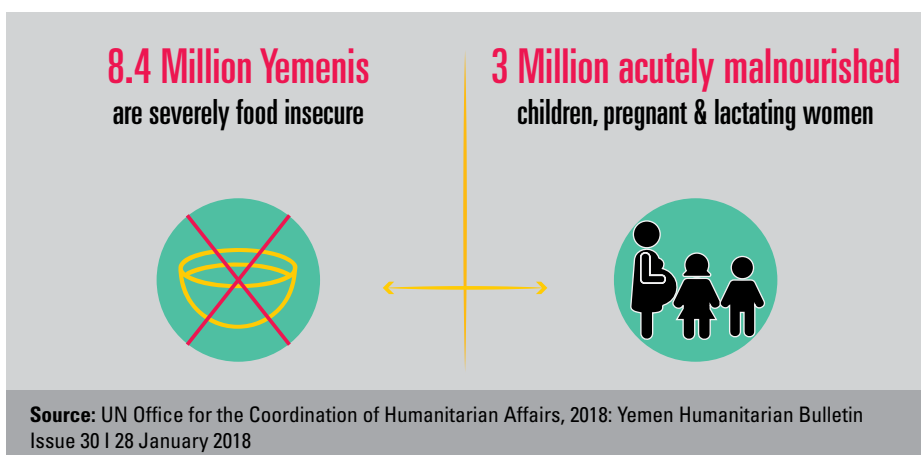
Destruction of livelihoods



Limited access to basic goods & services

Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2018. Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic (published on 21 Nov 2017).

- in extreme poverty. As a result, many households are resorting to negative coping practices such as cutting back food consumption, spending savings and accumulating debt, child labour and recruitment, early marriage, and engagement with armed groups.³⁹
- The UN Refugee Agency estimates more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees worldwide, most of whom remain in neighbouring countries such as, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.⁴⁰
 - Lebanon hosts more than a million Syrians—the largest number of refugees per capita, almost 1 in 4, compared to other parts of the world.⁴¹ The refugee crisis is not only straining Lebanon's infrastructure but also the social fabric with host communities reporting negative perceptions regarding the refugees as they compete for resources and jobs.
 - The situation in Yemen, already one of the poorest Arab countries, is so dire that it resulted in one of the world's worst man-made humanitarian crises: Two in three Yemenis do not know where their next meal will come from⁴² and an estimated 22.2 million people, equivalent to 75 per cent of the population, are in need of some kind of humanitarian or protection assistance.⁴³
 - Sustained violence continues to deny Yemeni civilians their basic human rights, which are one of the key pillars of social justice. 8.4 million are severely food insecure, with almost 3 million children, pregnant and lactating women acutely malnourished.
 - More than 10 per cent of Yemenis have been driven away from their homes in the last 30 months.⁴⁴





More than 10% of Yemenis
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in the last 30 months

Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2018: Yemen Humanitarian Bulletin Issue 30 | 28 January 2018

- The basic infrastructure systems including education and health have been disrupted in Yemen. As a result, two million children are out of school and one child under five dies around every 10 minutes from preventable causes such as malnutrition, poor sanitation or lack of medical care.⁴⁵
- The main social assistance programme in Yemen, the Social Welfare Fund's cash transfer programme, was suspended leaving approximately 8 million people deprived of basic needs.
- Conflict-related injustices are also evident in Iraq where 2.6 million persons remain displaced since 2014.⁴⁶ Displaced individuals report damaged houses, financial constraints, hostilities and lack of employment opportunities and public services as reasons for their inability to return home.
- Child marriage is used as a survival strategy to ward off the effects of poverty and war-related violence. 40.5 per cent of Syrian women refugees in Lebanon aged 20-24 were married before age 18, followed by 34 per cent in the Sudan and 32 per cent in Yemen.⁴⁷

Finding good stories amidst the hardships

Despite the daunting challenges, the Arab region continues to make small but positive strides to combat the different manifestations of poverty, inequality and injustice. The following section highlights

good stories in selected dimensions of social justice.

In the context of efforts to promote social inclusion, many countries have made

progress in addressing the concerns of older persons, through establishing institutions on ageing, developing or updating related national strategies and plans of action, and mainstreaming ageing issues in sectoral policies (e.g. Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Palestine, the Sudan and Tunisia). Other noteworthy developments occurred in the context of realizing the rights of persons with disabilities. Recently, Jordan passed a new law that broadens the definition of disability by taking into account contextual factors in addition to medical ones, hence capturing how the immediate environment interacts with the impairment. The 2014 Tunisian constitution also introduced a specific provision on disability and discrimination, and almost all countries have adopted specific disability laws and established bodies to coordinate issues related to the rights of persons with disabilities.

Attention to improving the situation of labour migrants in the region is quite widespread. Several countries have adopted new measures or upgraded their regulations regarding visas (Bahrain), entry, exit and residency conditions (Qatar), domestic workers (Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco), contractual arrangements (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates), working conditions (Bahrain and Qatar) and some specific cases related to the sponsorship system (Qatar, Saudi Arabia). In a similar context, several countries have made progress toward legalizing the situation of irregular migrants (Morocco, Saudi Arabia), and some have adopted national action

plans and formed committees to fight human trafficking and migrant smuggling (Morocco, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait).⁴⁸

Gender equality is another dimension where positive developments have taken place: Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia have taken the lead in enshrining gender justice and parity issues in their constitutions. Protection against gender-based violence is also gaining momentum with several countries issuing new or reforming existing legislation on sexual harassment, rape and in some cases domestic violence (e.g. Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan). Moreover, Saudi Arabia has taken legal steps to increase employment opportunities for women while several countries have introduced measures in support of women's political participation (Lebanon, Morocco, State of Palestine and Yemen).⁴⁹

In the area of social protection, several countries have tried to overhaul their social assistance programmes by setting up social insurance schemes for traditionally excluded groups and introducing cash transfer systems (State of Palestine, the Sudan, Mauritania, Tunisia).⁵⁰ Other countries are reforming energy prices (GCC countries, Algeria) and some have phased out long-standing fuel subsidies (Jordan, Morocco) and taken compensatory measures to protect the poor through improved and targeted forms of assistance (table 1).⁵¹ The Moroccan government for example mitigated the negative social impact of the reform by supporting school-aged children, subsidizing medical

Table 1. Arab countries: status of energy reforms

	Petroleum	Natural Gas	Electricity	Measures to protect the poor? (Y/N)	Medium-term plan? (Y/N)
MENA					
Oil importers					
Djibouti				No	Yes
Egypt				Yes	Yes
Jordan				Yes	Yes
Lebanon				No	No
Mauritania				Yes	Yes
Morocco				Yes	Yes
Thr Sudan				Yes	Yes
Tunisia				Yes	Yes
Oil exporters					
Algeria				Yes	No
Bahrain				No	Yes
Iraq				Yes	Yes
Kuwait				No	Yes
Oman				No	No
Qatar				No	No
Saudi Arabia				Yes	Yes
United Arab Emirates				No	No

Subsidies eliminated
 Reform initiated, subsidies remain
 No specific measure

Source: International Monetary Fund, “If not now, when? energy price reform in Arab countries”, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of Arab Ministers of Finance, Rabat, Morocco, April 2017.

expenses for the poor, and increasing funding for public transportation. Egypt has been also gradually abolishing subsidies since 2014 while introducing a cash transfer programme that invests in human capital development, called Takaful and Karama targeting over two million vulnerable households.

A number of countries are also making progress in select governance areas. Lebanon, for example, made a small step in 2017 with the passage of the Access to Information Law. Moreover, the UAE and Qatar fared better on the

Corruption Perceptions Index 2017 than in previous years. This is likely due to better management of public finances, improved public procurement and enhanced access to public services and infrastructure.⁵² However, almost all Arab countries are still far from eradicating corruption and building more equal, citizen-driven societies. To address the demands for social justice, governments need to adopt more transparent and accountable modes of doing business, and most importantly, open civic space, embrace freedom of expression and encourage youth participation.

Making it happen: How ESCWA's work promotes social justice

ESCWA supports the efforts of its member States to translate their visions, national objectives and international commitments into just and fair outcomes for all. By applying the fundamental principles of social justice, namely rights, equity, equality and participation and integrating them into their plans, policies and programmes, policy-makers and other national stakeholders are better positioned to increase people's indiscriminate access to social, economic and environmental goods, ensure a fairer distribution of income and opportunities and safeguard the right of everyone to be heard.

The Social Justice Section of the Social Development Division is entrusted with promoting ESCWA's social justice agenda in

the region. It works towards achieving this objective through:

- Undertaking research and analysis on social justice and equality issues in the region and producing policy recommendations that can be used by member states to address social justice deficits and promote more inclusive and cohesive societies.
- Developing tools/guides and designing capacity-building programmes to strengthen the skills of policymakers and relevant stakeholders, including the civil society, in mainstreaming the concepts of social justice, equality and participatory governance in national

Some of the key activities recently implemented in this context:

- Training programme for developing social protection policies using a participatory approach;
- Training programme for mainstreaming social justice principles in development plans, policies and programmes;
- Training programme for enhancing national capacities in responding to the needs of youth in formulating inclusive and sustainable development policies;
- Training programme for the design and implementation of equality-oriented policies and programmes;
- A regional study on Inequalities, Autonomy and Change in the Arab World;
- A technical report on the Equality-Inclusion-Justice Nexus and the use of this approach in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

policies, plans and programmes and local development initiatives.

- Facilitating regional and interregional exchange of practices and innovative experiences to address inequality and social injustice, which could be adapted and replicated in member countries.
- Supporting member countries to adopt the required tools to promote participatory decision-making and enhance citizens' engagement

and inclusion in policy formulation, implementation and monitoring.

- Offering a unique platform for dialogue and consensus-building for governments and civil society institutions in member countries and supporting them in forging the required partnerships to address development challenges.

For more information on our work see www.unescwa.org/our-work/social-justice.

Conclusion

As member countries quickly step in to fulfil the promises enacted in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a coherent approach to address injustice and inequality requires a shift in societal values, including among others, abandoning discriminatory practices in order to 'leave no one behind'. It also requires a multifaceted policy approach that considers the inter-linkages within the social sector as well as between the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development,

while ensuring that policy decisions are made and implemented in a participatory, fair, transparent and accountable manner.

ESCWA will continue to reflect on how to best use its functions as a think tank, advisor and voice to support the social justice agenda in the region. Yet, the role of policymakers and other national stakeholders in ensuring that the principles of social justice remain central in policy discourses and processes is paramount.

Endnotes

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25. Ecological Footprint is how much demand human consumption places on the biosphere to the area, or supply, of productive land available to meet this demand (biocapacity). Both Footprint and biocapacity are measured in global hectares. For more information, see Ecological Footprint Explorer. Available at data.footprintnetwork.org.
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