

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

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Inclusion of older persons: policy implications for the Arab region**Summary**

This document builds on the findings of ESCWA's research on the socioeconomic situation of older persons across the Arab region, and presents a multidimensional framework for social, economic and political inclusion of older persons. The document is timely as Arab countries have begun to develop policies geared toward older persons prompted by rapidly changing age structures.

The document provides a brief overview of the demographic trends in the region and discusses the opportunities and challenges that they present. It then unpacks the concept of inclusion of older persons, highlights some promising practices from the region and discusses the challenges hindering the full inclusion of older persons. The document then presents policy recommendations that could guide countries' efforts to develop cohesive and integrated policies and ensure that older persons are not left behind.

The Committee on Social Development is invited to review the content of the present document and provide comments, suggestions and recommendations thereon.

CONTENTS

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
Introduction	1-5	3
<i>Chapter</i>		
I. AGEING IN THE ARAB REGION: A FAST-EMERGING DEMOGRAPHIC TREND.....	6-8	4
II. THE AGEING TRANSITION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES	9-13	5
III. INCLUSION OF OLDER PERSONS.....	14-38	6
A. Economic inclusion	15-23	6
B. Social inclusion of older persons.....	24-33	8
C. Political and civic inclusion.....	34-38	10
IV. CHALLENGES FACING OLDER PERSONS INCLUSION IN THE ARAB REGION	39-46	11
V. INCLUSION OF OLDER PERSONS: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ARAB REGION	47-50	12

Introduction

1. A paradigm shift in the approach to older persons issues started materializing towards the end of the last century.¹ Prompted by rapidly changing age structures, the world turned its attention to the far-reaching socioeconomic consequences of ageing. Countries focused on changing the perception of older persons as dependents and beneficiaries to contributors and agents of development and explored means to reduce the vulnerability of a fast-increasing proportion of the population. Today, ageing is no longer the concern of the developed world alone. The ageing population is also rapidly increasing in countries and regions that have long had primarily young populations, including the Arab region whose average population will be considered aged by the year 2050.

2. The human rights-based approach embodied in international tools and frameworks, most notably the [Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing](#), highlights the permanent nature of fundamental rights, which do not fade with age.^{2,3} An analytical reading of these frameworks reveals that the well-being of older persons rests on two major pillars: social protection and inclusion. Governments across the world have become more conscious of the need to strengthen social protection to ensure income security and access to health for all its people.⁴ Inclusion, however, has received lesser attention.

3. Inclusion is a multidimensional concept that implies the full economic, social and political participation and integration of individuals in society, particularly those most vulnerable to exclusion, such as older persons.⁵ For older persons, exclusion results in material deprivation, loss of autonomy, neglect and abuse, health deterioration and isolation.

4. Given the changing regional demographic trends, and in light the alarming socioeconomic situation of older persons and, in the region, the dim prospects of ageing with dignity as evidenced in ESCWA's 2018 Population and Development Report focused on ageing in the Arab region,⁶ Arab governments are called to take immediate policy interventions to honour their commitment to leave no one behind, pledged when they adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 2030 Agenda reaffirms that development is not possible without the full inclusion and participation of all people, each according to their capability, and the equitable distribution of benefits, according to the needs.

¹ This document adopts the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) definition of older persons as individuals above the age of 60. However, the definition of older persons varies between countries ranging between 60 and 65 years of age. Where necessary, the paper clarifies the age used.

² The [Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing](#), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1982 ([resolution 37/51](#)), provided the first international instrument guiding thinking and actions on ageing. Since then, ageing has been catapulted to the forefront of policy agendas framed by a series of international tools and frameworks including the [United Nations Principles for Older Persons](#) ([resolution 46/91](#)), the [Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development 1994](#) (ICPD PoA), as well as the 2002 [Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing](#) and most recently the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).

³ For a discussion on international frameworks relevant to older persons in Arabic, see the ESCWA paper "Global Frameworks on Older Persons", [E/ESCWA/SDD/2017/Technical Paper.16](#).

⁴ According to the International Labour Organization, social protection floors are "nationally defined sets of basic social security guarantees that should ensure, as a minimum that, over the life cycle, all in need have access to essential health care and to basic income security which together secure effective access to goods and services defined as necessary at the national level". Available at <https://www.ilo.org/secsoc/areas-of-work/policy-development-and-applied-research/social-protection-floor/lang--en/index.htm>.

⁵ [ST/ESA/362](#).

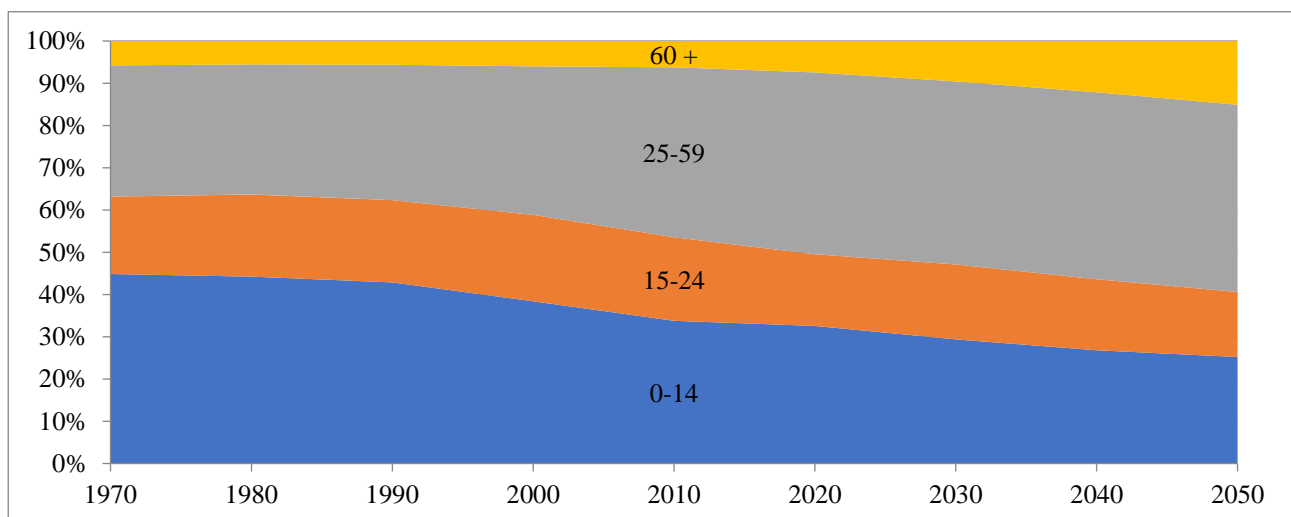
⁶ [E/ESCWA/SDD/2017/3](#).

5. This document builds on the findings of several ESCWA reports and studies,⁷ and aims to present a framework for multidimensional inclusion that ensures active ageing.⁸ To this end, the document briefly discusses population ageing as an emerging trend in the region and highlights the opportunities and challenges it presents. The document then delves into the inclusion of older persons in the region and presents some promising practices. The document concludes with a set of policy recommendations.

I. AGEING IN THE ARAB REGION: A FAST-EMERGING DEMOGRAPHIC TREND

6. The growth of an aging population is an emerging trend in the Arab region as a result of the developmental gains of the past few decades: it is primarily driven by declining fertility and child mortality rates and increasing life expectancy. Since 1970, the total population in the Arab region has more than tripled, from 123.5 million in 1970 to 398.5 million in 2015. During the same period, the number of older persons in the region almost quadrupled from 7 million to nearly 27 million. These trends are expected to continue well beyond 2050. The region's population is projected to increase to over 520.7 million by 2030 and 676.4 million by 2050. At the same time, the number of older persons in the Arab region is estimated to reach 49.6 million by 2030, comprising 9.5 per cent of the total population. By 2050, this number will exceed 102 million, or 15.1 per cent of the total population.⁹

Population Composition in the Arab Region by Broad Age Groups, 1970-2050



7. The ageing transition is defined as the period during which the share of persons aged 65 and above increases from 7 per cent to 14 per cent. Lebanon and Tunisia have already begun the ageing transition, and most of the Arab countries will begin the transition before 2040, with only five countries (Comoros, Iraq, Mauritania, Somalia and the Sudan) entering the transition after 2060. The transition is expected to be completed in most Arab countries over a period ranging between 13 and 40 years, which is significantly faster

⁷ These reports and studies include: [E/ESCWA/SDD/2017/3](#) and the forthcoming ESCWA studies *Socioeconomic Priorities for Older Persons in Lebanon: Recommendations to Ensure Live with Dignity* and *Towards Developing a Strategic Framework for Older Persons Protection: Guiding Principles and Priority Areas*.

⁸ According the World Health Organization, “active ageing is the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age” See “Active Ageing: A Policy Framework”, available at https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/67215/WHO_NMH_NPH_02.8.pdf;jsessionid=2C0C157F203EF3C5A90050DF1E9B693?sequence=1.

⁹ [E/ESCWA/SDD/2017/3](#).

than the length of time it took in other regions (for example between 50 and 150 years in OECD countries). Ultimately, the region's population will be considered aged by 2050.

8. Population age structures have significant impacts on the economy. The child dependency ratio has steadily decreased from as high as 87.4 per cent in 1970 to 55.1 per cent in 2015 and is projected to reach 39.6 per cent in 2050.¹⁰ Inversely, older person's dependency, having remained almost steady since the 1970, is expected to dramatically increase almost doubling from 7.0 per cent in 2015 to 16.5 in 2050. The first demographic dividend carries the potential of lower dependency ratios as the majority of the population being in the working age bracket. However, reaping its benefits is conditional on the presence of an enabling macroeconomic and social environment.

II. THE AGEING TRANSITION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

9. The fast advancing ageing transition in the Arab region has significant socioeconomic implications, particularly for countries that continue to struggle to address the priorities of their large population bulges of children, adolescents and youth. The majority of older persons, especially older women and those living in rural and conflict-affected areas in the Arab region today, are vulnerable to poverty, ill-health and isolation. Nearly three quarters per cent of older persons in the region are not covered by pension schemes, the highest percentage compared to all other regions;¹¹ out-of-pocket expenditure on health care can reach as high as 75 per cent, particularly in the least developed countries;¹² primary and secondary education attainment remains low, with illiteracy rates, particularly among older women in rural areas, as high as 95 per cent in some countries.¹³

10. This dire situation of older persons is further compounded by the changing role of the family as the primary source of support and protection for older persons. This is due to shifting socioeconomic trends and norms including living arrangements, urbanization and migration. The looming ageing transition and the short period in which it is expected to be completed, demand that Arab Governments take immediate actions to address the vulnerability of older persons in the region. If business continues as usual, the prospects for ageing with dignity appears very bleak.

11. Population ageing, indeed, can carry the potential benefits of the the increase in adult longevity known as the second demographic dividend. Lower child dependency rates coupled with increased life expectancy generates greater wealth. As people age, they often increase their earnings. The prospects of longevity incentivize people to accumulate greater personal wealth and increase investments during their working years. The increase in wealth increases the likelihood that parents, who have already begun to have fewer children, will invest more in the health and education of their children. As a result, countries will experience higher per capita income and be better positioned to invest in sustainable development.

12. Growing proportions of older persons can have a positive economic impact. Older persons contribution to the labour market is vital given their accumulated knowledge and expertise, and role in guiding and mentoring younger cohorts. Ageing opens up markets for new or adjusted products and services. Older persons' contribution to society is invaluable: they provide social and financial support to their children,

¹⁰ Dependency ratios are often used to measure this impact of population composition on the economy. It is calculated as the number of people in a "dependent age group" (people younger than 15 or older than 64) divided by the working-age population (people aged 15-64).

¹¹ International Labour Organization (ILO), *World Social Protection Report: Universal Social Protection to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals 2017–19* (Geneva, 2017).

¹² World Bank, "World development indicators", database. Available at <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators> (accessed on 20 February 2018).

¹³ Economic Research Forum, Jordan Labor Market Panel Survey, 2010; Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey, 2012; Tunisia Labor Market Panel Survey, 2014.

as well as to their parents, and other members of their community. They are custodians of culture and traditions. Ageing thus has a distinct potential to boost social cohesion.

13. However, benefiting from the second demographic dividend hinges on advance planning that ensures reaping the benefits of the first demographic dividend and allows the population to age with dignity. These plans should encourage the accumulation of wealth, institute social protection platforms, provide adequate physical environment and infrastructure and ensure economic, social and political inclusion of older persons.

III. INCLUSION OF OLDER PERSONS

14. Complementary to social protection, which focuses primarily on the basic needs of health and income security for older persons, inclusion of older persons enables them to lead meaningful, self-fulfilling lives as full members of society. This section unpacks the concept of inclusion at the social, economic and political levels, highlights some factors that facilitate success and presents promising experiences from the region. The document recognizes the interlinkages of the different levels of inclusion as one form of inclusion that could facilitate and impact other forms. It transcends the rigidity of the classical categorization of life stages into education, work life and retirement and adopts a life course approach that highlights the necessity of continuity of education and the flexibility of the concept of retirement.

A. ECONOMIC INCLUSION

1. *Older persons and the labour force*

15. Retirement is a right. Retirement conditions need to be favourable for the well-being of older persons and should provide them with income security.

16. In the Arab region the economic activity of older persons varies significantly. While employees of the public sector in certain countries retire at an early age, there is evidence that large proportions of older persons in countries where social security systems are weaker continue to work into old age.¹⁴ In Lebanon, for example, 45 per cent of males aged 65-69, and 19 per cent of males over the age of 70 work.¹⁵ In Morocco, nearly 20 per cent of older persons continue to work.¹⁶

Qatar

Article 160 of the Human Resources Management Law No. 8 of 2009 allowed for extending the retirement age from 60 to 65 and in specific cases beyond in case the employee is willing, capable, and his extension serves the public interest.

Source: <http://www.cm.gov.qa/Arabic/hr-government-low/Documents/Human%20resources%20Law.pdf>.

17. Older persons participation in the labour force is not necessarily a burden to the labour market, nor to older persons themselves. However, if older persons choose to continue to work, they need to be protected. Work beyond retirement age could provide older persons with a continued sense of purpose, avenues for socializing and additional income for those who require it. The workplace also benefits from the extensive experience and knowledge of older persons.

¹⁴ The retirement age varies significantly between countries, sectors and sex, and in most countries is compulsory. It ranges between as low as 47 years for female public sector employees in Kuwait and as high as 65 years in the Sudan. Source: Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, based on the results of a survey carried out by ESCWA for the Third Regional Review of MIPAA, 2017.

¹⁵ لبنان، الدراسة الوطنية للأوضاع المعيشية للأسر: تقرير الأوضاع المعيشية للأسر 2007 (بيروت، إدارة الإحصاء المركزي، 2008)

¹⁶ المغرب، واقع الأشخاص المسنين في المغرب (المركز الوطني للتنمية البشرية، 2017)

18. Contrary to the stereotype that increased labour force participation of older persons will increase competition for younger generations who are struggling with high unemployment rates, research indicates that more work opportunities for the elderly does not necessarily mean fewer opportunities for the younger generation.¹⁷ However these preliminary findings could be context specific, and additional research on the subject in the region would be useful.

19. Working arrangements that allow more flexibility for employees (such as flexible working hours, telecommuting), ensuring the ease of physical accessibility of the work space, are some of the means that ensure favourable employment conditions for older persons and allow them to choose the pace of their work to match their capacities. Age-sensitive technology can facilitate longer working lives and alleviate the adverse effects of disability, mobility restriction and other health issues, as well as isolation, marginalization or exclusion experienced by many older persons.¹⁸

Kuwait

A national project for retirees known as “Kibrat” – Arabic for expertise – focused on capitalizing on the knowledge and expertise of older persons through connecting with the different public and private sectors and providing older persons with suitable employment opportunities. The project aimed to invest retirees’ capabilities in development, encourage volunteerism, and facilitate intergenerational exchange of expertise.

Source:

<https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2767595&Language=ar>
<https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2767595&Language=ar>

2. The silver economy: older persons as consumers

20. Growing population bulges of older persons create a new economy, known as the silver economy. It is based primarily on the purchasing power of seniors and the demand that they create for new or adapted products and services. These products and services cut across the different sectors including health, insurance, robotics, banking and tourism, for example.¹⁹ They offer solutions to older persons and their caregivers to improve the autonomy and overall quality of life of older persons.

21. In addition to creating new market demands, the silver economy has the potential to considerably reduce costs for both older persons and the State. For example, health care-related costs could be significantly reduced with the introduction of innovative services, such as telemonitoring or e-health, and also increase accessibility to health services.²⁰

22. To facilitate the creation of a silver economy, continued access of older people beyond retirement age to employment and income-generating resources, such as credit, as well as the protection of their savings and accumulated assets, are indispensable.²¹ Both private and public sectors need to become more aware of the opportunities that the silver economy presents in order to capitalize on this emerging market niche. From a life cycle lens, preparing for the silver economy also entails strengthening working age individuals’ abilities to invest and save for their silver years.

¹⁷ Bo Malmberg, Thomas Lindh and Max Halvarsson, “Productivity consequences of workforce aging: stagnation or Horndal effect?”, *Population and Development Review*, vol. 34 (2008), pp. 238-256.

¹⁸ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), “Age-friendly employment: policies and practices”, UNECE Policy Brief on Ageing No. 9 (2011). Available at https://www.unecce.org/fileadmin/DAM/pau/_docs/age/2011/Policy-briefs/9-Policy-Brief-Age-Friendly-Employment.pdf.

¹⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “G20 workshop on ‘silver economy’ and ageing society: an opportunity for growth and job creation in the G20 countries”, Rome, 24 June 2015. Available at https://www.skillsforemployment.org/edmsp1/groups/skills/documents/skpccontent/ddrf/mtty3/~edisp/wcmstest4_167676.pdf.

²⁰ European Parliament, “The silver economy: opportunities from ageing”, July 2015. Available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/EPRS-Briefing-565872-The-silver-economy-FINAL.pdf>.

²¹ According to a survey done by the United Nations Population fund, an average of 35 per cent persons aged 60 to 79 were able to make savings in their older age. See https://lebanon.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Ageing%20policy%20brief%20_final%20for%20web%202021-12-2017.pdf.

3. Education, lifelong learning and inclusion

23. Education and lifelong learning are drivers for economic as well as social inclusion. Continued education, training and retraining through the life course enables individuals to continue to engage in the work force at an older age and enhances their capacity in contributing to the silver economy. Life-long learning in particular reduces the technology gap given the heavy reliance on technological innovations in the modern-day market. Improving language skills and learning new languages could be equally important in a globalized market. Adopting a life course approach highlights the need for continuous education throughout the life cycle as well as flexible retirement. Therefore, lifelong education and training empower individuals and ensure their resilience and inclusion in old age.²²

Lebanon

In 2010, the American University of Beirut launched the University for Seniors programme. It aims to give opportunities to older people to learn, to be socially engaged and to contribute actively to their community. The programme also integrates intergenerational exchange to encourage connections between senior students and younger cohorts.

Source:

http://www.aub.edu.lb/rep/cec/uni_seniors/Pages/default.aspx.

B. SOCIAL INCLUSION OF OLDER PERSONS

24. Social inclusion of older persons refers to their integration in networks of families, friends, neighbourhoods, communities and the society in general. It carries mutual benefits for older persons and their societies. Social inclusion of older persons is an important means to ensure social cohesion and build social capital.²³ It makes older persons happier and mitigates the risks of loneliness and isolation that they face, which negatively affects their physical and psychological health as evidenced by medical literature.²⁴ Social inclusion manifests itself in many forms such as intergenerational exchange, volunteering and community-based work and cultural and recreational engagement.

1. Intergenerational support

25. Intergenerational support, understood as mutual support among family members of various ages in terms of resources, assistance or emotional support, is a predominant social norm in the Arab region. Apart from playing a key role in providing older persons with necessary resources, it is the most important platform for the social inclusion of the elderly.

26. Intergenerational support in the region clearly has mutual benefits. Older persons and younger family members exchange financial, instrumental and emotional support. Whether it is allowing their children to live with them, helping with the household chores and expenses, and caring for their grandchildren and other older persons of the family, older persons' contribution to their family and community's well-being is crucial. In return, family support is the most important safety net for older persons particularly in light of fragmented

Tunisia

To ensure a long-term alternative to ageing in the family, Tunisia launched a special Surrogate Family programme. Host families provide older persons with welcoming living conditions in a family environment in exchange for a modest monthly allowance of 150 dinars (about \$60) from the Government. The objective of the programme is to support the psychological and emotional well-being of older people and to strengthen intergenerational relations.

Source:

<http://statements.unmeetings.org/media2/14685755/tunisia.pdf>.

²² Vegard Skirbekk and others, "The Flynn effect and population aging", *Intelligence*, vol. 41. No. 3 (2013), pp. 169-77.

²³ Social capital is a concept that refers to the networks of relationships among people and their shared values and understandings, which has productive benefits and enables the society to function effectively.

²⁴ John Cacioppo and others, "Loneliness and health: potential mechanisms", *Psychosomatic Medicine*, vol. 64, (2002), pp. 407-417. Available at <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.321.2982&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

social protection systems across the region. The support of the family and community is also crucial in facilitating ageing in place,²⁵ a significant factor influencing the well-being of older persons.

27. Older persons are important repositories of the society's history and values. Intergenerational relations can facilitate exchange between older people as guardians of culture and traditions and younger generations who are often intrigued by the past and may feel uprooted or disconnected due to changing family structures and the emergence of the nuclear family, urbanization, migration or displacement in instances of conflict.

2. Volunteering and community-based work

28. Apart from the cross-generational settings of the family, peer-to-peer contact and engagement in the wider community are crucial for the social inclusion of older people. Older persons often exhibit their willingness to contribute to society, share knowledge, and help others. Older persons can thus be an untapped resource to build social capital.

29. One avenue for active social participation in late adulthood is volunteering. While part-time labour force participation discussed above usually focuses on profitable employment, volunteering is geared towards engaging in community-based work. Volunteering allows older persons to contribute meaningfully and serve their local communities according to their own abilities and in turn improve their overall sense of well-being.²⁶ Volunteering provides means for increased social inclusion of older persons, offers opportunities for continued learning and education, and is a crucial resource for finding community-based solutions.

30. To facilitate older persons engagement in volunteering and community-based work, the private sector, civil society organizations and local communities need to create supporting environments to encourage older persons participation. These include improving accessibility to volunteering spaces, tailoring programmes that target older persons engagement and awareness-raising among older persons about the availability of such programmes.

Lebanon

In order to encourage the integration of the elderly into the community, the Byblos municipality in Lebanon, in collaboration with the local non-governmental organization, Institute for Development, Research, Advocacy and Applied Care (IDRAAC), launched the Elderly Empowerment Project, which provides the older persons with work and volunteering opportunities with local businesses and the municipality. Programme activities have included launching a database that lists all employment, volunteering and entertainment opportunities available for older persons.

Source: <http://www.idraac.org/home/community-services/community-services/recent-community-projects/the-elderly-empowerment-project>.

3. Cultural and recreational engagement

31. Cultural and age-specific sporting events have a great potential to encourage active ageing, combat social isolation and improve overall well-being of older persons. Day-care facilities, community clubs, accessible green spaces and cultural and religious institutions can offer venues to facilitate the social inclusion of older persons.

32. In many countries across the globe, cultural venues such as theatres and museums offer special discounts for older persons to encourage their participation.

²⁵ Aging in place is a term used to describe a person living in the **residence of their choice**, for as long as they are able, as they age. This includes being able to have any services (or other support) they might need over time as their needs change. See <https://ageinplace.com/aging-in-place-basics/what-is-aging-in-place/>.

²⁶ Timothy Windsor, Kaarin Anstey and Bryan Rodgers, "Volunteering and psychological well-being among young-old adults: How much is too much?" *The Gerontologist*, vol. 48, No. 1 (2008), pp. 59-70. Available at <https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article/48/1/59/758987>.

33. Technology plays an increasingly positive role for improving inclusion of older persons. Social media platforms, for example, facilitate communication, contact with family members, engagement with the wider community and emotional support. Access to these technologies is, however, conditional to literacy and basic digital literacy.

C. POLITICAL AND CIVIC INCLUSION

34. Political inclusion fulfills the right to political participation and to political representation. It is closely related to civic inclusion, a broader concept that refers to the connection with the surrounding community and participating in decision-making on issues concerning the community. The political and civic inclusion of older people therefore requires the creation of an enabling environment for older people both to exercise their right to vote and be elected, and to advocate and participate in the policymaking process.

35. Countries in the Arab region are increasingly aware of the need for an integrated approach to mainstream older persons issues and priorities in policymaking. Several Arab countries have developed or are developing national policies on ageing in recent years, although in many cases those policies have a specific focus on health and social protection and pay little attention to inclusion. To ensure an inclusive policymaking process, some countries have also engaged with civil society organizations and representatives of older persons in developing those policies, but this practice remains rather limited, with a heavy tendency for a centralized, top-down approach to policymaking.

36. While civil society organizations (CSOs) provide an important platform to engage older people in civil, political and social activities, advocacy organizations formed by seniors themselves are scarce in the region. Existing organizations focus mostly on service delivery and centre their activities around health, charity, long-term care and social and cultural events. Policy-oriented organizations that advocate for older persons rights are much fewer in number. The notable exception would be syndicates and retiree and veteran associations that are vocal in several Arab countries and are very vocal in demanding rights for older persons.

37. Raising the issue of older people's right to vote autonomously is another facet of political inclusion. Many Arab countries have pledged or introduced guidelines to improve the accessibility of polling stations for people with disabilities and mobility restrictions, who are disproportionately represented among the older generation. However, execution has not been thorough enough and barriers to voting persist for older people, particularly those with disabilities. With respect to older people's independence in choosing who to vote for, there is certainly room for improvement. Voting assistance and supported decision-making are among the tools to remedy these shortcomings.

38. As for representation in elected office, older persons do not seem to face bias due to age – rather the contrary. Social norms, combined with the years-long experience in the public or private sphere that is generally expected from holders of a public office, results in the strong representation of older persons in parliament and political party leadership roles. Needless to say, this representation is concentrated predominantly among men.

Morocco

Older persons benefit from the services of retired pensioners' associations, which are formed according to sectors, professions or even employers. These associations focus on defending the social rights of retirees and, in particular, on improving income security and medical coverage. Some associations propose self-help activities (such as travel, recreation) for their members, as well volunteering activities in some cases.

Source: ESCWA, *Towards Developing a Strategic Framework for Older Persons Protection: Guiding Principles and Priority Areas*. Forthcoming in 2019.

Jordan

Article 44 of the 2017 Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act stipulates that it is impermissible to deprive a person or restrict a person's right to vote or to run as a candidate in parliamentary, municipal, trade union or any other general election on the basis of, or because of, disability.

Source: Law No 20/2017. Available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/66679>.

The **Arab region** had the highest average age for parliamentarians compared to all other regions, at 55 years.

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Global Parliamentary Report: Facts and Figures* (2012). Available at <http://archive.ipu.org/gpr-e/downloads/facts-figures-e.pdf>.

IV. CHALLENGES FACING OLDER PERSONS INCLUSION IN THE ARAB REGION

39. Inclusive ageing is a clear win for the whole society. However, it faces several structural and cultural obstacles. Illiteracy and lower levels of education among older persons, especially women in the region weakens their ability to actively engage in decent employment (the labour market), volunteering, and other social and cultural avenues. It also limits their potential to benefit from new technologies and innovation. The high unemployment rates, prevalence of informality in labour markets and widespread economic insecurity limits ability of working age individuals to invest and save for their old age. These obstacles are magnified in light of the fragmented non-inclusive social protection platforms in the region. They also have a disproportionately larger impact on older women, older persons in rural areas and older persons with disability in the region.

40. Persistent negative attitudes towards ageing affects the everyday experiences of older people and may result in discrimination. While older persons in Arab culture are venerated as parents and grandparents, they are often regarded as dependents with limited physical, mental and psychosocial capacity, and a weak ability to adapt to modern day life. Ageist and deficit-based perceptions cause discrimination on the job market, in accessing goods, services and social spaces, and result in exclusion from policymaking.²⁷ Negative stereotypes increase the risk of poverty, abuse, violence and other human rights violations against older people.

41. The family network has functioned the main means of social inclusion and protection for older persons. However, changing social and cultural norms that value individualism, coupled with increased urbanism and migration, are threatening intergenerational support. Trends of cohabitation, for example where older persons live with their children or extended family, are gradually decreasing in most Arab societies. Anecdotal evidence from research conducted in the region indicates that older persons are suffering from increasing isolation as a result of their children moving away and due to the lack of spaces that are designed to include them.

42. Another main challenge that limits full inclusion of older persons is the increased prevalence of functional disability. It is especially observed among the poorest populations and among women. When not addressed, disability strongly affects not only the physical health but also communication, psychological and emotional well-being and autonomy of older people. Ensuring social, economic and political inclusion of older persons thus requires an enabling physical environment, including building design, infrastructure, public transportation and other services.

United Arab Emirates

Dubai city offers older persons discounts on public transport. In Abu Dhabi city, free public transport and parking permit is granted in specific areas for persons with disabilities.

Source:

https://www.nol.ae/RtaPortal/ShowDoc/StaticContentRepository1/pdf/en/NOL_Brochure
<https://government.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/special-needs/transportation-and-parking->

43. Older persons who choose to or have to continue to work are at risk of suffering from poor working conditions. Due to the weak coverage of pensions schemes and the exclusion of older persons from labour laws in several countries, older persons could suffer from harmful working conditions, such as long working hours, difficult working conditions and absence of benefits, thus further increasing their vulnerability. Negative stereotypes about the dependency of older persons and their limited productivity and adaptiveness are still common in work places both in the public and private spheres across the region, despite growing evidence that the impact of age on certain age-sensitive cognitive skills is less negative than previously believed given their better education and health compared to previous cohorts.

44. It is important to note that focusing on age as a single cause of discrimination fails to capture the diverse modes in which exclusion can manifest itself, and the intersectionality of causal factors. Older women, older

²⁷ According to the World Health Organization, ageism is the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people on the basis of their age. See <https://www.who.int/ageing/ageism/en/>.

migrants, older people with disabilities or minority backgrounds and older people living in poverty or in rural areas face compound vulnerabilities and aggravated challenges, leading to a higher risk of exclusion and human rights violations. Furthermore, the crisis and instability which is rampant across the region aggravates the vulnerability of older persons. Humanitarian assistance, mitigation plans and disaster preparedness often neglect to focus on the specific needs of older persons.

45. National plans that address older persons' priorities should thus be based on evidence on the situation of older persons and cater to the varying need of the different groups of older persons (example women, older persons with disability, the different age brackets, different socioeconomic backgrounds, the needs of older persons living in rural and urban areas, etc.).

46. Updated and disaggregated data on older persons highlighting the socioeconomic background, living arrangements, physical and psychological health and disability are rather limited in the region. The lack of such evidence compromises governments abilities to develop responsive and cohesive policies that ensure inclusion of older persons.

V. INCLUSION OF OLDER PERSONS: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ARAB REGION

47. Ageing is a lifelong process that does not start at age 60. Today's young people in the Arab region will be part of a population of over 100 million older people in 2050. Therefore, adopting a life-course approach to ensure inclusion of older persons must address the short- to medium-term needs of older persons today, and in parallel, anticipate the needs of future cohorts of older persons in the long term. Moreover, ensuring active ageing requires interventions from a very young age. Holistic policies that aim to ensure inclusion of older persons need to focus on interventions targeting youth and adults today to enable them to be positive contributors to their societies in their silver years.

Saudi Arabia

The General Authority for Statistics conducts an older persons' survey periodically. The survey aims to provide evidence regarding the sociodemographic composition of the population and ageing trends to guide policymaking. Data provided is disaggregated by sex, age brackets of older persons, nationality, education, functional and psychological disability, work status, marital status and living arrangements.

Source: <https://www.stats.gov.sa/ar/node/14583>.

48. Every older person is different. Over their life course, people do not enjoy the same equal rights and opportunities. Disadvantages from earlier stages of life compound as people age. Rising inequality will in the future have grave consequences for today's younger generation, as inequalities in education, health, employment and earnings are expected to reinforce each other and materialize in old age.²⁸ Nevertheless, perceptions and policy actions are often based on the preconception of older people being a homogenous group with common needs and experiences. The reality is that distinctions and inequalities in old age are widespread and are expected to intensify, hampering older people's prospects for full inclusion.

49. Therefore, the policy recommendation presented below are not meant as a one-size-fits-all, as countries will have to adapt to their realities and priorities. As highlighted in the introduction, these policy recommendations presume inclusive social protection platforms as prerequisites for ensuring effective of older persons.²⁹ They are also in line with the global frameworks including the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They respond to the different levels of inclusion and provide suggestions for concrete actions to operationalize the global frameworks at national levels.

²⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Preventing Ageing Unequally*, (Paris, OECD Publishing, 2017). Available at https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/preventing-ageing-unequally_9789264279087-en#page1.

²⁹ For policy recommendations on strengthening social protection in the Arab region, please see chapter of [The Population and Development Report Issue No. 8](#), Chapter 5, pp. 87-105.

50. As depicted by some of the brief country experiences presented in this document, some of these policy recommendations are already enacted in countries in the region. However, there is an urgent need for inscribing them in cohesive and integrated policies based on a life course approach, to minimize the cost of implementation, avoid duplication and fragmentation and maximize impact.

Dimension	Objective	Policy recommendations
General	Develop ageing policies that ensure inclusion as well as protection of older persons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote a rights-based culture of ageing. Translate international human rights instruments into national policies and legislation on older people and introduce affirmative measures to counter age discrimination and exclusion in older age; • Expand the scope of national ageing policies to emphasize multidimensional inclusion as well as social protection; • Provide platforms for engaging older persons in policy making process to ensure responsive policies; • Build an age-sensitive data infrastructure to provide disaggregated data (by age, sex, location, education, income brackets, living arrangements, health and disability, etc.) in order to improve the understanding of the unique challenges faced by different groups of older persons and their varying priorities.
	Improve public perception of older persons and fight age-based discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent discrimination and abuse by encouraging change in societal attitudes and raising awareness about the different facets of older persons contribution to society, their competences and abilities; • Enhance public understanding of active ageing from a life course perspective that begins at birth; • Target different stakeholders including local government authorities, private sector, civil society and media through campaigns, trainings, and informational material.
	Provide an enabling physical environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote age-friendly cities, where housing, transportation and the living environment take mobility restrictions in older age into account. Suggested actions include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Providing age-friendly transportation systems (with priority seats and reduced fares for older persons, for example); ○ Ensuring accessibility of public buildings (presence of elevators and mobility ramps); ○ Allocating priority seats, waiting areas, parking spots for older persons in public spaces and facilities.
Economic Inclusion	Adopt legal frameworks that ensure economic inclusion of older persons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure older persons beyond retirement age are covered by the labour law and are entitled to protection and benefits; • Introduce flexible retirement schemes that allow individuals to work beyond retirement if they wish to do so and according to their capabilities; • Prevent age discrimination in employment; • Develop age-sensitive economic plans that account for demographic trends and the impact of population ageing on economies (demand for various goods and services, taxation and transfers etc.), and adopt a proactive approach to adapting policies and production patterns accordingly.

Dimension	Objective	Policy recommendations
	Encourage age-friendly work environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness on the value added of older persons in the workforce, including retention of knowledge and skills and mentoring role; • Encourage flexible work arrangements which could include reducing working hours, introducing part-time employment, etc.; • Promote technologies that facilitate older persons inclusion (such as technologies that allow for telecommuting); • Ensure the physical accessibility of the work environment for persons with functional impairments.
	Promote economic empowerment through life-long learning and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote life-long learning and on the job training to ensure that individuals continue to build their knowledge and skills sets required for changing labour market demands such as knowledge of new technologies and improved language skills.
	Develop the infrastructure of a “silver economy”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt inclusive social protection floors that ensure pensions, retirement benefits and financial autonomy in old age; • Encourage younger adults to increase investments and saving during their working years; • Encourage initiatives that improve older persons access to credit facilities; • Build awareness of older persons as a consumer group (provide needed data and evidence); • Work with relevant stakeholders including government, industries, civil society and private sector to identify the needs and develop responsive services and goods.
Social and Cultural Inclusion	Promote intergenerational support and exchanges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness of older persons’ contributions to the family and community that often go unnoticed; • Support communities and families to facilitate ageing in place; • Provide financial support to family members caring for older people, for instance in the form of subsidies or tax reductions; • Address the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities across the life course by encouraging more equitable distribution within the family and community.
	Encourage volunteer and community-based work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a volunteering culture that encourages volunteering from an early age to encourage volunteering in older age; • Build awareness on age-friendly volunteering that considers older persons’ capacities and possible impairments and provide an enabling environment; • Involve different stakeholders including local-level authorities and civil society organizations to create opportunities for involvement and volunteering.

Dimension	Objective	Policy recommendations
	Promote cultural and recreational engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the establishment of day-care facilities and community clubs for older persons, and/or encourage existing establishments to launch older persons specific programmes; • Engage different stakeholders including local-level authorities and civil society organizations and religious institutions to design and implement older persons friendly activities and events; • Support informal, recreational and community-based education for older persons. Focus areas can include eradicating illiteracy as well as computer illiteracy; acquiring new skills and hobbies; and using innovative technologies that can assist older persons.
Political Inclusion	Facilitate older persons participation in political processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage the establishment of older persons' associations that can advocate for older persons rights at the local and national levels and represent them in the policymaking process (such as retiree associations, for example); • Guarantee older persons' right to vote by ensuring accessibility of polling stations.
