



MENA

GENERATION 2030

Investing in children and youth
today to secure a prosperous
region tomorrow

This report represents a significant creative and technical collaboration between colleagues from UNICEF Headquarters and the Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa.

Cover photo:

A Syrian refugee girl in an informal tented settlement in Jordan.

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Core report team

Veera Mendonca, Momo Duehring, and Arthur van Diesen from UNICEF, Middle East North Africa Regional Office; and Jan Beise, Sinae Lee, Bin Lian, Anastasia Mshvidobadze, and Danzhen You from UNICEF Headquarters.

The report was co-authored by Elizabeth Dalling, in close collaboration with the core team.

Design

Razan Al Sheikh.

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A woman wearing a colorful headscarf with blue, yellow, and red patterns. She is looking down and to the right with a slight smile. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue.

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GENERATION 2030 MENA

Executive summary

The opportunity

During the first half of the twenty-first century, an unprecedentedly large proportion of the population in the Middle East and North Africa will transition into their most productive years, opening up the potential for a demographic dividend - economic growth spurred by demographic changes. The most favourable period for the region as a whole will be between 2018 and 2040, when the dependency ratio is predicted to be lowest. This temporary lowering of the dependency ratio of the population has the potential to increase shared wealth and facilitate an expansion of opportunities for all - but only under certain conditions.

Children and young people (0-24 year olds) in the Middle East and North Africa currently account for nearly half of the region's population and have the potential to become agents of change, acting for a more prosperous and stable future for themselves and their communities, and playing their part in reaping the demographic dividend. But unleashing this potential requires urgent and significant investment to create opportunities for meaningful learning, social engagement and work, all of which are currently limited, particularly for young women and the most vulnerable.

The time to act is now. Due to a rapidly growing elderly population across the region, the window of opportunity to benefit from the demographic dividend will begin to close in the second half of the century.

The problem

A favourable age structure is essential. But other prerequisites for realising a demographic dividend such as political and social stability; inclusive and equitable economic and social policies; and expanded employment opportunities all face significant challenges in the region.¹



Political and social instability

The cost of conflict and violence in the Middle East and North Africa is enormous and exposes children, adolescents and youth to the risk of death and injury; violence at home and school; lack of access to education; uncertainty and loss of investment, especially in human capital. These and other factors contribute to the region achieving the world's lowest level of youth civic engagement – a key driver of instability in its own right.



Inequitable economic and social policies

Most countries in the region continue to marginalise adolescents and youth, particularly young women, the poor, refugees and those living with disabilities. Overlapping deprivations in the areas of health, protection and education severely compromise the ability of adolescents and youth to reach their full potential and become productive members of society and the economy.



Limited employment opportunities

Youth unemployment in the region is currently the highest in the world. Education systems are failing to prepare adolescents and youth for the workplace, and markets are not generating urgently needed jobs.

¹ See also: UNFPA, 2016. Shaping the Future: How Changing Demographics Can Power Human Development; World Bank Group. 2016. Global Monitoring Report 2015/2016: Development Goals in an Era of Demographic Change. World Bank, Washington, D.C.

The solution

The adolescents and youth of the Middle East and North Africa have the potential to become changemakers, by actively contributing to addressing the region's most pressing issues and to reaping the demographic dividend. But to unleash this potential, urgent policy actions are needed. Priorities will be determined by each country's age structure, depending on whether they are at the pre-dividend, early-dividend or late-dividend stage. But whatever their demography, all countries have an obligation to ensure the health, protection, education, transition to employment and civic engagement of their adolescents and youth, particularly the most vulnerable.

The time to act is now

Adolescents and youth across the Middle East and North Africa feel a sense of disillusionment, and frustration at the many barriers they face to effective learning and engagement with their communities and the workplace. According to the 2017 Arab Youth Survey, 55 per cent of youth feel that life in the region has deteriorated over the last decade.² Yet participatory research reveals that these same adolescents and youth remain hopeful that their reality will change and are keen to engage positively in changing that reality.³

It is vital that all governments, donors, practitioners, United Nations agencies and those with an interest in the future of the region play their part in fulfilling these hopes - both for the sake of the adolescents and youth themselves, and for their communities and countries to benefit from the demographic changes to come.

The opportunity of a demographic dividend is an extra incentive for countries in the Middle East and North Africa to invest in a new generation of adolescents and youth that is strong, rejects violence and discrimination, and is prepared for positive engagement in lifelong learning and work.⁴ Transforming frustration and disengagement among adolescents and youth into active involvement in problem-solving in their families, communities, workplaces and beyond is possible.

But it will not happen without intentional action. The time to act is now.

² ASDA/A Burson-Marsteller, 2017. Arab Youth Survey.

³ UNICEF, 2017. Participatory Action Research.

⁴ No Lost Generation and partners, 2017. Translating Research into Scaled Up Action: Evidence Symposium on Adolescents and Youth in MENA (summary report).



A young boy in the village of Tamarout, High Atlas Mountains, Morocco.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ILO	International Labour Organization
IMAGES	International Men and Gender Equality Survey
LSCE	Life Skills and Citizenship Education
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NCD	Non-Communicable Diseases
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PCBS	Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TFR	Total Fertility Rate
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

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