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BRIDGING THE INEQUALITY GAP AMONG
YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE ARAB REGION



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Preface

In recent years, the Social Development Division of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has focused on advancing the social justice agenda by providing knowledge and capacity development tools on mainstreaming the principles of equality and social justice in national development policies and programmes, and developing workable solutions and policy recommendations to promote youth participation in decision-making processes.

The present policy brief contributes to those objectives. It addresses selected dimensions of inequality among Arab young people, and highlights the gaps and challenges that affect youth policy development and implementation. It concludes with a set of key messages to assist Arab Governments in their efforts to invest in young people, and enable them to reach their full potential.

The present policy brief was researched and authored by Ms. Dina Tannir, Social Affairs Officer, under the supervision of Mr. Oussama Safa, Chief of the ESCWA Social Justice Section. Special thanks go to Ms. Ghina Abdul Baki, intern, who provided further research assistance. The policy brief also benefited from feedback by Mr. Frederico Neto, Director of the ESCWA Social Development Division.

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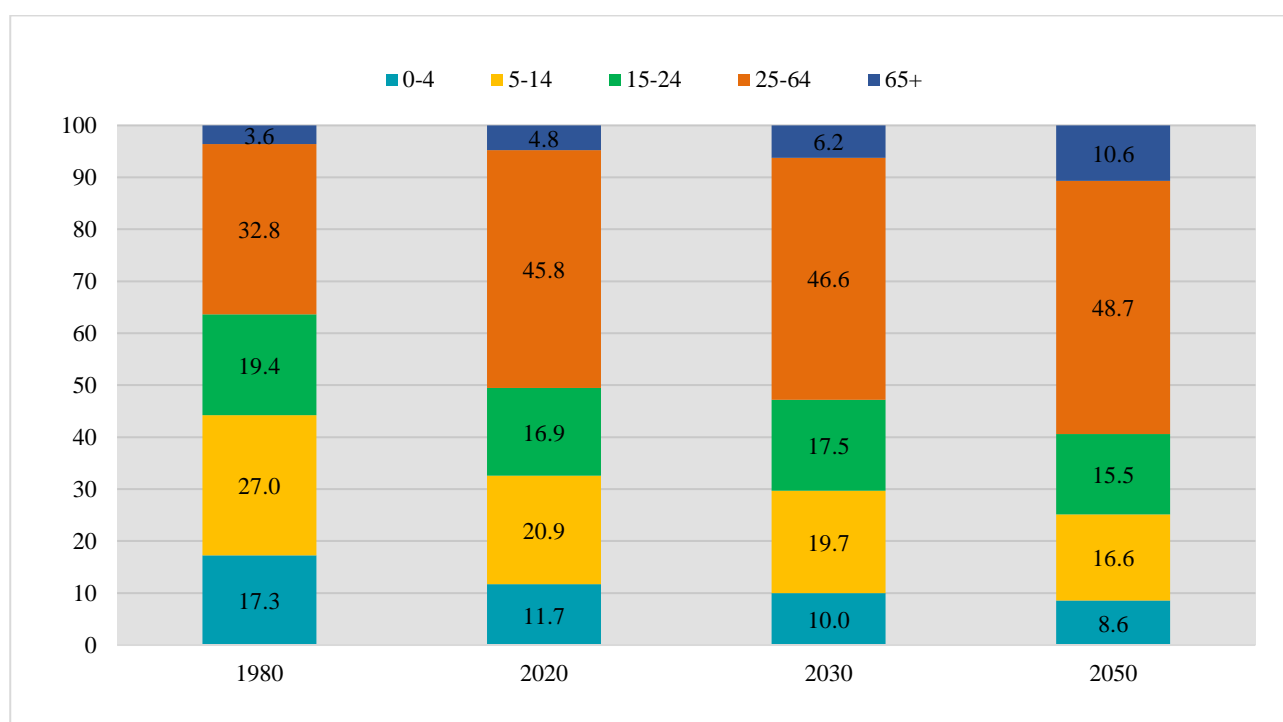
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Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes rising inequalities and youth unemployment as major global concerns. It commits to providing a nurturing environment for the full realization of youth rights and capabilities, especially those in vulnerable situations, and to helping countries reap demographic dividends. In particular, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, and SDG 8 on promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, include targets on investing in youth education and skills to promote employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. SDG 10 on reducing inequality within and among countries also calls for empowering and promoting the social, economic and political inclusion of all, including young people, and developing social and economic policies to achieve greater equality.

This narrative is important for the Arab region. Given that 17 per cent of the Arab population is between 15 and 24 years old (figure below), and the number of young people is projected to increase from 73.7 million in 2020 to 91 million in 2030,¹ policy responses addressing the vulnerability and marginalization of young people will help manage the various challenges that the region is facing and will contribute to the advancement of society.

Arab Population by age group
(Percentage)



Source: ESCWA, Demographic profiles of the Arab countries (forthcoming).

The present policy brief builds on ESCWA work in the areas of inequality and youth development. It discusses selected dimensions of inequality among Arab young people, and highlights the gaps and challenges that affect youth policy development and implementation. It concludes with a set of key messages to assist Arab Governments in their efforts to invest in young people and enable them to reach their full potential.

¹ ESCWA calculations based on United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Population Prospects, 2019. Available at <https://population.un.org/wpp/>.

I. INEQUALITY AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE ARAB REGION

The Arab region has a youthful population with the potential to significantly contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Unleashing this potential requires realizing the rights of excluded young people. In other words, it requires them to have equal access to quality health care, education, employment, housing, information and communication technologies and other public services, and to adequate channels for civic engagement. The following sections review the main dimensions of inequalities among young people in the Arab region.

A. INEQUALITY IN ACCESSING HEALTH CARE

In the last few decades, most Arab countries exhibited considerable improvements in key health indicators, such as life expectancy, infant and child mortality, and maternal mortality. For example, infant mortality fell from 83 per 1,000 live births for the period 1980-1985 to 26 per 1,000 live births for the period 2015-2020, surpassing the pace of decline in other regions. In terms of longevity, the life expectancy of both men and women increased from 57.6 and 61.9 years, respectively, for the period 1980-1985 to 69.7 and 73.4, respectively, for the period 2015-2020.² However, progress in health indicators conceals a number of inequalities between and within countries that apply to young people as much as to the general population.

The extent of youth inequality in accessing health care is difficult to assess, because publicly available data on youth-related morbidity and mortality is very limited. However, as the following section shows, Arab young people still suffer to varying extents from poor access to health information and facilities. Access to health is shaped by factors such as income, geographical location, education, gender, disability and cost. For example, young people in low-income Arab countries exhibit worse health outcomes than those in richer Arab countries,³ while young people in rural areas, youth with disabilities and young women are particularly disadvantaged.⁴

Access to health care is also determined by the structure of the labour and insurance markets. As a result, public health coverage in most Arab countries benefits mainly public and other formal sector workers, leaving a substantial informal workforce and their families without basic health insurance. This implies that young Arabs who are born to parents working in the informal sector are at a higher risk of being deprived from quality health-care services.

The health of young people in situations of conflict and displacement is also an issue of great concern. In Lebanon, for example, Syrian refugees experience various health issues, exacerbated by poverty, food insecurity, overcrowding and unsanitary living conditions where outbreaks of communicable diseases can quickly spread. With high poverty rates among refugees and a shortage of humanitarian funding for health care, household expenditure on health needs can be severely compromised.

Inequality in accessing health care is further aggravated by harmful practices that continue unabated in the Arab region. Early marriage of young women is still prevalent, with variations between and within countries, and is used as a survival strategy to ward off the effect of poverty, particularly in countries ravaged by wars and protracted conflicts. One in seven girls in the Arab region is reportedly married before her

² Ibid.

³ United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Arab States, Human Development Report, 2016.

⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, International Year of Youth (2010-2011): Regional Overview: Youth in the Arab Region. Available at <https://social.un.org/youthyear/docs/Regional%20Overview%20Youth%20in%20the%20Arab%20Region-Western%20Asia.pdf>.

eighteenth birthday.⁵ Studies show that 40.5 per cent of Syrian women refugees in Lebanon aged 20-24 were married before age 18, compared with 34 per cent in the Sudan and 32 per cent in Yemen.⁶

Moreover, female genital mutilation is widespread in some countries, affecting 87 per cent of women and girls in Egypt and the Sudan, 98 per cent in Somalia, 93 per cent in Djibouti, and 19 per cent in Yemen.⁷ In part, this is the result of a lack of access to health and social workers in certain communities, exacerbated by the vulnerable status of women in society and national laws. Furthermore, limited access to vital information on reproductive health can result in early childbearing, higher birth rates and poorer health outcomes among young women and their children. The regional adolescent birth rate, for example, stands at 47 births per 1,000 women, and is the third highest across regions after sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, with the highest values recorded in Iraq, Mauritania and Somalia.⁸

In addition, road traffic injuries continue to be the leading cause of death among young people aged 15-29 in the Arab region, followed by non-communicable diseases, tobacco and alcohol abuse. The Human Development Report 2016 revealed that 10 Arab countries are among the top 25 in deaths due to road accidents as a share of deaths from all causes, with Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates ranking the highest globally.⁹

In this context, it is also important to note that certain factors such as stress, unemployment, political instability, lax policy enforcement and a lack of entertainment options for young people have translated into a higher tendency to abuse drugs. While data on this issue is limited, the latest Arab Youth Survey suggests that illicit drug use among young people in the region is on the rise.¹⁰ In Egypt, 10 per cent of drug users are reportedly children or young people aged 12-19.¹¹ More critically, the number of young people arrested for drug abuse in Lebanon increased by more than 74 per cent between 2011 and 2016.¹² In the absence of the right to health and given the high cost of rehabilitation centres, if they exist, the likelihood of further deterioration in the physical and mental health of affected young people is high, particularly in the context of conflicts and economic crises.

Inequality in accessing health care, high out-of-pocket health expenditures, and the absence of comprehensive health and social protection policy that takes into account the various health risks and challenges faced by young men and women, increase the vulnerability of Arab young people to poor health outcomes. In turn, neglecting the wellbeing of Arab young people undermines the development of human capital, resulting in a vicious circle of economic deprivation and illness.

⁵ ESCWA, *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in the Arab Region: Dynamics, Challenges and Policy Options*, 2015.

⁶ UNICEF and International Centre for Research on Women, *Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa: Executive Summary*, 2017.

⁷ UNFPA Regional office for Arab States. *FGM performed in clinics can make it dangerously attractive*, 7 February 2018. Available at <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/en/news/fgm-performed-clinics-can-make-it-dangerously-attractive>.

⁸ UNDP and others, *Youth in the Arab Region*, Youth Newsletter 2019. Available at: http://www.arabdevelopmentportal.com/sites/default/files/publication/booklet_final_upload.pdf.

⁹ United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Arab States, *Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality*, 2016.

¹⁰ ASDA'A BCW, *A call for reform: 11th annual ASDA'A BCW Arab youth survey*, 2019. Available at www.arabyouthsurvey.com/.

¹¹ Osama Al-Sharif, *Action needed to tackle rising drug use among Arab youth*, *Arabian Business*, 2 May 2019. Available at www.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/419038-opinion-action-needed-to-tackle-rising-drug-use-among-arab-youth.

¹² Ministry of Public Health, *National report on drug situation in Lebanon*, 2017. Available at www.moph.gov.lb/userfiles/files/Programs%26Projects/MentalHealthProgram/NODDA_2017_english.pdf.

B. INEQUALITY IN ACCESSING EDUCATION

Education is perceived as the main path to upward social and economic mobility. It produces citizens who are skilled and informed, and who are more likely to participate in socioeconomic and political reform processes.

Over the past two decades, the Arab region has achieved remarkable progress in education indicators. The net primary enrolment rate rose from 79.1 per cent in 2000 to 87.9 per cent in 2018, compared with a world average of 89.4 per cent.¹³ Gains in enrolment are also evident among the young population, with many countries moving towards achieving full literacy among young people aged 15-24.¹⁴ Enrolment in secondary and tertiary education increased from 61.6 to 75.7 per cent and from 18.6 to 33.7 per cent, respectively, over the same period,¹⁵ while significant improvements were evident in gender parity in education.

However, this progress masks a number of disparities: Firstly, 4.8 million children were out of school in 2018, and around 68.9 million adults (15+) remain illiterate, 61.8 per cent of whom are women.¹⁶ Secondly, inequality in education attainment (number of years of schooling) remains higher in the Arab region than in any other region globally, and varies significantly between rich and poor Arab countries.¹⁷ Moreover, despite improvements, the gross education enrolment ratio in higher education was not commensurate with the population increase for the 18-24 age group, rising only from 18 per cent in 1998 to 22 per cent in 2008 across Arab countries.¹⁸ As explained below, the low returns on higher education coupled with the dualism in the labour market are the main factors underlying low enrolment in universities across the region. Thirdly, inequality based on income and gender remains a key barrier to access to education in some Arab countries. Educational attainment is a major concern among the bottom income quintiles within countries. For example, children in the bottom wealth quintile are less likely to attend school or reach secondary school than their peers in the top wealth quintile. Inequality of opportunity also varies by gender: Arab girls are three times more likely to be out of schools than boys.¹⁹ Moreover, the share of young women who are not in education, employment or training is 73 per cent in Yemen, 49.5 per cent in Egypt, and 32.2 percent in Jordan,²⁰ indicating that they have either dropped out from formal education to help their families, got married, or given up on finding decent jobs.

These gender disparities are aggravated by lower income levels and regional inequalities. In Yemen, the probability of attending secondary school for a 12-17 year old Yemeni girl from a poor illiterate family in a rural area is only 4 per cent, compared with 99 per cent for a richer girl living in an urban area.²¹ In the same context, a young person from the most advantaged background in Egypt is 97 per cent likely to attend

¹³ UNESCO, Institute for Statistics Data Centre (accessed on 2 December 2019). Available at <http://stats.uis.unesco.org>.

¹⁴ See for example, UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children: Children, Food and Nutrition: growing well in a changing world*, 2019.

¹⁵ UNESCO, Institute for Statistics Data Centre (accessed on 2 December 2019).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States, *Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality*, 2016.

¹⁸ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *International Year of Youth (2010-2011): Regional Overview: Youth in the Arab Region*, n.d.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ ESCWA, *Social Policy Brief No. 8: Unemployment of Young Women in the Arab Region: Causes and Interventions*, 2015.

²¹ UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States, *Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality*, 2016, p. 77.

university, compared with only 9 per cent for a young person from the most vulnerable background.²² These figures show that the high degree of inequality of opportunity in learning in the region is largely predetermined by family circumstances, including parental income and educational attainment as well as community characteristics.

The quality of the education system, particularly in public schools, also perpetuates inequality of opportunity among Arab young people. The continued emphasis on outdated pedagogical techniques and rote learning tends to limit the development of problem solving, creativity and social values in young adults, and undermines the acquisition of proficiencies required to thrive in a competitive market, thus further reducing returns on education.²³ This perception is shared by young people themselves. The latest Arab Youth Survey found that 78 per cent of young Arabs across the region, particularly those in Levant countries, have doubts about the quality of education they are receiving, and more than half prefer to pursue higher education in western countries.²⁴

The shortcomings of the education system have also resulted in a rapid expansion of private tuition in the last decade. Consequently, returns on education are skewed towards the richest segments of young people, leaving the poorest and most vulnerable behind. Moreover, the high cost of university education in private or semi-private institutions has created a significant gap in education quality, even among those with access to higher education. This narrative is consistent with an ESCWA study that found that wage inequality has increased in some Arab countries, especially among those with university degrees. The study attributed this outcome to a roll-back of the State, which affected the quality of education and allowed private providers to play a larger role in education.²⁵

The same study also found strong evidence of high levels of inequality in access to quality education, as reflected in the inequality of scores in international tests. For example, data on scores from the 2015 round of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the 2011 round of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) confirm that Arab countries have very low achievement levels in math, science and reading tests. Given the significance of these topics for an increasingly competitive labour market, Arab education systems may be propagating inequality among young people in the future in terms of access to higher education, decent jobs and earning potential.

C. INEQUALITY IN ACCESSING EMPLOYMENT

The approach to economic policy, the segmentation of the labour market, and the mismatch between educational outcomes and labour market demands have beset the Arab region with one of the highest youth unemployment rates globally. Despite improvements in educational achievement, the youth unemployment rate in the Arab region is estimated at 26.1 per cent, compared with a global youth unemployment rate of 12.8 per cent.²⁶ Moreover, inequality of opportunity varies by gender. The unemployment rate among young women is estimated at 38.2 per cent, compared with a rate of 22.5 per cent for young men (table 1).²⁷ A closer look at this gap at the country level reveals that the female youth unemployment rate is significantly higher than that of young males.

²² Ragui Asaad, Equality for all? Egypt's free public higher education policy breeds inequality of opportunity, Policy Perspective No.2, 2010.

²³ ESCWA, The Promises of Spring: Citizenship and Civic Engagement in Democratic Transitions, 2013.

²⁴ ASDAA' BCW, A Call for Reform; 11th Annual ASDAA' BCW Arab Youth Survey, 2019.

²⁵ ESCWA, Social Development Report 2: Inequality, Autonomy and Change in the Arab Region, 2017.

²⁶ World Development Indicators Database, 2019. Unemployment, youth total (percentage of total labour force aged 15-24) (modelled ILO estimate). Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS> (accessed on 21 November 2019).

²⁷ Ibid. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.FE.ZS?locations=1A> (accessed on 21 November 2019).

Table 1. Youth unemployment rates by country, 2019

Country	2019		
	Total	Male	Female
Algeria	30.8	27.6	47.9
Bahrain	5.3	2.2	13.5
Comoros	8.5	9.5	7.4
Djibouti	21.3	20.4	22.1
Egypt	32.4	27.1	44.1
Iraq	16.5	15.1	30.1
Jordan	36.7	32.5	54.6
Kuwait	14.4	8.5	34.1
Lebanon	17.6	15.9	21.3
Libya	42.0	36.4	56.9
Mauritania	16.0	15.1	17.9
Morocco	21.9	21.8	22.5
Oman	8.4	5.6	27.7
State of Palestine	45.9	40.1	71.0
Qatar	0.6	0.3	2.7
Saudi Arabia	25.5	20.3	43.6
Sudan	27.0	20.7	43.7
Somalia	24.9	24.3	27.2
Syrian Arab Republic	19.6	16.1	41.1
Tunisia	34.8	33.9	36.8
United Arab Emirates	7.6	6.3	12.7
Yemen	23.4	22.7	30.7
Arab region	26.1	22.5	38.2

Source: World Development Indicators Database, 2019. Unemployment, youth total (percentage of total labour force aged 15-24) (modelled ILO estimate). Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS> (accessed on 3 December 2019).

The gap between young men's and women's employment could be explained by the relatively low share of females in tertiary education enrolment, and the low participation of young women in the labour force. Only 1 out of 8 young women are engaged in the labour force,²⁸ which is largely sustained by labour market policies that do not mainstream gender concerns, in addition to conservative social norms affecting women's status and the overrepresentation of females in unpaid family work. Without the required policies to encourage female labour force participation, it is likely that current gender inequality in accessing jobs will persist, resulting in wider social and economic gaps during the transition to adulthood and restricting women's agency.

Youth unemployment rates vary significantly between countries. For example, labour market estimates show that youth unemployment rates range from 0.6 per cent in Qatar, 34.8 per cent in Tunisia and 45.9 per cent in the State of Palestine.²⁹ Political crises and raging conflicts in Iraq, Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic

²⁸ UNDP and others, Youth in the Arab Region, *Youth Newsletter 2019*.

²⁹ World Development Indicators Database, 2019. Unemployment, youth total (percentage of total labour force aged 15-24) (modelled ILO estimate).

and Yemen also undermine youth employment prospects in those countries, and delay other pathways to adulthood, including family formation, home ownership and civic participation.

In parallel, inequality of wages disproportionately affects young women: young Arab females earn much less than their male counterparts. In the United Arab Emirates, for example, young female workers earn on average 43 per cent less than young males,³⁰ exceeding gender-based wage differentials in other parts of the world. For example, the wage gap between young males and females in Italy and Latvia is 15.8 and 13.9 percent, respectively.³¹

Inequality among young people is also marred by an inverse correlation between education and youth employment. Data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) for 2011 show that 18.6 per cent of those with intermediate and advanced levels of education are unemployed in Saudi Arabia, 23.4 per cent in Jordan, 36.1 per cent in Morocco, and 48.4 per cent in the State of Palestine,³² resulting in low returns on education. The gain in wages resulting from every additional year of schooling is only 5.4 per cent in the region compared with a global average of 7 per cent.³³ These results reflect the mismatch between educational outcomes and the skills required by the labour market, thus highlighting the need for integrated social and economic policies.

Increasing demand for jobs and limited public resources have forced large proportions of young people to engage in poor quality low-wage jobs that offer little or no protection, including informal employment that was estimated to account for more than two thirds of the region's total employment in 2016.³⁴ Significantly, young people constitute 80 per cent of the workers in the informal sector in Egypt, the State of Palestine and Tunisia.³⁵ Such high rates of informal employment are of concern because they are correlated with income inequalities and increased susceptibility to working poverty. Overall, working poverty rates among young people in Arab countries are 39 per cent compared with 49 per cent in Southern Asia and 70 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa.³⁶

Poverty, harsh living conditions and unemployment have also translated into an outflow of young migrants seeking jobs in other countries, thus increasing losses in human capital in countries of origin. Between 2009 and 2015, the proportion of young Arab people aged 15-29 who were willing to migrate rose from 21 to 28 per cent.³⁷

The struggle to find jobs in the region is further exacerbated by three of the most protracted humanitarian emergencies of our times. In 2018, 10.5 million people were internally displaced owing to conflicts in Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. In addition, 7.2 million refugees and asylum seekers were displaced in countries across and beyond the Arab region,³⁸ placing some host countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey under pressure from an increased labour supply and competition. Fewer job opportunities meant that young refugees were forced to engage in whatever jobs they could find, including precarious informal and

³⁰ ESCWA Social Policy Brief No. 8: Unemployment of Young Women in the Arab Region: Causes and Interventions, 2015.

³¹ Eurostat, Gender gap statistics, 2019. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender_pay_gap_statistics#Gender_pay_gap_much_lower_for_young_employees.

³² ILO, Statistical Update on Arab States and Territories and North African Countries, 2011.

³³ UNESCO, Education 2030: Arab Region Outcome Statement: Towards inclusive and equitable quality learning opportunities for all, 2018. Available at <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/education2030.pdf>.

³⁴ ILO, Employment Promotion. Facts and Figures, n.d. Available at www.ilo.org/beirut/areasofwork/employment-policy/lang--en/index.htm (accessed 26 November 2019).

³⁵ Nader Kabbani, Brookings Doha Centre Policy Briefing: Youth Employment in the Middle East and North Africa: Revisiting and Reframing the Challenge, 2019.

³⁶ ILO World Employment and Social Outlook 2016: Trends for Youth, Press release, 24 August 2016. Available at https://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS_514537/lang--en/index.htm.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ UNHCR, Operations Middle East, n.d. Available at <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/36?y=2018>.

low-income jobs, or to participate in begging and illegal activities, thus intensifying employment-related inequalities and vulnerabilities.

The social deficits discussed above show that the region has failed to provide better employment outcomes for its young people despite progress on a number of fronts, including the development of national youth policies and programmes that target youth employment. As a result, youth frustration has grown from an inherent sense of discrimination and exclusion, inciting them to challenge the status quo. It has therefore been argued that youth unemployment was among the main drivers of the mass anti-government protests that swept several Arab countries in 2011.³⁹

D. INEQUALITY IN ACCESSING INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

Accessing information and communication technologies (ICTs) allows education to transcend beyond classrooms, and is an invaluable platform for expressing opinions and for challenging the social and political structures that exacerbate inequality.

In the Arab region, mobile phone subscriptions increased from 26.8 per cent in 2005 to 100.6 per cent in 2019.⁴⁰ Similarly, the number of people who have Internet access surged from 8.3 per cent in 2005 to 51.6 per cent in 2019, which means that more than half of the Arab population is connected to electronic means of information and communication, and that Arab countries are on par with the rest of the world in this indicator.⁴¹ However, fixed broadband subscriptions still lag in the region, standing at 8.1 per cent of the total population, compared with 14.9 and 33.6 per cent globally and in more developed regions, respectively.⁴²

Social media have become a major part of Arab young people's lives. Around 90 per cent of young people in the region use at least one of the major social media platforms daily, and more young people obtain their news from Facebook and other online sources than from television news channels.⁴³ Yet, some disparities prevail across countries, and ICT connectivity varies by education level. For example, well-educated young people in Lebanon and Qatar are significantly more connected than their less educated peers living in Egypt and Yemen. Furthermore, within countries, connectivity tends to increase with education, even in countries with low connectivity.⁴⁴

E. INEQUALITY IN PUBLIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Generally speaking, it is largely young people and the educated who drive change in social and political orders when their autonomy increases. Consequently, youth autonomy, defined by increased self-expression and the ability to choose one's life course, is significant for equality of opportunities and outcomes. Increased autonomy among young people improves their chances of being represented in public life and enhances societal outcomes, such as gender equality, income equality, political inclusion, innovation and respect for diversity.

However, young people in Arab countries have little presence in public life and little say in the decisions that shape their lives. A recent study by ESCWA on inequality and autonomy found that while the aspiration for personal autonomy and self-expression increased in Arab countries, this shift occurred mostly among young

³⁹ Oxfam, Youth and inequality, Oxfam Briefing Paper, 12 August 2016.

⁴⁰ International Telecommunication Union, Key ICT indicators for developed and developing countries and the world, 2019. Available at <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx> (accessed 2 December 2019).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ ASDAA' BCW, A Call for Reform; 11th Annual ASDAA' BCW Arab Youth Survey, 2019.

⁴⁴ UNDP, UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States (2016). Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality, 2016.

educated individuals who had less control over their future and hence had little power to support change.⁴⁵ Arab society is therefore divided between young dreamers with aspirations for change but no power over events, and old controllers who have the ability to influence events but no desire to do so. The report attributes the low value of self-expression among young people to an education system that does not encourage voice and civic values, and to various cultural, economic and political factors that constraint youth agency. Moreover, the report argues that low levels of personal autonomy tend to translate into lower levels of social empathy. Given the positive relationship between autonomy and equality, it is not surprising that the Arab region, despite some progress, has remained conservative on multiple equality-related fronts, such as gender equality, commitment to democratic values, and religious tolerance.

These findings can explain the Arab region's low score on the index of civic engagement. In 2013, the region stood at about 11 per cent below the global average in civic activism, particularly among young people and the well-educated.⁴⁶ However, apart from participating in demonstrations, civic and electoral participation remains weak among young people. According to surveys conducted between 2014 and 2016 in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia, the proportion of young people who regularly vote in elections was estimated at only 12 per cent,⁴⁷ reflecting the low confidence of young people in the transparency of the system. In the same context, the participation of young people in community work or non-governmental organizations was the lowest in the world in 2014, with an average of 9 per cent in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the State of Palestine and Yemen, compared with 14 per cent in the next lowest region, sub-Saharan Africa.⁴⁸

In addition, young people are almost absent from participation in parliaments of more than half of Arab countries, reaching a low of 7 per cent in Bahrain and Lebanon. National youth parliaments were established in Iraq and Lebanon in 2009, and a youth consultative council was launched in Yemen in 2007.⁴⁹ Moreover, special youth-related legislative committees exist in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Yemen, but the majority of Arab countries continue to address youth issues through programmes or entities on sports, culture or family affairs.⁵⁰ As a result, the potential of Arab young men and women in contributing to their societies is often under exploited.

The low participation of young people in public and political spheres is the result of interrelated factors. Firstly, despite increased self-expression, the region is still governed by the values of patriarchy that suppress dissent and a culture associated with quietism and obedience. Secondly, the traditional educational system has failed to provide citizenship education, which means that students are less likely to develop the required skills to participate in civic or political activities or appreciate the values of tolerance and pluralism. Thirdly, despite positive strides in good governance in some countries, the overall environment remains overshadowed by physical insecurity and violence, and a combination of institutional and legislative arrangements that restrict youth engagement in the public sphere.

II. TRACKING YOUTH POLICIES IN THE ARAB REGION

Since the early 2000s, Arab Governments have attempted to address the challenges faced by young people, and to mainstream their concerns in national development plans and programmes. Moreover, the geopolitical events that have characterized the Arab landscape since 2011 and the high level of dissent among

⁴⁵ ESCWA, Social Development Report 2: Inequality, Autonomy and Change in the Arab Region, 2017.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Walid Merouani, Social security for young workers in Arab countries. *Economic Research Forum*, 2019. Available at <https://theforum.erf.org/2019/09/21/social-security-young-workers-arab-countries/>.

⁴⁸ UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States, Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality, 2016.

⁴⁹ UNDP and others, Youth in the Arab Region, Youth Newsletter 2019.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

young people underscore the need to adopt youth-specific policies and programmes aimed at promoting their inclusion and development.

As a result, several Arab countries developed national youth strategies or policies that address various manifestations of inequality, including in health, education, employment, migration, culture and political participation.⁵¹ In this context, 10 of the Arab 22 countries have either developed youth policies or initiated the process at some point (table 2), while the rest continue to address youth issues by deploying sectoral programmes and project that focus on specific topics, or by mainstreaming youth concerns in national development plans. Some countries also initiated processes to address the needs of young people by conducting surveys (Egypt and Iraq) and establishing a national observatory (Tunisia).

Table 2. National youth policies and strategies in Arab countries

Country	National policy or strategy	Government authority responsible for youth issues
Algeria	None	Ministry of Youth and Sports
Bahrain	Draft “National Youth Strategy 2011-2015” pre-launched in 2011	General Organization for Youth and Sports
Comoros	None	Ministry of Education, Research, Culture and Arts
Djibouti	2001-2005 national youth policy	Secretariat of State for Youth and Sports
Egypt	Draft National Policy for Youth in Egypt (2009)	Ministry of State for Youth Affairs
Iraq	Draft national youth strategy (2013)	Ministry of Youth and Sports
Jordan	National Youth Strategy (2005-2009)	Higher Council for Youth
Kuwait	None, but a National Youth Document (2012) exists	Ministry of State for Youth Affairs
Lebanon	National Youth Policy (2012)	Ministry of Youth and Sports
Libya	None	Ministry of Youth and Sports
Mauritania	None	None
Morocco	National Youth Policy (2003)	Ministry of Youth and Sports
Oman	None	None. Youth affairs is separated across numerous government ministries
State of Palestine	None, but a Youth Cross-cutting Strategy (2011-2013) exists	Higher Council for Youth and Sports
Qatar	None, but a Youth Development Report (2012) exists	Ministry of Youth and Sports
Saudi Arabia	None, but a national Youth Strategy was in development (2009-2013)	General Presidency for Youth Welfare
Somalia	None, but a Youth Development Report (2012) exists	Ministry of Sports and Youth
Sudan	Draft National Youth Strategy (2007-2031)	Ministry of Youth and Sports
Syrian Arab Republic	None, but a National Youth Policy was under development (2008)	Unclear
Tunisia	None	Ministry of Youth, Sports, Women and Families
United Arab Emirates	None	General Authority of Youth and Sports Welfare
Yemen	National Youth Strategy (2006-2015)	Ministry of Youth and Sports

Source: National Youth Policy Database. Available at www.Youthpolicy.org (accessed on 3 December 2019).

⁵¹ Nader Kabbani, Brookings Doha Centre Policy Briefing: Youth Employment in the Middle East and North Africa: Revisiting and Reframing the Challenge, February 2019.

However, despite ostensibly positive efforts, the approach followed by Arab countries to address youth issues is marked by a number of deficiencies. Firstly, across the region, the institutional setting responsible for youth affairs rests within the authority of one ministry, primarily the Ministry of Youth and Sports, with few or no mechanisms for coordination with other relevant ministries and key non-governmental actors involved in providing young people with development opportunities. Secondly, the prevalent approach treats youth issues as a homogenous group, and tends to focus on education, employment and sports rather than on general social structures and institutional set ups that allow young people to thrive and express themselves. Thirdly, the success of these policies is undermined by a lack of evaluation of their impact and the absence of participatory mechanisms that would allow young people to partake in decisions that affect their lives. More critically, exclusionary policies and practices can alienate young people, particularly the poor and unemployed, and lure them into antisocial or anti-establishment behaviour such as violent civil protests, crime and extremism, thus threatening security and stability.

III. WALK THE TALK: BRIDGING THE INEQUALITY GAP AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN ARAB COUNTRIES

Much of the current policy prescriptions focusing on issues of youth employment, education and political participation are fairly standard. The following section summarizes the key messages that can assist Governments in their efforts to ensure that young people have equal opportunities and outcomes in all aspects of their lives, and to enable them to achieve their full potential as agents of change. At the same time, these recommendations should be part of wider efforts embraced by Arab countries to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

(a) **Maximize returns on youth development policy** by adopting a two-track approach that allows the formulation of youth-specific policies and programmes that are linked to other sectoral policies, and that integrate youth concerns in national development plans. To achieve this goal, public institutions responsible for implementing youth policies and programmes should coordinate with other sectoral entities to ensure the inclusion of young people in macro and sectoral measures to eliminate the various manifestations of inequality. This approach also requires political commitment and support at the highest levels of Government, enhanced institutional and technical capacity, and funding sources;

(b) **Work for youth with youth.** Young people and social actors concerned with youth issues must be involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies and decisions that affect their lives, and must work together to influence the social and political realities that undermine their emancipation and empowerment. In this context, Governments should institute clear and structured consultative mechanisms that facilitate this process;

The future of humanity and of our planet lies in our hands. It lies also in the hands of today's younger generation who will pass the torch to future generations. We have mapped the road to sustainable development; it will be for all of us to ensure that the journey is successful and its gains irreversible.

Source: A/RES/70/1, paragraph 53.

(c) **Recognize and facilitate the role of young people in the implementation of national goals and of the 2030 Agenda.** Youth development and the achievement of the SDGs are not mutually exclusive. Rather than being mere beneficiaries of the 2030 Agenda, young people are well positioned to contribute to sustainable development efforts, including those targeting climate change, inequality, poverty and conflict, if they are provided with the opportunities that nurture their talents and creativity;

(d) **Create a legislative environment that supports youth equality.** The success of youth policy is contingent upon determining the legislative frameworks that govern the identification of priorities, the allocation of resources, the roles and responsibilities of government institutions and non-government organizations concerned with youth issues, and the laws and policies that guarantee the protection of human rights and tackle all forms of discrimination faced by young people, particularly young women, poor young people and youth with disabilities;

(e) Enhance the knowledge and skills of young people to allow them to realize their full potential.

Education should be at the core of youth policy issues and is necessary for building human capital and achieving sustainable growth. For this reason, Governments should strive to offer free education for all to mitigate the impact of economic inequality for young people. Access to quality education can be improved by adopting new teaching methodologies that encourage rational and analytical thinking; exploring new technologies to create learning opportunities that challenge the conventional role of schools and universities; upgrading technical and vocational training programmes; and strengthening the accreditation and certification systems required for the labour market. To increase the return of education on self-expression, Governments should institutionalize citizenship education through school curriculums at all levels of schooling. This should be complemented by offering alternative avenues for the affirmation of the self, including more emphasis on civic values and a social mindfulness;

(f) Address the social, cultural and structural barriers to accessing health care. Similar to education, health is an essential asset for building human capital. Consequently, strengthening youth health will improve development outcomes in society, including growth and productivity. Ensuring equitable and quality health care for young people requires the deployment of universal health coverage and targeted health-care services, including services that address both youth disability and mental health, especially in countries ravaged by conflict. School and university health services, mobile clinics and dedicated youth centres also have the potential to make health care more responsive to young people's needs. In addition, Governments must ensure that young men and women have equal access to non-biased sexual and reproductive health information and services;

(g) Expand economic opportunities available to young people. Access to decent work is critical for youth empowerment and for ensuring stable and cohesive societies. In this context, Governments should pursue a broad range of measures that enhance both the quantity and quality of jobs. The ILO, for example, urges Governments to adopt national employment policies to plan, coordinate and monitor job creation within national policy frameworks, and to match skill sets with labour market demands. In countries where young people comprise a large proportion of informal workers, it is recommended to invest in their potential to start businesses through skills training, and to ease access to credit to encourage entrepreneurship. Another top priority is to emphasize the conditions that promote women's access to equal employment by providing support in childcare, transport, literacy training, and flexible working arrangements. Active labour market policies are another vehicle to facilitate the transition of young people from school to work, by offering career guidance, job counselling and matching services. Moreover, structural transformations to improve the business environment and support the development of a more productive and diversified private sector that is capable to absorb the new workforce remain a priority in the region;

(h) Facilitate youth civic and political engagement. Supporting the active and meaningful participation of young people will encourage their involvement in their communities and will shape their sense of belonging and identity, a key ingredient for the promotion of cohesive and stable societies. This requires building the capacity of young people and youth-led organizations, and providing them with opportunities to participate actively in political processes (electoral and parliamentary processes, public administration and local governance). This also entails the creation of an enabling environment that guarantees civic rights and allows young people to express their views on public matters in relative freedom. In this context, policymakers should promote the concept of inclusive citizenship for all, and encourage early engagement of young people in community activism at the national and local levels to prepare young men and women to debate and address the challenges of their countries. Furthermore, sufficient attention should be devoted to the role of young people in peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts; they therefore need to be included in those processes and empowered to fulfil that role.

CONCLUSION

Today, Arab young people are grappling with numerous social, economic and environmental challenges, as well as inequalities inherited from previous generations. These challenges are compounded by entrenched social norms, and the absence of formal spaces to voice their concerns.

Despite remarkable progress, national youth policies and strategies in the region continue to overlook the fact that youth inequalities reflect deficits in the development models adopted by most Arab countries. More than ever, this thinking needs to be adjusted and moved beyond piecemeal, projectized or sectoral approaches that only treat symptoms, towards more robust structural reforms that uphold youth rights to education, health, housing, ICT, decent employment and participation, and address the linkages between them. In other words, positive social outcomes for young people require an inclusive political and economic environment that unleashes the energy and talents of young people and enables them to address the multiple inequalities they face. At the same time, young people must espouse the values of peace, tolerance and citizenship, and organize into responsible and accountable associations that can advise and partner with Governments and other national stakeholders to tackle inequality.

Looking forward, the achievement of the SDGs by 2030 depends to a large extent on addressing the multiple facets of inequality, especially for young people, as both proxies and consequences of wider inequalities. It also depends on the transformations required in governance processes to not only meet the basic needs of young people, but also empower them as architects of the future and guardians of peace.