

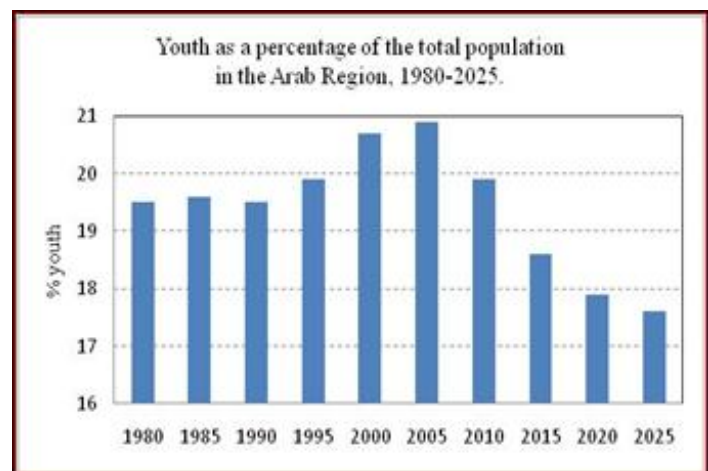


Regional Overview: Youth in the Arab Region

- One out of every five persons in the Arab Region is between 15-24 years old and more than half of the population is below the age of 25.
- Each year, over 500,000 people enter the labour market in the ESCWA region, most (90%) are youthⁱ
- Arab countries have the highest regional youth unemployment rate in the world, particularly affecting young Arab femalesⁱⁱ
- Only half of the Arab youth has knowledge about sexually transmitted diseasesⁱⁱⁱ
- Youth are almost entirely excluded from participation within parliaments in more than half of the Arab countries, reaching a low of 7%^{iv}

The Arab region has witnessed marked socioeconomic improvements, despite having been subject to persistent poverty, unemployment and armed conflicts. A current challenge is presented by the unprecedented 'youth bulge,' which is a term used to describe how the proportion of Arab youth (aged 15-24 years) is increasing significantly in comparison to other age groups. That increase, combined with overall Arab population pressures, has resulted in the most rapid youth population growth in the region's history. Given this trend, it is important to establish a development agenda that firmly recognizes Arab youth rights and aspirations. Doing so can advance economic growth, social inclusion, and political stability in the region.

Out of 22 countries in the region, only 9 have either developed youth policies or are in the process of formulating them. Nevertheless, recent unrest in the region has presented a compelling rationale for governments to bring youth issues firmly into the focus of the national agenda. Policymakers have increasingly recognized the need to formulate national youth policies and action plans, aimed not only at fostering youth human capital development, but also at providing them with the necessary opportunities to reach their full potentials in education, health, employment, and participation in public and political life.





United Nations entities have long been involved in working on youth-related issues in the Arab region. Recognizing the importance of youth initiatives, they work hard to improve the conditions of young Arabs by assisting Member States in achieving development goals. Their works includes but is not limited to: advocacy, promoting national youth policies, strengthening youth participation, and coordinating mechanisms with Member States in order to ensure better outcomes.

Issues and challenges facing youth in the region:

Education

Over the past two decades, remarkable progress was achieved in the region in all educational indicators. Unfortunately however, significant problems do linger: high illiteracy rates among youth (reaching 16.6%), student dropouts from primary education, low enrolment of girls in comparison to boys, deterioration of education quality, and a general mismatch between education curricula and the labour market's skill demands.

Sharp disparities in education exist within the Arab region. When comparing western Asia to northern Africa, girls are three times more likely to be deprived of education than boys.^v At the time of a 2005 study, nearly one third of children of the primary school age who were out of school were from least developed Arab countries.^{vi}

Interestingly however, education enrollment in tertiary education within the region favors women. This could possibly be attributable to their low economic activity rates and higher admission exam scores, or to the fact that young women are less likely than their male counterparts to drop out to join the labor force or to study abroad.^{vii} Nevertheless, university education is generally limited in Arab countries when compared to other regions of the world. Despite the fact that the number of students enrolled in higher education doubled between 1998 and 2008, when adjusting those figures for population increase within the 18-24 age group, the gross enrolment ratio improvement was not considerable, rising only from 18% to 22% across Arab countries.^{viii}

It is only recently that special attention has been given to improving technical and vocational training in the region. And even still, additional efforts are required to help fill in gaps in the labor market, such as the enhancement of accreditation and certification systems, and the enhancement of ICT-related programs.





Employment

Together, Arab countries have the highest regional youth unemployment rate seen anywhere in the world. Youth unemployment rose over the last decade, and this trend particularly affected young Arab females. In 2009, more than 20% of the youth labour force in the region was unable to find a job, which constituted more than half of the total unemployment.

While they do share many similarities, there are some key differences that stand out between countries of the region. Arab countries' national youth unemployment rates vary considerably: the 6.3% rate in the United Arab Emirates stands in stark contrast to the 38.9% seen in Jordan. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (considered to be net labour importers) seek to ensure that their young nationals are encouraged to enter the private sector to find jobs that match their skill sets and pay acceptable wages, as opposed to having them rely on Governments to guarantee permanent employment in the public sector. On the other hand, the remaining Arab countries tend to be labour exporters, and as such, they confront the challenge of creating jobs to absorb the increasing number of young people eligible for entrance into the labour force.

Young Arab women are confronted with a double burden: their age and their gender. In Arab countries, the conflation of these two factors has resulted in the highest regional gender gap in terms of unemployment, due to profound cultural, social and economic gender divisions. Studies indicate that only 30% of women of working age participate in the labor market, and those who do find work are limited to low-paying jobs in the private sector, whether formal or informal. Though labor laws in some Arab countries do not explicitly discriminate against women, family laws and regulations intended to concede to women's special needs, including maternity leave and limits on working hours frequently discourage employers from hiring women.

A statistical snapshot of youth employment issues in the Arab Region:

- There was 20% youth unemployment in 2009, more than half of the region's total
- Unemployment dips as low as 6.3% in the UAE, and rises as high as 38.9% in Jordan
- Only 30% of working-age women participate in the labor force in the Arab region as a whole

Health

Despite significant progress in health over the past decades, Arab youth still suffer, to varying degrees, from inadequate health provision and poor access to health facilities. This is especially true for young women, youth in rural areas, and youth with disabilities. In least developed Arab countries standards and quality of health services are inadequate, which is particularly relevant for Arab countries experiencing security concerns and armed conflicts.





Young people suffer from a lack of easy access to health information, particularly regarding sexual and reproductive issues. Only half of the Arab youth has knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases.^{xiv} Issues related to unwanted pregnancies, HIV infection and AIDS, as well as female genital mutilations remain taboo in cultures that continue to be reluctant to discuss such concerns openly. Even though the Arab region is the world's least afflicted with HIV/AIDS, with a 0.3 per cent incidence rate among adults in 2004,^{xv} there has still been an increase in the incidence of HIV/AIDS, with data tending to be underestimated.

Many young Arabs are vulnerable to risky behavior related to substance abuse, smoking, unhealthy nutritional consumption, and reckless driving. The rate of smoking amongst young males is increasing, with rates reaching as high as 37% in Algeria, while the incidence of smoking amongst young females has dipped as low as 0.3% in Egypt.^{xvi} In any event, such patterns of risky behavior have led to excess morbidity and mortality in the region.

Recent Improvements in Regional Health Indicators:

- The Arab Region has the lowest incidence of HIV/AIDS of any world region (0.3% among adults)
- The maternal mortality rate fell some 34% between 1990 and 2000
- The infant mortality rate fell from 30 to 26 deaths per 1,000 live births between 2005 and 2009
- Overall regional life expectancy increased by two years over the course of the decade between 1990 and 2000, from 69 to 71 years.

Gender disparities also manifest themselves on the health front, despite real improvements in Arab women's health. The maternal mortality rate in the Arab region fell to about 272 per 100,000 live births in 2000, a decrease of almost 34% from its 1990 level. Nevertheless, young women living in rural areas are particularly exposed to reproductive health issues. Many of them still marry at an early age and give birth to a large number of children, without spacing pregnancies out. Early pregnancy and inappropriate child-spacing contribute to poor infant health and nutrition, thus increasing the risk of early death. Infant mortality rates, however, saw a decrease even during the short period between 2005 and 2009, falling from 30 to 26 deaths per 1,000 live births.

Participation

Given the recent protests and civil unrest in numerous countries of the region (e.g. Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and Syria), it is important not to overlook Arab youth aspiration for participation in the decision-making process. More than ever before, young Arab men and women are aware of the importance of participation and its relevance for them, their societies and their future. However, entrenched institutional arrangements, dated governing procedures, and inadequate evaluation and accountability mechanisms have to date contributed to limited youth participation in decision-making





processes.

Youth are almost entirely excluded from participation within the parliaments of more than half of the Arab countries, reaching a low of 7% in the parliaments of Bahrain and Lebanon. Furthermore, only 4 countries (Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Yemen) have established specialized youth-related legislative committees.^{xvii} The majority of countries of the region tends to address youth issues by proxy, through committees on sport, culture or family affairs.

Perhaps not surprisingly then, the potentials and innovative ideas of young Arab men and women are often under-employed by duty bearers throughout the region. Youth participation in boards of directors, for example, is limited and is often based solely upon appointment and selection. Moreover, they tend to participate in activities that are not commensurate with their experience and skills. And, as a result, they often experience feelings of frustration and social exclusion, which may help to explain recent attempts by Arab youth to induce change.

Nevertheless, many Arab States have recently refocused their efforts on youth issues. They have begun to recognize that this important part of the population should not only be thought of as beneficiaries, but also as active agents of economic, social and political transformations. With new, youth-led and youth-oriented civil society organizations flourishing, and more young people utilizing information and communication technologies, Arab youth are now more able to voice opinions, address existing inequalities, and shape community priorities.

The UN System's Efforts on Youth in the Arab Region

United Nations entities have long been involved in working on youth-related issues in the Arab region. Recognizing the importance of youth, they work hard to improve the condition of young Arabs by assisting Member States in achieving development goals. The work of the United Nations and its agencies is guided by the United Nations Development Group's (UNDG) Regional Strategic Action Plan on Young People.

The Action Plan is a set of leadership commitments and core actions for the UNDG, which contains the essential elements and priorities to provide effective and comprehensive responses. It provides a common approach and a tool for continuous improvement and refinement of the strategic response, which is necessary to address the myriad needs of young people in the region. It is hoped that these regional strategic youth priorities will translate into concrete actions at the country level that will contribute to accelerating the achievement of the MDGs and the World Programme of Action on Youth's (WPAY) goals.^{xviii}





The Plan prioritizes a sectoral form of support, identifying six key areas of intervention for young people's development: health, education, protection, participation, labour and emergencies. Specific objectives are given to each priority area, and different UN Agencies and Offices are in charge of them within a certain timeline.

UN Agencies at work on Youth Issues in the Arab Region:

Depending on the area, one of the following might be the UN's lead youth issues agency:

WHO, UNFPA, UNICEF, ILO, ESCWA, UNDP or UNDG.

UNDP has long been involved in promoting and advancing the concept of human development in the region. The organization calls for an expansion of people's choices and freedoms, and for an increase in their ability to live long healthy lives, to be educated, and to enjoy a decent standard of living. As a response to the recent events and the new political openings in the Arab states, UNDP will be helping to design more inclusive governance where the voices of marginalized populations, especially the youth, will be heard.

Another example of the UN's efforts on youth in the Arab region is ESCWA's project "Strengthening capacities of policy makers in the region to formulate national youth policies and plans of action: Responding to the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY)." The Project expects to strengthen the capacity of policymakers to formulate, or to revise and upgrade, existing national youth policies to bring them in line with the identified youth priority areas. It also aims to upgrade existing national plans of action for youth to include a national list of indicators to monitor progress in WPAY priorities.

Formulation of National Youth Policies

Despite growing interest in youth, most Arab countries lack a strategic vision for youth development. The region continues to address youth through unsustainable sectoral programmes and projects, rather than by formulating national youth policies that would provide nationally-agreed-upon frameworks and realistic guidelines from which actions can be developed to enhance meaningful youth participation and development.^{xix}

Among the 14 ESCWA countries, 5 countries have formulated national youth policies (Jordan, Bahrain, Palestine, Egypt, Yemen), another 5 countries are in the process of formulating such policies (UAE, Syria, Iraq, Qatar, Lebanon) and the rest of the countries (Sudan, Oman, Kuwait, KSA) only tackle youth issues through their sectoral and national development plans. An absence of detailed statistical data and research on youth, as well as inadequate national capacities for formulating evidence and





knowledge-based youth policies, are some of the challenges being faced at present.

With the aim of fostering citizenship and motivating leadership abilities and negotiation skills amongst the youth, a Lebanese National Youth Parliament was launched in 2009. It is comprised of 64 gender-balanced members, selected from public and private schools. Similarly, an Iraqi Youth Parliament was established in 2009, comprised of 275 members. This parliament aims to activate youth participation in the political, cultural and social fields, and also to provide channels of communication for young Iraqi men and women to express their aspirations and to contribute in making the decisions that affect them.

The Leader Qualification Centre in the United Arab Emirates implements the directives of the General Authority of Youth and Sports Welfare regarding the preparation, education and enhancement of young people and sports leaders, including their scientific and technical knowledge. It coordinates with youth and sports institutions and organizations in formulating future plans and programmes, organizing training sessions, and conducting relevant studies.

Yemen, meanwhile, launched a Youth Consultative Council in 2007. At present, its 111 members are young persons aged 20 to 25, with females constituting 45% of the total number of council members. Candidates are nominated by political parties, civil human rights organizations, governmental unions, syndicates, and organizations for youth and persons with disabilities. The Council aims at enhancing a volunteering spirit among youth, and at involving them in civil work, social service, as well as discussions on youth and national issues.^{xx}

New efforts at National Youth Policy formation in the Arab region:

- 5 countries have established National Youth Policies: Jordan, Bahrain, Palestine, Egypt, and Yemen
- 5 countries are in the process of National Youth Policy formation: UAE, Syria, Iraq, Qatar, and Lebanon
- Both Lebanon and Iraq established Youth Parliaments in 2009

The Way Forward

It can be seen that more efforts need to be made in the Arab region to harness the potential of young people and help them develop to the best of their abilities. The dire need to focus more on youth is even greater in this time of unrest. Youth empowerment and development cannot be achieved without the harmonized efforts of the United Nations' entities and Member States in the region.

Arab countries have become aware, though unevenly, of the importance of addressing youth issues. Much work remains to be done in order to improve the gender gaps that exist in education and employment between young males and females. The quality of education and its correlation to the needs





of the labour market is yet another area that countries in the Arab region need to focus on in order to tackle the issue of unemployment among the Arab youth. Moreover, health provisions and access to health facilities and health information should be improved. As witnessed in the recent uprisings in the region, member countries should aim to guarantee youth participation in decision-making processes as well as in the political and social realms. Last but not least, countries in the region should formulate or revise existing national youth policies to assist youth development.

To be able to achieve the aforementioned improvements, the countries in the Arab region should work to overcome a number of obstacles that impede their capacity to formulate appropriate national youth policies. Such obstacles may be of a structural nature (insufficient knowledge of modern approaches to youth issues and of the priorities of the World Programme of Action for Youth) or institutional (lack of an effective coordinating institution) or, in some instances, circumstantial (eruption of wars and lack of stability and security). Coordinated mechanisms such as the UNDG Strategic Action Plan on Young People, including UN Agencies and the Regional Commission, can play a role in enhancing the capacity of these countries to formulate national youth policies, follow up their implementation, and ultimately, evaluate them.

United Nations entities, such as ESCWA, should continue their work in strengthening the national capacity of member countries in the formulation of national policies and strategies targeting youth, organizing training workshops, preparing guides to enhance the capacity of national staff in the area of national policy formulation targeting youth, encouraging research and surveys that determine the basic factors affecting youth and their needs, and finding ways through which these could be addressed. Moreover, entities need to ensure that leadership exists for an extraordinary and immediate response to the needs and challenges facing young people in the Arab States. Other strategies might include: mobilizing the necessary technical and financial resources in support of the development and implementation of national policies, supporting countries in the region in establishing and strengthening data collection and monitoring and evaluation systems, and strengthening advocacy to raise awareness of the situation of the most-at-risk young people, and to stimulate increased investments for programming that target these populations.





For further reading:

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Endnotes

- ⁱ Regional Commissions, New York Office, Report “Full employment and opportunities for all, regional highlights” 2008
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- ^{vii} UN and League of Arab States. MDGs in the Arab Region, 2007
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