Arab Sustainable Development Report 2024



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Foreword



The previous edition of the Arab Sustainable Development Report (ASDR 2020) came out in the spring of 2020, just as the Arab region and the world were plunged into the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to this point, the region was already lagging in progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and structural transformative shifts across the different dimensions of sustainable development were much needed. With the pandemic, efforts and energies were mobilized across Arab countries to reduce its impacts on lives, livelihoods and the economy. The impacts on sustainable development and SDG progress were significantly adverse and countries are still reeling today from the shocks suffered by economies and health and education systems.

The outbreak of war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine further exacerbated this crisis, sharply impacting global supply chains and, of particular importance for the Arab region, food security. As a major importer of food staples, and with a third of its countries experiencing conflict, the region is particularly vulnerable to price fluctuations and food shortages. The region is also highly vulnerable to rising temperatures and water scarcity, and increasingly suffers from droughts, sandstorms and other natural disasters. With the climate crisis disproportionately affecting the Arab region, the impact of these concurrent shocks has been magnified.

Understandably, the efforts of most Arab Governments focused on responding to the crises, strengthening their levels of resilience and minimizing the vulnerability of economies – particularly in light of long-standing structural economic challenges. Issues of particular concern were the extent to which health and education services and digital infrastructure could handle the challenge; the impacts on economic diversification agendas; and the implications for middle-income economies that have grown increasingly concentrated in the service sector. The need to scale up manufacturing capacity and accelerate the integration of Arab economies into global and regional supply chains became more pressing. Regional economic integration remerged as critical not only in the context of trade, but also digital connectivity, health services, food security and other key areas.

Much attention was rightly given to the state of social protection programmes and their ability to shield vulnerable populations from shocks. New vulnerabilities were emerging against a backdrop of a shrinking middle class and rising wealth inequality in the vast majority of countries.

In light of these multiple crises, the importance of the public sector re-merged as the primary guarantor of economic and social rights.
A key lesson learned from this period is that

public institutions continue to be the core actor capable of driving a rights-based, sustainable and inclusive development agenda. This is not to downplay the importance of a whole-of-society approach to the achievement of the SDGs. Indeed, only a robust private sector can create the decent jobs needed for the 26 per cent of the region's young women and men who are unemployed. The private sector must lead in shifting practices towards more sustainable production that protects the health of the planet and its people. A vibrant and free civil society is the cornerstone of democratic societies that hold Governments to account, empower citizens and advocate for the rights of all.

However, as these crises have underscored, it is the policies, laws, frameworks and mechanisms in place that ultimately determine the region's resilience or lack thereof. Accordingly, **policy directions taken up by States** need to be re-examined, strengthened, changed, or introduced to ensure that Arab societies can withstand shocks, anticipate risks, and protect our people, economies and environment. The region's chosen policy directions will impact the ability to coordinate effectively for change at the global level, especially when it comes to the structural inequalities of the global financial architecture and managing the climate crisis.

Against this background, ASDR 2024 analyses the policy directions adopted by the 22 Arab countries towards achieving the SDGs. It examines the main policy directions at the regional and sub-regional levels, allowing the reader to see in one report for the first time, where efforts are concentrated in addressing each of the SDGs. Building on the structural barriers identified in ASDR 2020 and the recommendations to dismantle them, ASDR 2024 examines the policy trends that are hindering SDG progress in order to identify possibilities for advancements and the gaps where more, or different, efforts are needed. The report also highlights the importance of and potential for regional action to achieve each of the 17 SDGs.

In a region heavily burdened by debt and shrinking fiscal space, ASDR 2024 sheds light on financing challenges for each SDG. Although more work needs to be done to fully assess the budgetary situation for each Goal, we urgently need more discussions linking the policy and financing landscapes. Only this way can we begin to aim more effectively for the impacts we hope to achieve.

The Arab region is beset by conflict with many countries affected, including Iraq, Libya, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, with tragic consequences and significant regression on key development indicators. ASDR 2024 is being published while a devastating war is being waged in Gaza. To date, it has claimed tens of thousands of lives, wiped out basic infrastructure, is threatening famine, and destroying faith in multilateralism. During these darkest of times, the rule of law, the human rights framework, insistence on justice and the principles of equality and respect for the dignity of each woman, man and child can deliver us into the light. These same principles that we expect globally will also guide our work and policy advice at the regional and national levels.

A lot is being done in our region, even in areas where we might have assumed we are lagging or in areas that are emerging, including artificial intelligence and generative technologies. We need to build on this existing work, refine it, improve it, and scale it up where necessary. There is a lot of work to be done; 464 million people are directly impacted, and there is no time to lose.



Rola Dashti
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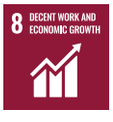

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Note to the reader

The Arab Sustainable Development Report (ASDR) is a **quadrennial United Nations inter-agency publication** produced by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) to support the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the regional level. The 2024 edition of the ASDR engaged a taskforce composed of 18 United Nations agencies working in the region.[1]

Building from ASDR 2020 and its analysis of the main barriers to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Arab region, ASDR 2024 examines **SDG policy trends** at the regional and subregional levels (see below on the composition of subregions). It identifies the main approaches taken by Arab Governments to progress on priority policy areas under each of the 17 SDGs. In doing so, it also identifies policy gaps and provides contextual analysis for each trend.

ASDR 2024 includes **17 chapters** – one for each SDG – in addition to an **umbrella chapter** that summarizes the main findings of the policy trend analysis, along with important contextual elements related to the policymaking environment and state of development in the Arab region.

The 17 SDG chapters combine **qualitative and quantitative analysis** and are structured similarly, as explained below. Each chapter focuses on one SDG, while addressing the interlinkages among all SDGs and cross-referencing other chapters where relevant.

Information across the report is presented in **bullet points** for a user-friendly experience.

ASDR 2024 is only available in **digital format**. In addition to the ability to browse all content online, an innovation was introduced that allows the reader to "**build own report**" – collating selected parts of the report that are of interest into a downloadable custom-made file.

Queries and feedback may be addressed to escwa-2030agenda@un.org.



Qualitative analysis

The qualitative analysis is based on the input and expert opinions received from the **United Nations agencies working in the region** and builds on a wealth of United Nations publications and databases. The **Voluntary National Reviews** (VNRs) issued by Arab States have been an important source of country examples in several chapters. In addition to extensive desk research, the analysis also builds on a rigorous **review process by independent experts** from the region (see Acknowledgments).

The qualitative analysis focuses on a few of the most **essential policy areas for each SDG**, based on a close reading of the Goal and its constituent targets and indicators and vetted by the United Nations interagency taskforce. The selection of main policy areas takes into consideration that some policy areas may appear under more than one interlinked SDG — for example, the chapter on SDG 1 focuses on poverty reduction and social protection policies, while the closely related and equally important policy area of employment generation is analysed in the chapter on SDG 8.

> **Policy trends** do not draw on comprehensive mapping of every single policy at the national level. Rather, within each selected SDG policy area, policy trends identify a concentration of **current policies (i.e. policies that are presently in effect)** that aim to achieve similar results (the what) and/or take similar policy measures to achieve them (the how). The trends are grouped as they appear as common for the region or for a particular grouping of countries, as applicable.

The **key regional and subregional policy trends** are identified based on existing efforts to review the policy landscape in the region by different United Nations entities and are supplemented through an additional desk review of current SDG policies at the national level. Each policy trend is illustrated by notable **country examples** that are by no means comprehensive.

While it is not possible, given the scope of the report, to offer robust analysis of the effectiveness and impact of each policy direction, the report identifies **policy gaps and missing policy elements** that hinder regional progress on the SDGs. This information is typically provided in **side-boxes. A set of actions** is proposed in the introduction of each SDG chapter **to address these major policy gaps on the road to 2030**.

Each SDG chapter dedicates a section to the **groups of people at risk of being left behind:**[2] those identified in ASDR 2020, along with new groups that may have emerged, showcasing notable examples of national policies that target each of these groups.

Given the relative scarcity of information available on **SDG financing** in the region, it is not always possible to draw regional and subregional financing trends for each SDG. While the financing section of the chapter on SDG 17 analyses regional policies to achieve overall fiscal sustainability, the **financing landscape** section in each SDG chapter focuses on financing issues specific to the SDG under consideration, such as the level of government expenditure on the SDG, the role of subsidies and official development assistance, and emerging financing mechanisms.

Information presented in the **regional dimensions** section of each SDG chapter highlights existing regional collaborations, notably those in the frame of the League of Arab States and its subsidiary bodies. It also sheds light on what could and needs to exist if Arab countries are to progress on the SDGs.

Typical SDG chapter structure

Section title	Section content
A. Introduction	Brief qualitative assessment of where the region stands on the SDG under consideration. On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress: priority actions to address policy gaps and accelerate the achievement of the SDG in question in the region. What the data say: regional/subregional level data (see quantitative analysis below).
B. The policy landscape	Policy trends common to most countries of the region, irrespective of income level or country situation. Illustrative examples of relevant national policies for each policy trend. Policy gaps or missing policy elements, presented in side-boxes.
C. Policy trends by subregion	Policy trends specific to each subregion, or policies that are being pursued differently in different subregions. Illustrative examples of relevant national policies for each policy trend. Policy gaps or missing policy elements, presented in side-boxes.
D. Policies to leave no one behind	Groups of people at risk of being left behind and what causes their vulnerability. Illustrative examples of targeted national policies that are helping these groups.
E. The financing landscape	Financing challenges and opportunities specific to each SDG in the region.
F. Regional dimensions	Existing and potential opportunities for regional integration and cooperation.

Quantitative analysis

ASDR 2024 is not a progress report. The quantitative analysis in the "**What the data say**" section and other sections of the SDG chapters offer a snapshot of available regional and subregional averages with an indication – where possible – of the direction of change (progress/regress) since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, and a comparison against the world average.

While it is impossible to establish causality between observed policy and data trends, the data story provides important context to improve the reading of policy trends.

Data were mainly sourced from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor and supplemented as needed by other sources. Data from the Monitor reflect the global indicator framework for the SDGs and targets of the 2030 Agenda developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators.[3] Readers are encouraged to refer to the Monitor for the most up-to-date figures.

Composition of subregions

The Arab region as presented in this report is composed of the 22 member States of the League of Arab States: Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.



The report adopts a flexible approach to the definition of subregions across chapter; each chapter opted for the country groupings that best bring out the subregional policy trends. Nevertheless, and unless otherwise stated, the subregional country groupings used in most chapters of the report are the following:

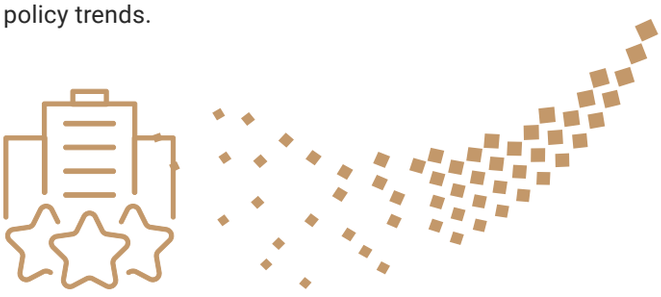
- The **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)** subregion: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates;
- The **middle-income countries (MICs)** subregion excludes countries in situations of conflict and those classified as least developed countries: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia;[4]
- The **least developed countries (LDCs)** subregion follows the United Nations classification: the Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen;
- The **countries in conflict** subregion: Iraq, Libya, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.[5]

Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen are included in both the least developed countries and countries in conflict subregions. In some chapters, very similar policy trends were observed for these two groups, and hence the two groupings were combined under one heading, for example in the chapters on SDG 3 (Good health and well-being); SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth); SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure); SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities) (Migration policies); SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities); SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production); SDG 15 (Life on land); and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals) (Technology).

The chapter on SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities) identified common fiscal and wage policy trends in middle-income and least developed countries and common migration policies in middle-income countries and conflict-affected countries.

In the chapter on SDG 14 (Life below water), geographic groupings based on regional sea basins were used because they offer a more suitable frame for the policy trend analysis.

In the chapters on SDG 5 (Gender equality), SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals) (Finance and Data, monitoring and accountability), no clear subregional differences could be identified and the policy analysis was confined to regional policy trends.



Endnotes

1 International Labour Organization (ILO); Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO); United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); World Health Organization (WHO); International Organization for Migration (IOM); United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); World Food Programme (WFP); United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO); United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA); United Nations Volunteers (UNV); United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA); United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT); United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC); United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR); United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN WOMEN); United Nations Development Coordination Office (UNDCO).

2 Including *inter alia*: Women and girls; Young people, children; Informal workers; Migrant workers; Refugees and internally displaced persons; Persons with disabilities; Older persons; People living in poverty and less well-off persons; Rural communities; People living in slums or inadequate dwellings.

3 Global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

4 Some chapters, for example the chapters on SDG 1 (No poverty) and SDG 4 (Education for all) include some conflict-affected countries within the group of middle-income countries, resulting in a larger group: Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, the State of Palestine and Tunisia.

5 Some chapters, for example the chapters on SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 4 (Education for all) and SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities), consider a larger category, namely "countries experiencing conflict and fragility", which include the seven countries in conflict plus Lebanon.

Introduction

Policies for the Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab region: emerging trends and structural challenges

The 2024 edition of the Arab Sustainable Development Report (ASDR 2024) focuses on policies to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Arab region. The report maps policy trends related to SDG implementation at the regional level and in relevant groupings of countries: Gulf Cooperation Council countries, middle-income countries, least developed countries and countries experiencing conflict and fragility. Building on the knowledge and analysis of 18 United Nations entities working in the region, ASDR 2024 supports this mapping of trends with reference to **national policy examples related to the 17 SDGs in the 22 Arab States.** It points to policy gaps and contextualizes the trends within structural and emerging development challenges and priorities in relation to regional SDG data.

For the purpose of this report, there is no clear-cut definition of the term "policy". In practical terms, a policy trend reflects the approach Governments take to achieve (national) priorities. Their efforts include national and sectoral strategies, initiatives, programmes, legislation, engagement with global and regional frameworks, and the establishment of financing and institutional mechanisms to facilitate implementation. ASDR 2024 adopts this wider designation in its use of the terms "policy" and "policy trends".

The analysis of policy directions in the 17 chapters that follow highlights promising elements, robust policies and policy gaps. It identifies areas where integrated policies that address the different dimensions of sustainable development remain lacking. It links those policy directions wherever possible to the **financing landscape** and **policies to leave no one behind,** as well as **regional dimensions** for cooperation and multilateral action. By doing so, ASDR 2024:

- Provides a better understanding of SDG progress in the region in relation to policies undertaken;
- Helps policymakers identify policy approaches adopted by Arab Governments facing similar challenges;
- Identifies opportunities for the acceleration of SDG implementation through the adoption of more integrated policies and the promotion of regional cooperation and action.



I. The SDG policy landscape in the Arab region

Given the multiple policy areas under each SDG, it is not possible to provide a comprehensive summary of the main trends or findings. However, looking across the policy directions covered in detail in the 17 chapters that follow, a number of observations emerge. These common characteristics of SDG policies in the region are useful for identifying entry points and assessing the extent to which structural challenges to policymaking are being addressed.

The below findings do not cover all 17 SDGs or the different policy areas within each. They use select policy examples from the different SDGs in order to illustrate the finding.

Policies setting ambitious targets are on the rise; however, these are often unaccompanied by practical and resourced action plans.

- While substantial legislative progress has been made towards combatting violence against women and girls, only five of the countries that have adopted laws to protect against domestic violence have **national plans or strategies on combatting violence against women** and only one of them makes binding budgetary commitments to implement the existing legislation (SDG 5).
- Many countries have launched **strategic frameworks on sustainable consumption and production and the green economy,** but these policies are more aspirational than actionable (SDG 12). Policy implementation remains weak and underfunded, while many exemplary practices and demonstration projects need to be scaled up.
- Most countries have set **renewable energy targets** aligned with nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement on climate change (SDGs 7 and 13), but only eight countries have developed action plans or strategies to achieve them.
- Only a few Arab countries have taken the crucial step of translating **net-zero emissions targets** into comprehensive, economy-wide strategies with integrated programmes and specific objectives for priority sectors (SDG 13).
- Several countries have set ambitious **land degradation neutrality targets;** nine registered voluntary targets under the Convention to Combat Desertification (SDG 15). However, the lack of science-based and holistic action plans, adequate monitoring and community participation represent important implementation hurdles.

Emerging and new policy areas are being introduced.

- There is an emerging focus on **nutrition through a multisectoral approach** in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and some middle-income countries, including the establishment of dietary guidelines, food labelling standards, unhealthy food marketing regulations, and media campaigns and counselling on healthy diets and nutrition (SDG 2).
- **Mental health policies are being introduced and plans or legislation are recognizing the right to mental health.** However, a significant gap remains in securing adequate funding, services and robust monitoring systems (SDG 3).
- Several countries have established **national artificial intelligence (AI) structures** and developed **policies to promote AI,** with a focus on skills building, investments, the legal and regulatory environment, as well as ethics. Some countries have already set up an ecosystem for AI (SDG 9).
- **Sustainable smart cities are emerging in the region,** with 14 out of 22 countries having related initiatives that can enhance urban safety, increase traffic safety, strengthen early-warning systems, unlock the potential of real-time data in predicting and preventing crime and terrorism, and address violence against women and girls in public spaces (SDG 11).
- **Sustainable public procurement** has progressed in several Gulf Cooperation Council and middle-income countries, including through partnerships with international counterparts to establish and adhere to standardized norms and guidelines. This supports public agencies in prioritizing environmentally and socially responsible products and services while encouraging businesses to adopt sustainable practices and stimulating market development through innovative processes (SDG 12).

Follow-up on regional and global frameworks is strengthening national efforts.

- By mid-2023, 20 of the 22 Arab countries had convened national multi-stakeholder dialogues as part of the Food Systems Summit 2021 process and follow-up. Of these, 11 articulated **national pathways with concrete measures to achieve sustainable food systems by 2030** (SDG 2).

- The 20 Arab countries that are Party to the Paris Agreement on climate change have submitted at least one **nationally determined contribution** to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) secretariat, identifying adaptation needs and priorities and establishing mitigation targets (SDG 13). Additionally, 15 of these countries submitted an updated or new nationally determined contribution (NDC) within 5 years of their first NDC document.
- As part of their national statements of **commitment at the Transforming Education Summit in 2022,** several Arab countries pledged to incorporate climate change into curricula (SDGs 4 and 13).

In some key policy areas, efforts remain largely ineffective despite growing attention and in some cases funding, leading to serious questions regarding policy design and implementation.

- **National employment policies and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programmes** have not had a noticeable impact on the high levels of unemployment. This could, in part, be attributed to issues with the design or resourcing of programmes. More fundamentally, however, the persistent low economic growth conditions are disincentivizing investment and job creation, and social, cultural and logistical barriers are impeding the labour force participation of certain groups (SDG 8).
- **Tax incentives** for stimulating foreign direct investment have often failed to generate commensurate benefits in terms of jobs or economic growth (SDGs 8 and 10).
- The **mainstreaming of gender equality considerations** has been slow, both across sectoral development policies in making them more relevant and responsive to the needs of all citizens, and in the work of different national institutions to ensure greater awareness and buy-in and active participation in change (SDG 5).
- In most countries in the region, **spending on education** lags international benchmarks and is generally inefficient, with learning outcomes lagging those in countries with similar levels of expenditure (SDG 4). Educational policies must be augmented by better data and evaluation systems to inform evidence-based resource allocation and address underlying inequalities.
- At least 17 Arab countries have established protections for the **rights of students with disabilities,** with many also taking steps to enhance the physical accessibility of learning environments. Various barriers, however, continue to impede access to quality education for students with disabilities: negative attitudes towards disability; difficulties accessing transportation; shortfalls in accessibility in learning environments; low levels of funding for inclusion initiatives; and insufficient training on disability for teaching and support staff (SDG 4).
- Only four countries in the region have explicitly formulated a **national urban policy.** Urban environmental issues are often covered by sectoral approaches instead of being addressed in integrated urban policies, which limits their effectiveness (SDG 11).

Policies in some areas remain blind to vulnerable groups, inadvertently pushing people behind.

- A commitment to renew efforts towards advancing the universal **social protection** agenda was taken in the 2021 Ministerial Forum Declaration on the Future of Social Protection in the Arab region, through which countries agreed to work toward enhanced and eventually universal coverage by shock-responsive, well-managed and sustainably financed social protection systems. However, institutional coordination and financing constraints limit the capacity of programmes and schemes to counter poverty, tackle inequality and prevent downward income mobility, with common challenges including reaching informal workers, addressing gender gaps emerging from programme design, and financing adequate benefits for recipients (SDG 1).
- In some countries, agricultural modernization programmes are not catering for the **needs of traditional smallholder farmers,** and unable to integrate them, are pushing them further into poverty (SDG 2).
- The speed at which digital technology is advancing will require the **upskilling and reskilling of older employees,** an issue not yet widely addressed in the region that risks widening inequality between generations (SDG 9).
- **Climate policies often overlook the specific needs of marginalized and vulnerable populations** that are disproportionately affected by climate-related disasters. Internally displaced persons, refugees, migrants, inhabitants of low-lying coastal areas and individuals with lower incomes encounter significant obstacles to accessing essential resources and technology for effectively adapting to climate change (SDG 13).



The region continues to underutilize advocacy and educational efforts for transformative change.

- **Health policies are failing to curb obesity,** especially in the Mashreq countries, due to lack of advocacy and educational programmes that promote healthy diets and lifestyles (SDG 2), which could further advance sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12).
- Advocacy and educational activities to end the **existing stigma around mental health,** including among health-care professionals, are lacking. This can discourage people from seeking help and prevent the provision of effective mental health services (SDG 3).
- The **integration of sexual education in school curricula** has also been slow, thus missing the opportunity to address sociocultural norms and taboos among adolescents and young people (SDGs 3, 4 and 5).
- While awareness of the value of biodiversity across society is generally weak, very few countries have incorporated **biodiversity education and awareness-raising** as strategic pillars of their national biodiversity strategy and action plans (SDG 15).

Greater attention is being paid to the integration of technology and digitalization across policy areas.

- **E-payments and the use of platforms such as mobile wallets** for social protection beneficiaries are in progress (SDG 1).
- Greater attention to **technology in education** is observed, both for developing student skills and for facilitating home learning (e.g. **e-learning platforms**) (SDG 4).
- **Digital government (or e-government)** has progressed because of policies to modernize public entities and accelerate digitalization, transforming the operations and services of public institutions in partnership with the private sector. The use of digital technologies by Governments helped to maintain essential public services in health, education and social protection during the COVID-19 pandemic (SDG 9 and SDG 16).
- Some countries have developed a **national digital health/e-health strategy or policy** or have embedded their digital health strategy in the national health strategy to institutionalize the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for health and well-being (SDG 3).
- Gulf Cooperation Council countries are developing local technologies and manufacturing capacities for **water desalination and wastewater treatment,** an approach that is also gaining significance in other Arab countries, although more work is needed to mitigate the potential environmental impacts of desalination technologies (SDG 6).

Policies are being supported by the establishment of multi-stakeholder institutions.

- Most countries, notably the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, have established **high-level political oversight bodies (e.g. food security councils) to ensure the stable procurement of food** as a matter of national security (SDG 2).
- **Tripartism** is making headway in the region, signifying an increased willingness to engage employers and workers in labour policy. All countries have **social dialogue institutions and bodies** and have adopted the Arab Action Agenda for Employment, which prioritizes social dialogue and encourages the creation of social and economic councils (SDG 8).
- Gulf Cooperation Council and middle-income countries are establishing **industrial clusters** that represent a conducive environment for growth and integration into global value chains, bringing together various stakeholders and boosting their collaborations (SDGs 8 and 9).
- **Agreements for the co-management of marine protected areas** that engage civil society organizations and local communities are emerging in middle-income and least developed countries with positive impacts in terms of mobilizing community support, fostering a sense of ownership, and increasing compliance with marine protected area regulations (SDG 14).



Weak regional integration is hindering SDG progress

For a region that boasts a relative homogeneity in terms of language and culture, the Arab region is one of the least integrated globally. The impact is felt most obviously in the state of the economy and trade and in conflict management and resolution. There are, however, a few policy areas where regional or sub-regional cooperation is working well. For example, among Gulf Cooperation Council countries, labour mobility of nationals is further enhanced by portability agreements that facilitate the operation of pension and social protection systems. Collaborative agreements to manage fisheries constitute a positive development as do emerging efforts on collaborative sand and dust storm assessment and early warning systems. Likewise, the area of cyber security and network interoperability is becoming a focus of regional action.

However, as the following chapters will show, weak integration across the SDGs is costly and the potential to accelerate action by adopting regional frameworks and mechanisms remains significant. The policy analysis in this report identifies this potential across the 17 SDGs; **select examples include:**

SDG 1

Extending social protection systems to people living outside their countries of origins, including through a regional social security coordination agreement; establishing a regional social solidarity fund to close the poverty gap in the least developed countries and guarantee a basic standard of living.

SDG 2

Establishing regional strategic food reserves similar to those established by Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries, as well as regional and bilateral trade arrangements in food and agricultural inputs.

SDG 4

Developing a common framework for skills development and credential recognition, as well as strengthening cooperation across educational institutions for student exchanges and joint research.

SDG 6

Building capacity around water diplomacy to ensure peacefully managed access to shared water resources and improving water-use efficiency through inter-sectoral efforts to decouple economic growth from water use.

SDG 8

The implementation of an Arab customs union to strengthen the integration of supply chains and support industry and manufacturing.

SDG 9

Streamlining tariff systems, digitizing supply chains and facilitating the movement of people and goods to strengthen supply chain resilience.

SDG 10

Stronger cooperation on migration management, remittances and the protection of migrant rights.

SDG 11

Strengthening the capacity of local authorities through exchanges of knowledge and good practices within regional networks of cities, supporting local Governments to advance sustainable urban development.

SDG 13

Regional initiatives to identify climate risks and solutions and enhance early warning systems for climate related hazards and collaboration among meteorological offices, as well as developing regional and sub-regional response plans to prepare for effective disaster responses.

SDG 10
SDG 17

A coordinated approach to tax policy and illicit financial flows, as well as a coordinated Arab approach to debt management and advocacy on changes needed to the global financial architecture.

II. Structural challenges and cross-sectoral issues call for a transformative policymaking agenda

The shift to integrated, responsive, accountable and forward-looking policymaking is not easy but is necessary. Policy coherence requires breaking down the siloes of ministerial and other institutional arrangements, as well as developing inclusive rights-based policymaking that engages a broad range of stakeholders, including marginalized groups. It also requires harmonizing domestic and foreign policies and aligning commitments taken at the international level, particularly in economic and financial areas, with national developmental capacities and objectives. This is not a straightforward endeavour but involves difficult decisions and trade-offs between different policy solutions, often influenced by various institutions or actors that carry distinct ideologies and diverging interests as well as unequal power or weight.

The following 17 chapters chart the policy trends within each SDG. This analysis is a prompt for focus on the impact of the policy landscape on the development trajectory in the region and on the well-being of its people and environment. Building on the analysis provided in the following chapters, two approaches are needed. First, evaluation and impact assessment of key policies at the national level with a comparative approach across the different sub-regions. This is the ultimate objective of any attempt to consider policies for the SDGs—the extent to which policies aid transformation toward a more just, inclusive and sustainable reality for current and future generations. Second, addressing the structural impediments to integrated policymaking for the SDGs and the push for a holistic approach that tackles structural issues at the national and regional levels.

Below is an overview of structural and cross-sectoral issues that continue to hinder the transformative potential of the SDGs and that frame analysis of the policy directions presented in detail in the individual SDG chapters.



A weak or broken policymaking cycle

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and amplified existing fragilities in the capacities of public institutions in Arab countries, including in regard to weak preparedness of institutions, fragmentation of the decision-making process, and challenges in coordination among institutions as well as between public institutions and non-State actors such as civil society organizations.[6] The weak response[7] was not only the result of shrinking fiscal space and ability to fund response interventions, but relates to the lack of trust in public institutions operating in political and/or economic crises. The weak response cannot be separated from the weakness of frameworks to monitor and evaluate policies and the functioning of government institutions. Ineffective institutions with limited accountability can create a breeding ground for social and political instability and conflict.

Ineffective institutions hinder capacity to deal with any kind of shock or disaster, including natural ones. For instance, across the region, several human and climate related disasters translated into a massive loss of lives that could have been avoided and effectively mitigated. The collapse of two dams in Derna, Libya in September 2023, is an example of the impacts of conflict and extreme weather coinciding, with disastrous outcomes. The dams collapsed due to a lack of maintenance and inadequate operation. Fragmented, divided and weak institutions did not follow up or supervise maintenance work. Nor were there effective institutional systems in place for disaster prevention and management.

Lack of policy coherence: Fragmentation in policymaking has a clear negative impact on development progress. For example, most countries lack integrated sexual and reproductive health services for improved outcomes, with sexual and reproductive health programmes managed independently from national health systems. Social protection programmes in many countries are dispersed among multiple entities and mechanisms of distribution lead to high inefficiency while many families and individuals fall through the cracks. Poor coordination of tax incentives and other policies result in poor investment performance, with many such investments not producing the expected effects on growth or employment.

The problem is also linked to centralized budgets that are not responsive to priorities or needs at the subnational or local levels. The decentralization process is unfinished in most countries of the region. Overall, since they depend on transfers from the central Government, local Governments and authorities still have weak capacities for mobilizing local resources. Compared to other regions in the world, Arab cities and local authorities have lower rates of local revenue collection due to centralized budgeting mechanisms at the national level, corruption, inefficient transaction and land records management, and poor accountability. Local authorities have limited ability to collect property taxes, the primary source of locally generated revenue. As a result, cities may be unable to meet demands for operating costs, such as employee salaries, building rents and equipment, and instead must rely on subsidized operations by using transfers meant for capital investment.

An integrated, holistic approach to policymaking is necessary.

Sustainable development trajectories are encapsulated in long-term national visions and enabling environments, based on a systemic and integrated approach to policymaking. These aspirational visions need to be translated into actionable policies with measurable objectives and monitoring mechanisms, as well as practical solutions beyond selective and isolated interventions.

While political commitment might be reflected through visions captured in strategies and action plans, these must be coupled with the legal and normative frameworks to translate commitments into policies and action. In addition, awareness of the interlinkages between or interdependence of different SDGs and policy areas must be enforced by coordination mechanisms that allow for holistic policy design and implementation.

Furthermore, the SDG follow-up and review processes ought to be closely linked with the policymaking cycle, including the fiscal and investment plans, thus allowing for better allocation and management of budgetary resources for the implementation of the SDGs. Engagement of the highest level of Government and ministries with cross-cutting influence, such as ministries of finance, is pivotal in steering implementation and ensuring adequate financing.

Lack of coordination among different government entities on development priorities—and lack of policy coherence across different strategies—compounds inefficiencies and the lack of attentiveness to trade-offs. In some countries, for instance, price controls and food subsidies end up skewing national agricultural production and promoting less diversified diets. Untargeted energy and food subsidies end up accruing more benefit to better-off households than to those living in poverty, while fishing subsidies have led to overfishing in many places. Fuel subsidies have hindered efforts to curb energy demand and transition to cleaner energy at the household and corporate levels. Water desalination has high energy requirements, often met by fossil fuels, which contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. Without proper mitigation, brine discharge from desalination plants can also pollute water bodies. In the agriculture sector, policies encouraging the planting of high export value but water intensive crops, combined with inefficient irrigation practices, result in water overuse in a region that suffers from high levels of water scarcity and where integrated water resource management (IWRM) is an important topic on the policy agenda.

Data gaps hinder evidence-based policymaking processes: The lack of monitoring and evaluation systems for data- and evidence-based policymaking remains a key weakness among countries in the Arab region. While there have been improvements in the ability of national statistical offices (NSOs) to produce data pertaining to the SDGs and increasingly use voluntary national and local reviews, the quality and frequency of the statistical information produced nationally and locally, and their regional and international comparability, remain key challenges. Statistical legislation requires updating and modernizing.

Data availability, quality and accessibility has been a persistent challenge in the region and is closely linked to the weakness of institutions, with almost 80 per cent of SDG data coming from administrative sources. The COVID-19 pandemic placed further stress on the work of NSOs and simultaneously underscored the importance of data production and the necessary coordination and management of data. As a result, there is emerging investment in new methods and the use of non-traditional data sources and modes of data collection in the region. NSOs across the region are engaged in establishing well-coordinated national statistical systems governed by up-to-date legislation, modernizing administrative records and upgrading dissemination tools to produce harmonized data. Data availability in the region has increased in recent years, with the SDG data gap decreasing from 50 per cent in 2020 to 35 per cent in 2023.[8]

While it could be argued that data for the SDGs are a challenge in most countries, it is useful to highlight that there are critical data gaps related to governance, human rights and discrimination in the Arab region. The human rights deficit manifests itself in the lack of disaggregated data by income level, gender, disability, ethnicity, religious affiliation, migratory status, geographical location, etc., and data collected on indicators reflecting the state of inequality under SDGs 5, 10 and 16, which cannot be monitored properly. This makes the data deficit a political and not only a technical issue. For instance, almost all Arab countries have shown increasing interest in measuring the well-being of people with disabilities, but there is a lack of disability-inclusive data to allow policymakers to implement and monitor evidence-based inclusive policies.

Weakness of the science-policy interface and lack of science-informed policymaking

Evidence-based policymaking cannot flourish independently of a vibrant, robust and free environment of knowledge production. Innovation remains underfunded and underprioritized; in 2021, there were 630 full-time researchers in the region per 1 million inhabitants while the world average is 1,353. Likewise, only 0.61 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) was spent regionally on research and development against a world average of 1.93 per cent. Gulf Cooperation Council countries are allocating large sums for scientific research but their productive sectors may not have sufficient absorptive capacity. While these countries have advanced and sophisticated infrastructure and facilities for research and development, the percentage turnouts are small when compared to other countries and regions because of their high GDP value. In addition, the links between research, innovation and policymaking have yet to materialize in institutionalized processes or mechanisms.

Beyond weak investment in research and development and persistently low rates of academic publishing across the region, there is huge potential for strengthening the science-policy interface and ensuring that policymakers encourage and have access to locally developed knowledge and research. At the regional level there is, for instance, limited adoption of science-based assessments as a basis and justification for integrating water and sanitation into climate-related plans and policies. Scientific assessment findings that identify climate risks and areas, sectors and groups that are most vulnerable to climate change are insufficiently used in the policy development process. In addition, the gap between industry and academia is significant: industries are focused on production development, market access, risk alleviation and profit-making, whereas academic research is in most cases purely scientific and not readily convertible into practical application.

A lack of strategic foresight and greater policy focus on the short term are also weakening inter-generational justice, especially in the economic and social spheres. Some positive elements can be seen in the environmental sphere, for example in the anticipation of climate impacts on water resources and agriculture: the development of disaster risk reduction policies; and greater efforts in the application of environmental impact assessments and ecosystem management approaches. However, deficiencies remain in terms of long-term public debt management, urban planning and territorial development, the anticipation of the socioeconomic impacts of technology, and the lack of comprehensive ageing policies that cut across sectors and bridge the inter-generational gap.

Poly-crises and the structure of the Arab economies

While the political economy underpinning policymaking varies from one country to another in the region depending on each country's resources, population and political system, it is generally deeply shaped by the rentier model that exists in the majority of Arab countries. Throughout the region, many economies are marked by the State-led accrual of economic rents through natural resource wealth; the distribution of subsidized goods and services, a large footprint of State-run enterprises within national economies; and control over the distribution of economic resources and opportunities. This model leads to increasing socioeconomic inequalities in accessing productive opportunities and reproduces the elite class.[9] After the short-lived period of nationalist models of governance in the post-independence period, the spread of authoritarian approaches to governance, including deepening the State and military capture of economic spaces, meant that actors that are key to economic and developmental dynamism, including labour unions, political parties, civil society groups and private sector actors and associations, were increasingly marginalized in policymaking processes.

Economic growth has been relatively stagnant in the Arab world during the last decade. Rentier economies and dependence on oil exports created an environment where manufacturing and private investment in productive sectors are weak. Integration of Arab economies in global value chains is limited. The region has moved towards market integration through the Pan-Arab Free Trade Area agreement but intraregional trade still faces multiple obstacles; at around only 13 per cent of total trade, it falls far short of its potential for fostering economic growth and sustainable employment in the Arab region, which lags behind other emerging regions. The unrealized potential of a regional

market is a great detriment to economic growth. Renewed political commitments to trade integration, including through the implementation of an Arab customs union, would have multiple positive effects on the region's economy.

The Arab region's chronically challenged economy has been further battered by the succession of global crises that have emerged over the past four years. The region was ill-prepared to weather the sharp economic slowdown and inflationary pressures emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2022 escalation of the war in Ukraine, and instability in global energy, food and raw materials markets.

The impacts of these crises, however, have not been uniform. Gulf Cooperation Council countries have largely benefited from energy price hikes, which have led to significant windfalls and high rates of revenue; government interventions kept inflation significantly below world and regional averages. In the rest of the region, the economic impacts of the poly-crises have been serious, with many countries not yet recovering in terms of real GDP per capita. Most non-Gulf Cooperation Council countries have experienced some combination of debt crisis, currency depreciation, reduction of price supports, widening trade imbalances, and political instability or conflict that have significantly weighed on economic recovery and increased cost of living.

At the same time, official development assistance (ODA) inflows to the region have fallen in both absolute and relative terms. In 2018, for instance, net ODA flows to the region totalled around 35.4 billion United States dollars (US$) , representing around 20 per cent of the global total. In 2022, this figure fell to $33 billion, representing just 13 per cent of net ODA globally. The decline is particularly sharp for the region's least developed and conflict-affected countries, which saw their combined net ODA inflows fall by nearly 25 per cent during this period.[10] Around 65 million people in the region depend on ODA for survival.

Persistently high unemployment and an education deficit

Informality in the Arab region is widespread: across the region, an estimated 63 per cent of employment is informal (a figure reaching 87 per cent in the least developed countries),[11] as weak regulatory frameworks, poor labour market conditions, economic concentration in low-productivity sectors, inadequate educational outcomes and conflicts have hindered decent work opportunities in the formal sector.[12] Most workers are not covered by minimum wage laws, work safety regulations, social protection systems and other benefits afforded by labour laws. Women are highly represented in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the informal sector; in addition to having the highest female unemployment rate in the world, the Arab region also has the lowest rate of women's economic participation – the timeframe to close this gap is estimated at 115 years.[13]

Unemployment was the highest in the world at 10.7 per cent in 2022 compared to 5.8 per cent globally. The situation is even more dire for women; at 19.9 per cent, the region's female unemployment rate in 2022 was more than triple the global average. Youth unemployment was 26.3 per cent in 2022, far exceeding the global average of 14 per cent. For young women, the unemployment rate was even higher at 41.6 per cent in 2022. High youth unemployment has fuelled a brain drain, as talented young people with few prospects at home seek opportunities abroad. Poor socioeconomic conditions, political instability, conflict and limits on free expression, compounded by institutional weaknesses and corruption, drive the migration of educated professionals from low- and middle-income countries to higher-income countries in the region and beyond.

Regional unemployment has rarely fallen below 10 per cent since 2000, despite efforts at economic diversification and the proliferation of vocational training for younger cohorts. These efforts remain below scale. Educational reform has not caught up quickly enough. Economic challenges hinder efforts to scale up education and make well-targeted investments to improve the quality of instruction. Within countries, further obstacles include an uneven distribution of qualified teaching staff and other essential resources, contributing to inequalities in learning opportunities. Professional development frameworks for teachers are not present in all countries, and in many cases, education systems face challenges attracting talent to the teaching profession. The pace of TVET reforms has varied across the region, and in most cases, systems continue to suffer from insufficient funding, short-term skill anticipation, limited hands-on experience opportunities for students, and rigid access criteria. Additionally, limited opportunities to transition between TVET and higher education make the impact of these programmes questionable.

From a broader perspective, emerging sectors of the 4th industrial revolution demand educational systems that build skills in problem solving, critical thinking and use of new technologies. Such reforms to the educational system are difficult to imagine without a social and political environment where critical thinking and freedom of expression are guaranteed.

Financing faces domestic and international challenges

Fiscal space is shrinking across the region, even more so in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and recent global and regional crises. Financing is impacted by slow growth and heavy constraints related to domestic resource mobilization and structural impediments within the global financial architecture and trends in foreign aid.

Domestically, far-reaching reforms are needed to increase resource mobilization. Social expenditure is low in the region compared to global averages and underutilized as a tool to combat inequality.[14] Meanwhile, Arab countries spend considerably more than the global average on consumption subsidies and military and police forces.[15] This imbalance means that public expenditure falls short of its potential to empower populations and reduce inequalities of outcome and opportunity. Instead, it reinforces the status quo. The tax to GDP ratio in the region was estimated at 8 per cent in 2019 compared to median rates of 18 per cent for middle-income and 25 per cent for high-income countries globally. While tax reform is underway in some countries, tax increases in the region have not necessarily yielded equivalent increases in revenue, as weak enforcement capacity, numerous exemptions, high levels of informal economic activity, low compliance rates, and various forms of tax abuse have undercut the efficiency of the region's tax administrations. Despite reforms, the shares of both personal and corporate income taxes in total tax revenue have not significantly changed in most countries in the region.

Significantly, tax policies and reforms have also not been optimized for addressing inequality in the region. Regressive indirect taxes such as value added tax (VAT) continue to predominate in the tax revenues of most middle-income and least developed countries. For example, regressive indirect taxation represents 40-50 per cent of total tax revenue in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia and over 70 per cent in Jordan. Despite an increasing concentration of wealth amongst the richest people in the region, countries have adopted very few measures to tax wealth.

Public debt has become unsustainable in several countries across the region. Many Arab countries have high debt-to-GDP ratios. This stood at around 46 per cent of GDP for the region in 2023, reaching 71.1 per cent in middle-income countries and 78 per cent in least developed countries. As a growing share of this debt is borrowed at unfavourable terms, debt servicing costs have also grown, accounting for significant portions of total government revenue and reducing capacity to invest in SDG policy priorities. To date, there is no mechanism for a coordinated Arab regional approach to debt management or advocacy on the international stage to influence global financial architecture.

Climate change and natural resource scarcity

Climate change is raising temperatures, with parts of the region facing increases of 5°C by the end of this century based on current trends. Due to their relatively limited adaptive capacity, the Arab least developed countries are the most vulnerable to climate change. Land degradation and desertification are accelerating biodiversity loss, contributing to food insecurity, degrading ecosystem services, threatening human health, well-being and resilience, and exacerbating political instability and conflict.

The Arab region is also the most water-scarce globally. Almost 90 per cent of the region's population is experiencing high levels of water stress and 17 countries are affected by desertification and land degradation. Climate change is further aggravating water scarcity and its impacts on health, food security and biodiversity are critical. Climate change is also increasing the intensity and frequency of water-related crises such as floods and droughts.

Barriers to addressing climate change challenges in the region include limited capacity as well as limited or mis-directed financing. This is due in part to weakness of data and analytical capabilities and insufficient coordination at the highest institutional policy levels in most countries of the region when it comes to climate action, data and monitoring. Net-zero strategies lack details on the institutional, financial and technical aspects of achieving decarbonization. Furthermore, they are not aligned with national development plans and the allocation of resources in State budgets. Core international funding falls far short of the needs of Arab States, is concentrated in middle-income countries, and is often in the form of non-concessional loans. It also privileges mitigation initiatives at the expense of adaptation priorities identified by Governments.

The region has made progress in universalizing access to energy services, but its reliance on fossil fuels is high and the penetration of renewable energy remains limited. There are disparities in energy access among and within countries,

particularly between rural areas (83 per cent in 2021) and urban areas (98 per cent in 2021). Accelerating progress requires decisive policy shifts to decouple economic growth and energy consumption, enhance the efficiency and productivity of electricity generation, and increase investment in and use of clean and renewable energy. The region is witnessing a rise in utility-scale projects, including the launch of mega-projects on renewable energy. However, at 5 per cent in 2020, renewable energy as a share of total final consumption remains very low. In addition, energy intensity has remained relatively unchanged over the last decade, while it has fallen by between 10 and 21 per cent in all other regions in the same period.



Conflict: varied triggers and regression in development gains

Of the 22 Arab countries, 7 can be considered countries in conflict and 38 per cent of the population (173 million people) live in conflict-affected areas.[16] Many other countries are impacted and host large numbers of refugees.

In addition to the loss of life and livelihoods, the developmental impact of conflict is well-documented: devastation of infrastructure, including health-care and educational facilities; regression on women's rights and a rise in violence against women and in child marriage; an entire generation that is out of school or whose schooling is severely disrupted or comprised; and a weakening of institutions and a rise in corruption, among others. What this will mean for the region in years and decades to come is yet to be reckoned with.

Representing only 5.8 per cent of the world's population, the Arab region is the origin of about 14.8 million refugees. It hosted 9.4 million refugees under the mandates of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in 2023. These figures represent about 40.5 per cent and 25.4 per cent of all refugees worldwide, respectively. The region has around 19.4 million internally displaced persons. More than 65 million people need humanitarian assistance in seven countries in conflict.

Source: UNHCR, "Refugee Data Finder", accessed on 1 February 2024.

Note: Data on humanitarian assistance from the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) for Iraq, Libya, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

Conflicts in the region are not uniform. Different drivers and exacerbating factors (co)exist: internal strife, repression and weak rule of law, inequality and/or failure of the social contract, occupation, and external interventions. Different types of responses are needed. Multilateralism is being severely tested and global processes have rarely proven effective in halting conflict or leading to just resolution. The occupied Palestinian territory is the extreme case. The Israeli occupation is the longest in the world and has led to the systematic de-development of the occupied Palestinian territory. The occupation, its oppressive policies, disproportionate use of force and the building of settlements are all violations of international law. The role of international actors in countries such as Iraq, Libya or the Syrian Arab Republic is also illustrative. In many cases, international actors are seen as parties to the conflict rather than catalysts for just and sustainable peace. At the regional level, the efficacy of mechanisms has also been very limited.

Few development plans in countries affected by conflict include contingencies for renewed vulnerability. Peace agreements and development responses for conflict mitigation are not engaging subnational actors to drive sustainable change and restore or reconstruct the social fabric along lines that would guarantee peaceful co-existence.

Governance deficit and weak integration of human rights

The Arab region has a large governance deficit, with a high level of corruption reducing trust in Governments. Restoring trust in institutions, rule of law, and strengthening the effectiveness of institutions to secure justice for all and facilitate transitions to sustainable development are the scaffolding necessary for the region to reduce and prevent violence, involve citizens and civil society in decision-making processes, and build peaceful societies through inclusive and rights-based social contracts. Rule of law and independence of the judiciary are weak, with notable variations between countries. The performance of audit institutions varies significantly within the region and the role of parliaments in budgetary oversight is also diverse.

Access to information by the public, the press and researchers is often limited. Only eight countries have laws that guarantee public access to information. Meanwhile, since the Arab Spring, several countries have introduced new limits on freedom of speech and assembly. Civic space in most countries is rated as closed, repressed or obstructed.[17] Corruption is also rife and impacts not only the distributive role of the State, but also the enabling environment for economic growth and private sector engagement. In 2022, the percentage of firms that experienced at least one bribery payment request was 21.7 per cent compared to a world average of 14.8 per cent.[18] Attempts to move forward with open Government and e-government are a step in the right direction, but institutional transparency and effectiveness are only a part of the problem.

A persistently large gender gap and ongoing inequalities: The upholding of human rights also faces challenges in the Arab region. Discriminatory laws as well as social practices that are not curbed by the power of the law impact various social groups, including women. According to the Global Gender Gap Index 2022, the Arab region has the second largest gender gap worldwide.[19] According to the Arab Gender Gap Report,[20] women are twice as likely to be illiterate as men, making up two thirds of the region's illiterate adults. These inequalities clearly manifest in the economic sphere in relation to women's participation in the labour force[21] and wage gaps, and in the form of absent or weak workplace policies and practices that promote gender equality.[22] Inequalities also manifest themselves in women's access to justice and in relation to representation and participation in political and policymaking spheres, including governmental and non-governmental entities like labour unions. Women's share of seats in national parliaments is among the lowest in the world. Eliminating violence against women and girls is the highest priority for achieving SDG 5 in the region. Laws to criminalize violence against women are missing in some countries and their enforcement in others is weak, while discriminatory social norms and limits on mobility continue to structure women's lives, though unevenly. Harmful practices, such as early marriage and female genital mutilation, remain a significant problem. High levels of teenage pregnancy, lower life expectancy, poor health outcomes and higher poverty are challenges several Arab countries are facing. Inequalities are also evident in educational attainment and in the domestic private sphere, which remains heavily impacted by patriarchal norms. Inequalities are experienced in harsher forms as well among the most vulnerable constituencies, including persons with disabilities, older persons, migrants and displaced persons.


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Geopolitics and multilateral governance

It is critical to view the governance deficit and any strategy to strengthen a human rights regime in Arab countries within the regional and global geopolitical context. The democracy deficit in the region has historically been intertwined and influenced to a significant degree by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The lack of a just resolution to the conflict, one that guarantees Palestinians their inalienable rights as enshrined in international law, continues to draw the region into conflict and instability. This has also significantly contributed to a disenchantment, if not a loss of faith, in the human rights regime, in multilateralism and in global institutions to deliver on justice. To date, at least 58 United Nations Security Council resolutions that are critical of Israel and its actions, seek to hold it accountable, and/or to protect the rights of Palestinian people were overridden through veto power. Disenchantment with the rule of international law, in addition to rising inequality, contributes to the growth of regressive elements that undermine the rule of law at the national level both institutionally and socially.

Source: Security Council - Veto List.

Across the region, official data on income and wealth inequality is sparse, complicating any analysis of the state of inequality in the Arab countries. What is clear, however, is that economic growth has not been sufficiently broad-based to substantially increase low-income households' share of national incomes, and that discrimination and relatively weak rule of law have contributed to inequalities that leave millions of people behind. On top of this, conflict and instability have led poverty to rise in the Arab region over the past 20 years. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated gaps between the rich and those living in poverty. While 70,000 individuals in the region became millionaires between 2019 and 2021,[23] some 29 million people fell below the extreme poverty line of $2.15 per day.[24] Reducing inequality will require Arab countries to reassert the role of the State as the guarantor of economic and social rights through policies to promote pro-poor growth and decent job generation, prioritize social expenditure, and protect the rights of all people.

Endnotes

6 Abdellatif and others, 2020; Abi Rached, 2021; Al Shami, 2023.

7 Governments worldwide have announced fiscal stimulus packages amounting to $9.6 trillion, which includes about $100 billion in the Arab region. See ESCWA, 2020.

8 ESCWA, 2024a.

9 Hameed, 2020.

10 OECD Statistics. Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions [DAC2a]. Accessed on 18 April 2024.

11 See the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor on SDG 8.

12 ESCWA and ILO, 2021.

13 World Economic Forum, 2022; ESCWA, 2023b.

14 Despite comparable levels of total government spending, the region channels only 8.3 per cent of GDP to health, education and social protection, compared to a global average of 19.8 per cent. See ESCWA, UNDP and UNICEF, 2022.

15 Excessive military spending is diverting funds from socioeconomic development, regional integration and peacebuilding, and increasing instability due to mutual suspicion among neighbouring countries. Regional military expenditure was nearly $112 billion in 2021. This sum represents 4.6 per cent of regional GDP and 16.4 per cent of regional general government expenditure, against the world averages of 2.2 and 5.8 per cent, respectively. See the World Bank data and the GlobalEconomy.com, Military spending, percent of GDP – Country rankings.

16 ESCWA, 2023a.

17 According to civic space monitors, no major improvements in civic space were documented in the Middle East and North Africa region during 2022. Out of 19 countries, civic space is rated as closed in nine, repressed in seven and obstructed in three. Source: monitor.civicus.org.

18 ESCWA, 2021a.

19 World Economic Forum, 2022.

20 ESCWA, 2021b.

21 ILO, 2019. ILO states that "the Arab region has the world's lowest rate of female economic participation – 26 per cent compared to the global average of 56 per cent. By contrast, male labour force participation rates, at 76 per cent, are above the global average of 74 per cent".

22 This includes maternity protection, the provision of childcare for women and men with children, mechanisms to prevent and address harassment at the workplace, and leave policies and working arrangements that support workers with family responsibilities. See ILO website.

23 ESCWA, 2022.

24 ESCWA, forthcoming.

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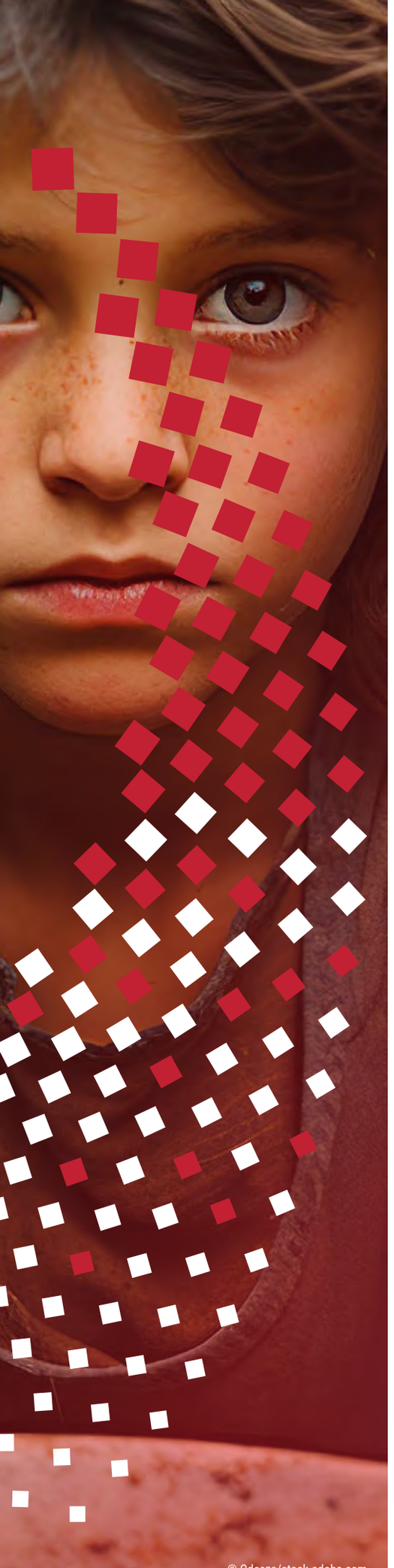

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SDG 1

End poverty in all its forms everywhere

A. Introduction

The Arab region is not on track to eliminate poverty in all its forms by 2030. The number of poor and vulnerable people has grown over the last decade. Although rising poverty has been most pronounced in the least developed countries, political instability, conflict and economic crises have contributed to an increase across the region. Long-standing structural challenges in the region's economies, poor performance in growth and job creation, high levels of inequality and insufficiently redistributive fiscal policies pose significant obstacles to realizing inclusive growth that leaves no one behind and makes lasting progress towards ending poverty.

Addressing poverty is complex and deeply interlinked with progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a whole. To sustainably end poverty, Arab countries must achieve inclusive economic growth characterized by decent employment opportunities for all (SDG 8). They must reverse accelerating trends towards wealth concentration that have made the region the most unequal in the world (SDG 10), break down gender barriers that contribute to the feminization of poverty (SDG 5), and ensure stable, inclusive institutional environments that enable peace and prosperity (SDG 16). Further, sustainable poverty reduction will require countries to address non-monetary contributors to poverty, including through reforms to ensure access to quality education (SDG 4), policies to promote food security and good health (SDGs 2 and 3) and investments to expand access to basic services, including clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), clean and affordable energy (SDG 7) and quality housing (SDG 11).

Recent crises have underscored the imperative of adopting far-sighted policies that address the needs of those left behind. Universal, robust, shock-responsive social protection systems must be established to alleviate and prevent poverty and ensure a dignified life for all.

A series of crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2022 escalation of the war in Ukraine, and the global acceleration of inflation has aggravated challenges and exposed weaknesses and risks in the Arab region. As a result of these overlapping crises, the number of people living on less than $2.15 per day has grown by an estimated 29 million since 2019. Money-metric poverty according to national definitions is projected to have risen by a further 27 million people. Multidimensional poverty has also worsened amid increased rates of undernourishment and food insecurity, and disruptions and widening inequalities in access to quality health and education services.

Although countries responded to the pandemic with an array of short-term support measures to aid those whose livelihoods were threatened, many such measures have now been rolled back. Overlapping crises have deepened fiscal imbalances that threaten social spending and poverty reduction efforts in the region, particularly in non-oil-producing countries.

Source: ESCWA and others, 2023; ESCWA, forthcoming.



What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).

Available SDG 1 data present a concerning picture of the region's progress towards ending poverty. Important indicators are trending in the wrong directions.

As of 2023, an estimated 20.2 per cent of the population was **living on less than $2.15 per day**.[1] This is more than double the proportion that lived below this threshold in 2015 (9.5 per cent), and more than triple the 2005 rate (6.2 per cent). This increase has stood in stark contrast to global trends of falling poverty, and has largely been driven by the devastation caused by the region's protracted conflicts.

Between 2010 and 2022, the proportion of the **employed population living below the international poverty line** more than doubled from 3.1 to 7.6 per cent. This increase has been sharpest in the Arab least developed countries and countries in conflict but is also observable in the Mashreq.

The proportion of workers in the Arab region considered to be in **vulnerable employment** has slowly declined since 2010, falling from 27.8 to 24.7 per cent by 2021. Female workers (29.7 per cent) and rural workers (37.6 per cent) are considerably more likely to be in vulnerable employment than the population at large.

With only 35.1 per cent of the **population covered by at least one social protection programme** in 2020, the Arab region was far from realizing the right to social protection. Contingencies with the highest rates of coverage for eligible people were work injury (46.2 per cent), old-age pensions (37.2 per cent) and maternity cash benefits (31.6 per cent). The least covered contingencies were unemployment (7 per cent), disability (15 per cent), and child and family transfers (20.5 per cent).

Rates of access to basic services, such as water, sanitation and electricity, show clear disparities between urban and rural areas, and between least developed and other Arab countries. The gaps contribute to high levels of multidimensional poverty. While more than 89 per cent of the region had access to basic drinking water services in 2022, this figure was 80 per cent in rural areas and 63.4 per cent in the least developed countries. Similarly, while 90.8 per cent of the region's population had access to electricity in 2021, the share was 82.8 per cent in rural areas and 63.5 per cent in the least developed countries.

A lack of disaggregated data poses a significant obstacle to devising evidence-based policies for reducing poverty in all its forms, and to the effectiveness and efficiency of existing measures.

While countries are increasingly adopting multidimensional poverty measurements, these are not yet widely employed as core indicators of poverty reduction. Data reported by sex, location, age, disability, migratory status, ethnicity and other relevant characteristics remain scarce. Such gaps limit the ability to conduct complete assessments of poverty and vulnerability and hinder capacities to formulate evidence-based responses.

For an up-to-date view of SDG 1 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.



Measuring poverty in the Arab region

SDG 1 acknowledges the multiple methodologies used to measure poverty. These vary in terms of the threshold at which an individual is considered poor, the degree to which measurement is tailored to national contexts, and the consideration of non-monetary factors.

A common metric, used under SDG target 1.1, is the **international extreme poverty line,** which establishes a global baseline applicable to all countries. This line has been periodically adjusted. In 2022, it was raised from living on less than $1.90 per day to less than $2.15 per day. Based on this revised threshold, an estimated 20.2 per cent of the Arab region was estimated to be living in extreme poverty in 2023.[a]

The international extreme poverty line is limited in that it does not account for contextual differences among countries. Many have established **national poverty lines** that set thresholds according to typical local living standards and the costs of basic needs. Not all countries in the Arab region have defined national poverty lines, however an analysis using approximated national poverty lines for countries in the region suggested that 35.4 per cent of the population lived in poverty in 2023.

While the above measures are commonly used to track poverty, they narrowly conceptualize it in monetary terms. In contrast, **multidimensional poverty indices** consider additional deprivations. These indices, unique to local contexts, are constructed from indicators related to health, education and standard of living. They support a more holistic understanding of the breadth and depth of poverty.

a ESCWA, forthcoming.

On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 1

Tackling corruption, enhancing transparency, and strengthening the inclusivity and representativeness of public institutions to improve accountability (SDG 16) are crucial for poverty reduction, given structural linkages between poverty and inequality. Policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 1 can only bear fruit if they are accompanied by policies that support the creation of decent jobs through revitalized, diversified economies and a healthy private sector (SDG 8).

In addition, Arab States can:

- Develop the capacity and transparency of data collection systems, including through an increased focus on disaggregation by sex, location, age, disability, migratory status and other relevant characteristics.
- Adopt multidimensional poverty measurement and regularly collect data to ensure a holistic understanding of poverty and deprivation.
- Increase the frequency of data collection to ensure the availability of real-time data to inform policy decisions.



- Strengthen integrated policymaking to address factors contributing to multidimensional poverty, including deficiencies in access to quality education, health coverage, water and sanitation, and quality housing, prioritizing the needs of those most left behind.
- Implement measures to tackle inequality, including through redistributive fiscal policies to share the benefits of growth, and macroeconomic policies that favour decent job creation.
- Prioritize public budgets to make smart investments that enhance equity and reduce poverty, including by improving services frequently used by women, the poor, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups.
- Reform social protection systems, applying a life-cycle approach to achieve comprehensive, universal and shock-responsive coverage that builds the resilience of poor and vulnerable people. This objective must be achieved through a mix of contributory and non-contributory systems and consultative strategies to reach currently un- or under-covered populations.

B. The policy landscape for SDG 1

Although the nature and depth of poverty vary significantly across the Arab region, several common trends are evident in efforts to combat poverty. These transcend national income levels and geographic subgroupings.

Governments are increasingly recognizing poverty as a multidimensional issue requiring a coordinated response. National plans increasingly acknowledge interlinkages between poverty and other policy areas, and often include measures to address shortcomings in education and health, promote gender equality, increase access to basic services, foster economic growth, and improve governance to promote an enabling environment for the elimination of poverty.

Such efforts must be complemented by actions to put poverty reduction at the centre of sectoral plans, and ensure coherent and well-coordinated policies to address poverty and its root causes. Encouragingly, countries increasingly employ multidimensional poverty indices tailored to national contexts to develop a holistic understanding of poverty and inform policy measures. For instance, **Mauritania** launched its multidimensional poverty index in 2023, and the **State of Palestine** adopted its methodology in 2017. Other countries developing multidimensional poverty indices include **Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco** and **Somalia**.

Although the use of multidimensional poverty indices is increasing, most countries have yet to adopt such methodologies. Even in those that have, multidimensional poverty indices remain secondary to income poverty measurements as indicators for policy success in most cases. Some countries, such as those in the Gulf Cooperation Council, have not established national poverty lines to measure income poverty.

Countries are employing active labour market policies and economic empowerment programmes to help target populations gain opportunities and graduate from poverty. Such policies include efforts to regularize informal work, provide short-term employment opportunities, develop skills and support job placement. They often aim to reach youth, women, unemployed workers, social assistance beneficiaries or persons with disabilities. Despite such efforts, the region continues to have very high levels of unemployment. Countries at all income levels struggle to generate sufficient decent work to accommodate new entrants to the labour market and workers in vulnerable employment. A review of active labour market policies found that almost half focus on highly skilled unemployed persons, and that women are underrepresented among programme beneficiaries. Evidence suggests, however, that some of the most impactful interventions in improving labour market outcomes entail entrepreneurship programmes for marginalized groups, including women, people with low educational attainment and rural populations. There is an opportunity to refocus such efforts and enhance their impact.[2]

At 10.7 per cent, the Arab region has the highest rate of overall unemployment globally. It also has the highest rates for women (19.9 per cent) and youth (26.3 per cent). This situation hinders sustainable poverty reduction efforts, highlighting the need for inclusive economic growth and the creation of new opportunities.

◆ **Social expenditure is low compared to global averages and inefficiently spent.**[3] Despite overall spending comparable to levels in other parts of the world, the Arab region spends only 8.3 per cent of GDP on health, education and social protection. The global average is 19.8 per cent. Meanwhile, Arab countries spend considerably more than the global average on universal subsidy programmes and military and police forces. Overall spending efficiency significantly lags global averages, leading to worse outcomes in education, health and housing, and dampening the impact of social expenditures on poverty reduction. Section E of this chapter provides further analysis.

Efforts to end poverty can be bolstered by well-coordinated efforts to link macroeconomic planning with social development objectives, and to foster whole-of-government approaches to tackling complex challenges. Despite measures to facilitate such approaches, historical patterns of fragmentation and siloed policymaking are often difficult to break, leading to inefficiencies in programme implementation.

◆ **Governments across the region are reducing energy and food subsidies, rolling out more targeted social protection programmes that support those most in need and expanding access to contributory social insurance systems.** Although universal subsidies are costly and inefficient, with most benefits accruing to better-off high-consuming households, their removal can negatively impact the financial security of the poor and vulnerable. To offset this risk, Arab countries have taken steps to improve the coverage of contributory- and non-contributory social protection systems. The focus and ambition of such measures vary according to national circumstances but common instruments include expanding targeted cash transfers, introducing new benefit programmes, and extending contributory social insurance coverage to previously excluded groups, such as agricultural, informal or self-employed workers. Mechanisms including unified registers have been increasingly employed to facilitate beneficiary identification, assisted in many cases by interinstitutional efforts to share information and data on potential recipients.

Despite programmes to extend contributory social insurance coverage to new categories of workers, uptake rates are generally weak. Realizing the right to social protection within the Arab region will require overcoming challenges related to high levels of informality, introducing new programmes based on a life-cycle approach to social protection, and improving existing contributory and non-contributory systems to bolster coverage.

Other reforms, primarily in the Gulf Cooperation Council and middle-income countries, have focused on reforming social insurance systems to close gaps in benefits between public and private sector workers. Many countries provide generous benefits to State employees while private sector workers typically receive relatively worse health insurance coverage, disability insurance and retirement pensions. This gap, along with better working conditions in the public sector more broadly, influences jobseeker preferences for the public sector and hampers efforts to diversify Arab economies through private sector-led growth.[4]


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How does social protection contribute to poverty reduction?

Sustainably eradicating poverty requires action in a broad range of policy areas, including reducing inequality (SDG 10) and promoting sustainable, inclusive economic growth and decent work for all (SDG 8). Further, addressing deprivations in food security (SDG 2), health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), and access to basic services and quality housing (SDGs 6, 7 and 11) is central to tackling multidimensional poverty, as elaborated in later chapters of the present report. Poverty reduction also calls for comprehensive, shock-responsive social protection systems, the primary theme of this chapter. Such systems deliver assistance to those in need and insure against risks of falling into poverty.

Particularly in a region of high unemployment, high income inequality and unequal access to basic services, social protection is critical to progress on SDG 1. It is also a distinct policy area where approaches can be tracked and analysed across countries.

Through both contributory and tax-financed non-contributory programmes, social protection systems cover a wide range of initiatives to alleviate, prevent or reduce poverty. Non-contributory cash transfers, for instance, can help households afford basic needs and smooth consumption patterns in the face of shocks. Contributory social insurance systems, meanwhile, can help prevent people from falling into poverty due to job loss, injury or retirement. Programmes can aid recipients to graduate from benefits and obtain sustainable livelihoods, including through economic empowerment and training.

Maximizing the impact of social protection policies on poverty reduction requires countries to work towards universal coverage that guarantees income security, access to health care and protection against destabilizing shocks. Social protection floors ensuring access to essential services and nationally defined minimum income levels are invaluable in preventing or alleviating poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion, especially when planned according to a life-cycle approach that responds to the specific needs that individuals may have through childhood, working age and old age.[a]

At 35.1 per cent, the region lags behind the world average of 46.9 per cent of people covered by at least one social protection benefit, with the unemployed, children and persons with severe disabilities among the least covered vulnerable groups. While other groups, such as older persons, have relatively better coverage (37.2 per cent), this is less than half the global rate of 77.5 per cent,[b] and benefits are often insufficient to meet basic needs. Overall, non-health social protection in the region, at around 6.2 per cent of GDP,[c] is well below the global average of 12.9 per cent. Spending remains heavily concentrated on contributory benefits, which account for more than two thirds of total resources and disproportionately go to public sector workers.[d] Reforms across the region increasingly seek to expand coverage, improve management and increase the shock responsiveness of benefits.

[a] See ILO, Social Protection Floor.

[b] See the ILOSTAT Explorer, SDG Indicator 1.3.1 – Proportion of population covered by social protection floors/systems, 2020 data, accessed on 25 July 2023.

[c] Based on ILO regional data for the Middle East and North Africa, which includes 18 Arab countries (Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen) and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

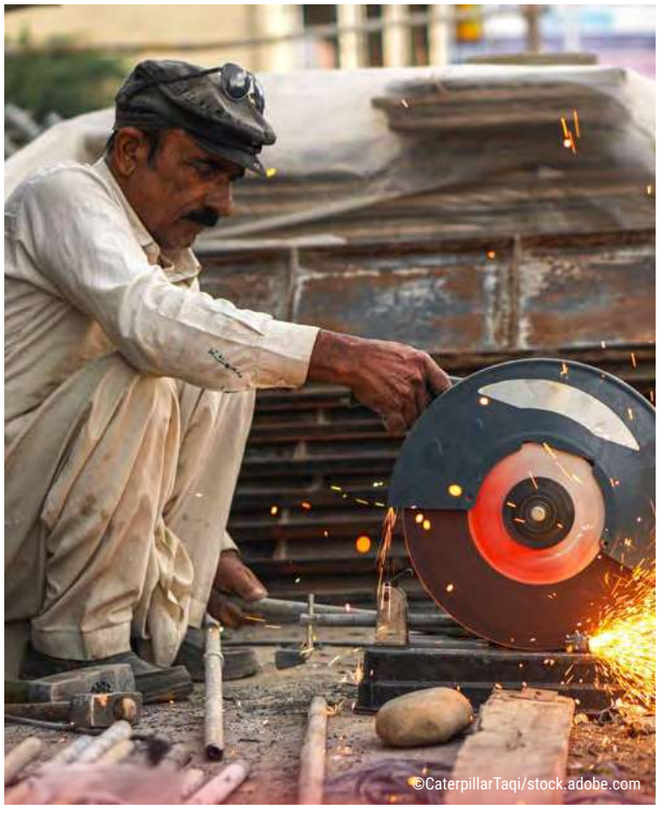
[d] ILO, 2021.



C. Policy trends by subregion

1. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

Gulf Cooperation Council countries have high per capita incomes relative to the rest of the Arab region. Their Governments offer generous subsidies, low tax rates and broad opportunities for public sector employment. Little effort has gone into investigating the prevalence and depth of poverty among Gulf Cooperation Council nationals, however. National statistical offices have not developed poverty lines for measuring deprivations, and no Gulf Cooperation Council country has a specific national strategy for poverty reduction. Estimated national poverty lines suggest that as many as 3.3 million Gulf Cooperation Council country nationals live in poverty.[5] Additionally, most official statistics and programmes exclude non-nationals, who often face poorer living conditions and lower social protection coverage than Gulf Cooperation Council nationals. They make up an estimated 52 per cent of the Gulf Cooperation Council population, ranging from 39 per cent in Saudi Arabia to 88 per cent in Qatar.[6]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◆ **The Gulf Cooperation Council countries offer an array of social transfer programmes to eligible citizens in need,** who generally include widows, families with children, persons with disabilities, older persons and certain unemployed persons. Available support often includes subsidies for housing, energy and basic utilities. Private foundations are regularly engaged as partners in distributing benefits, which are typically financed by *zakat* funds.[7] As Governments reform universal subsidy systems, some countries, including **Bahrain** and **Saudi Arabia**, have introduced payments to qualifying low-income individuals to offset increases in the cost of living. **Oman** has recently enacted reforms to establish universal, government-financed social protection benefits for older persons, persons with disabilities and children.[8]

◆ **Many Gulf Cooperation Council countries have recently introduced new contributory insurance programmes or expanded eligibility for existing schemes.** The **United Arab Emirates**, for example, established a new employee-financed unemployment insurance system in 2022 with a mandatory private insurance mechanism. **Oman** unveiled its first unemployment insurance programme in 2020 and has recently announced a contributory insurance system for maternity, employment injury and sickness as part of comprehensive social security reforms.[9]

Ongoing pension system reforms in several Gulf Cooperation Council countries include efforts to enhance financial sustainability and reduce inequities in benefits between national workers in the public and private sectors. For example, **Oman** has moved to integrate 11 separate pension schemes into a single national system,[10] and **Bahrain**[11] and **Saudi Arabia**[12] have recently adjusted contribution and benefit formulas. The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have also pursued integration as a subregion for certain contributory benefits, such as pensions. Pension portability allows national workers from one Gulf Cooperation Council country who are working in another to continue accruing credits towards retirement benefits.

◆ **The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have implemented economic empowerment strategies to support citizens in obtaining quality employment but there has been slow progress in increasing private-sector employment among national workers.** The *Tamkeen* Labour Fund in **Bahrain** offers support to

job seekers, students and employers to facilitate transitions to the labour market, with specialized programmes for women. Similarly, the *Hafiz* programme in **Saudi Arabia** supports youth jobseekers through education, training and a National Labour Gateway placement system. In the **United Arab Emirates**, the "Able to Work" policy targets recipients of social assistance for skills development programmes and job placement support in cooperation with private sector partners. Such programmes complement broader efforts within the Gulf Cooperation Council to "nationalize" workforces by increasing citizen employment. These nationalization efforts have faced challenges in matching sufficiently qualified nationals with work opportunities that are attractive relative to public sector options.[13] In all Gulf Cooperation Council countries with available data, non-nationals represent more than three quarters of the private-sector workforce. In **Oman** and **Saudi Arabia**, the percentage of private-sector employment occupied by nationals increased by 6 to 7 per cent between 2015 and 2021. In **Bahrain, Kuwait** and **Qatar**, the share has remained largely unchanged.[14]

◆ **Expatriate workers from outside the subregion are generally excluded from social protection programmes in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries even as they are more likely than nationals to work under precarious conditions. This leaves the sizeable migrant population vulnerable to poverty.**

Migrants face diverse obstacles to accessing social protection coverage, including legislation that formally excludes foreign nationals from programmes; practical barriers stemming from low compliance, enforcement and awareness; complex administrative procedures for registration; procedural complexities making it difficult for insured migrants to access their benefits; unequal treatment of applications; and a lack of social security coordination that limits the portability of acquired benefits.[15]

Despite this general trend, some Gulf Cooperation Council countries, such as **Kuwait**, extended measures such as emergency COVID-19 wage subsidies to support businesses in retaining foreign workers.[16] Further, some Gulf Cooperation Council countries, including **Kuwait** and **Qatar** have taken steps to improve migrants' living conditions by increasing minimum wages and applicable allowances. Other significant reform trends have included improvements of migrants' access to sickness leave and pay, unemployment and workplace injury insurance programmes, end of service payments, and other forms of coverage. The nature and scope of such reforms have varied widely across the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, with **Oman** recently adopting the most sweeping reforms to increase coverage in the subregion. Table 1.1 outlines the legal provisions for migrants to access social protection, according to seven key contingenci es. While these apply to most workers in the private sector, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries generally exclude domestic workers from labour code protections. **Bahrain** stands out as an exception for granting such employees coverage under select provisions.[17]



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Table 1.1
Trends in migrant worker coverage by contingency in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries

Contingency		Status
	**Medical insurance coverage**	All Gulf Cooperation Council countries require expatriates to be covered by mandatory private health insurance coverage, with employers responsible for financing coverage.
	**Sickness leave and pay**	Across Gulf Cooperation Council countries, migrant worker sickness coverage is an employer liability rather than a programme covered by social insurance. Once sick leave periods mandated by law are exhausted, employment can be terminated. **Oman** recently broke from this model by establishing social insurance sickness benefits for national and migrant workers.
	**Unemployment insurance**	Although all Gulf Cooperation Council countries have introduced unemployment insurance schemes for national workers, few have provisions for migrant workers. **Bahrain** includes migrant workers in the national unemployment insurance scheme, while the **United Arab Emirates** has recently introduced an employee-funded private unemployment insurance scheme covering national and non-national workers.
	**Employment injury**	Across the Gulf Cooperation Council, employment law accords migrant workers the right to medical treatment at the employer's expense in the event of a workplace injury. Injured employees are entitled to continued salary payments for a defined period of time, which varies according to national legislation. In **Bahrain** and **Saudi Arabia**, employers must contribute to social insurance systems to ensure benefits for injured expatriate workers, with **Oman** also planning to extend such coverage to migrant employees.
	**Old-age, disability, death and survivors' benefits**	While Gulf Cooperation Council nationals are eligible for national pension schemes, non-national workers instead can receive an end-of-service indemnity financed by their employer. Irregularities in payment of the indemnity are relatively common, prompting efforts in **Qatar, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates** to manage contributions or otherwise hold employers accountable. Such solutions remain short of minimum social security standards, however. **Bahrain** and **Oman** have launched systemic reforms to replace the end-of-service indemnity with national provident funds.[a]
	**Maternity benefits**	Gulf Cooperation Council nationals and migrant workers alike are entitled to statutory maternity leave, with applicable pay financed as an employer liability. Ongoing reforms in **Oman** may soon make it the only country in the Gulf Cooperation Council to break from this model, with new legislation establishing a nationalized social insurance scheme for maternity and paternity benefits.
	**Child and family benefits**	Migrant workers are not entitled to family benefits in any Gulf Cooperation Council country, and in most cases, low-paid migrant workers are not able to bring their families to the country of destination.

Source: ILO, 2023h.

[a] Additional information on this topic available in ILO, 2023g.

2. Arab middle-income countries

Despite progress, multidimensional poverty in Arab middle-income countries[18] remains high, affecting nearly one in four individuals. The situation is exacerbated by slow economic growth, significant urban-rural disparities and high levels of informal employment. Recent crises have deepened these challenges and pushed more people into poverty.[19] In most countries, the informal economy accounts for 60 per cent or more of total employment. Informal workers have historically been excluded from social insurance programmes and are thus at greater risk of falling into poverty. Recent social protection policy reforms have sought to reach previously excluded populations through cash transfer programmes and extensions of social insurance coverage to new categories of workers. These have faced headwinds, however, as rising inflation has increased food and energy prices and worsened vulnerability.

◆ **Arab middle-income countries have worked to expand social protection coverage through both contributory and non-contributory means,** yet efforts to include informal workers remain insufficient. Several countries, including **Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco** and **Tunisia**, have implemented reforms to provide informal workers and those in uncovered sectors with avenues to coverage by social insurance programmes. The uptake rate of such measures has often been weak, however, due to a variety of factors, including a lack of information, inadequate enforcement and the perceived complexity of compliance. Mechanisms such as the *contribution professionnelle unique* in **Morocco** or the *Estidama++* Fund in **Jordan** have sought to simplify procedures for contributing to social insurance schemes and to address affordability constraints. Other efforts have increased the application of contributory systems for short-term benefits. These include the recent adoption of unemployment and maternity insurance for private sector workers in **Iraq**[20] and measures in **Jordan** to extend the scope of maternity insurance to cover childcare.[21]

Non-contributory social protection coverage has expanded in middle-income countries. All countries have employed targeted cash transfers, which are sometimes linked with other social policy objectives. The *Takaful* and *Karama* programme in **Egypt**, which by mid-2023 had benefited some 4.6 million households with 20 million people, represents the largest such effort. While *Karama* transfers are unconditional and target low-income orphans, older persons and persons with disabilities, *Takaful* transfers are subject to conditionalities. To be eligible for *Takaful*, children must attend school at least 80 per cent of the time and have four health visits per year, and parents must take part in hygiene and nutrition training sessions. The *Tayssir* transfer programme in **Morocco** targets families with school-aged children and has school attendance criteria for families to maintain eligibility. Under other programmes, such as the National Aid Fund Unified Cash Transfer Programme in **Jordan**, the National Poverty Targeting Programme and Emergency Crisis and COVID-19 Response Social Safety Net Project in **Lebanon**, and the National Cash Transfer Programme in **Palestine**, eligible beneficiaries receive a suite of other benefits, which may include insurance, waivers of school fees and other support. Non-contributory programmes have also supported coverage of other life-cycle contingencies, such as the National Disability Allowance in **Lebanon** (see the following section on policies to leave no one behind) or policies in **Palestine** to prioritize disability and old age for coverage through targeted social allowances.[22]

◆ **Several middle-income countries have enhanced the administration and coherence of their social protection systems.** Patchwork extensions have historically led to the emergence of a variety of funds and programmes offering benefits to select categories of workers. Countries including **Algeria, Egypt** and **Morocco** have sought to rationalize their systems and improve management by unifying plans into larger schemes.

Further, as countries in this group reform subsidy-based systems in favour of more targeted social assistance approaches, many, including **Egypt, Jordan, Morocco** and **Tunisia**, have **invested in better information management,** including through the implementation of unified registries and unique identifiers, to facilitate beneficiary identification, expedite assessments of benefit applications, review applicants' eligibility for benefits and allow administrators to cross-check recipients throughout the range of included programmes.


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Morocco: social protection reforms to fight poverty

In 2021, Morocco launched an extensive reform of its social protection system under Framework Law 09.21. The reform combines increased eligibility for contributory coverage with subsidies for people living below specified income thresholds. It adopts a phased approach to achieve universal social protection coverage by 2025 through steps including:

- Expanding compulsory health insurance coverage to an additional 22 million beneficiaries, including vulnerable people covered by subsidized insurance, self-employed persons and non-salaried professionals.
- Generalizing family allowances to households not currently benefiting from this programme, which will extend coverage to an estimated 7 million children.
- Extending pension coverage to an additional 5 million people through the inclusion of self-employed professionals and many informal workers.
- Broadening the eligibility conditions for unemployment insurance coverage.

The realization of these objectives could greatly strengthen resilience to key life-cycle risks and create an important safety net to protect people from falling into poverty.

Source: ILO, Social Protection Country Profile, Morocco.

◆ **Many middle-income countries have integrated active labour market policies into their poverty reduction efforts. Persistently high rates of unemployment, however, have challenged the scope for such policies to produce results at scale.** Cash-for-work programmes in **Algeria, Egypt, Morocco** and the **State of Palestine** offer temporary employment opportunities in public works projects to eligible candidates. Some countries have integrated skills development, vocational training, job seeker assistance programmes and microfinance initiatives into poverty reduction strategies as tools for economic empowerment. Examples include the economic empowerment programmes of the Ministry of Social Solidarity of **Egypt**, the National Employment and Youth Empowerment strategies of **Jordan**, the *Pôle social* system of **Morocco** and the National Economic Empowerment Institution of the **State of Palestine**.

◆ **Programmes focusing on underserved regions, including rural areas, slums and zones with high rates of poverty, are common in middle-income countries. But challenges remain in bringing such efforts to scale and ensuring that target populations are not left behind.**

Major rural development programmes include the Rural Renewal Policy in **Algeria**, the *Hayah Karima* programme in **Egypt** and the *Programme de Réduction des Disparités Territoriales et Sociales* in **Morocco**. Common measures in such programmes include increasing resources for infrastructure development; enhancing water, sanitation and energy connections; and investing in improving the accessibility and quality of services, such as for health care and education. The Rural Economic Growth and Employment Project in **Jordan** and rural development projects in **Tunisia** have aimed to increase rural incomes through greater access to finance, integration of farmers into value chains and new employment opportunities. **Algeria, Egypt, Morocco** and **Tunisia** have sought to address urban poverty through strategies to support social housing or facilitate housing upgrades to eliminate slums (see the chapter on SDG 11).

3. Arab least developed countries

Within the Arab least developed countries, poverty has accelerated faster than in the region as a whole. In 2019, an estimated 35.1 per cent of their population lived on less than $1.90 per day, compared to 14.4 per cent in 2010.[23] Poverty in these countries is often marked by stark deprivations, including a lack of access to sanitation services and basic utilities, and is generally characterized by deep rural and urban divides. Compounding challenges include slower economic growth rates, higher unemployment levels and significantly greater consumer inflation than in other countries in the region. Further complicating efforts to eliminate poverty are fiscal management challenges and enormous debt-servicing burdens that reduce resources for poverty reduction programmes. Meanwhile, least developed countries in the region have significant social protection needs stemming from high levels of poverty and displacement, which are frequently driven or exacerbated by political instability and climate-related disasters such as droughts.

◆ **The least developed countries have prioritized non-contributory social assistance programmes in their efforts to alleviate poverty. Cash assistance programmes in particular are centrepieces of short- and medium-term social protection strategies.** Most cash assistance programmes target specific vulnerable groups, such as people who are food insecure, children, elderly persons and persons with disabilities. Enhancements to contributory systems are planned at later phases. The least developed countries have further prioritized the generalization of basic health coverage. Most of them, including the **Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania** and the **Sudan**, have passed legislation to eventually ensure universal access to health services.

Contributory social insurance programmes have low coverage rates beyond the public sector due to high levels of unemployment and informality, and limited capacities to enforce employer contributions from the private sector.

◆ **Most least developed countries focus on rural areas and the agricultural sector, among other priorities, in their plans to reduce poverty or extend social protection.** Many have taken measures to expand social protection coverage to agricultural workers or rural people more generally, as seen in the **Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania** and **Yemen**. Others have launched economic empowerment programmes, such as the *Toumze* system in **Mauritania**, which provides poor rural households with livestock assets, and the Rural Women's Empowerment and Revolving Fund in the **Sudan**, which offers training opportunities and access to microfinance for eligible women. A focus on agricultural development underscores the sector's critical role in food security and poverty reduction, particularly as nearly 60 per cent of people live in rural areas. The agriculture sector generally employs between 25 and 40 per cent of the workforce in the least developed countries.

◆ **Most least developed countries have dedicated strategies for poverty reduction and social protection. Many recognize the role that climate change and environmental degradation play in driving vulnerability and displacement.** The most recent social protection strategies of the **Comoros** (2014), **Djibouti** (2018–2022), **Mauritania** (2013) and **Somalia** (2019) provide analyses or objectives related to climate vulnerability, with the Mauritanian strategy including "food security, nutrition, environment and climate change" as its first strategic axis. Recent national development plans and poverty reduction strategies in the **Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia** and the **Sudan** consider climate action as integral to efforts to end poverty, reflecting their high vulnerability to climate change.

4. Arab countries experiencing conflict or fragility

Arab countries experiencing conflict or fragility[24] face aggravated challenges in alleviating poverty, as violence, displacement and institutional instability create humanitarian crises marked by the decimation of livelihoods and the destruction of infrastructure for basic services. Monetary poverty in such contexts is further aggravated by displacement, unemployment, famine, disease and stunted human capital development, with consequences that can last for decades. Alongside these challenges, these countries struggle to adequately finance social programmes and have low effective social protection coverage. Agile, shock-responsive and innovative approaches to poverty reduction and social protection are needed to alleviate conflict-linked deprivations. The humanitarian-development-peace nexus can serve as an overarching framework for channelling resources and services but its operationalization and deployment remain incomplete (see chapter on SDG 16).

◆ **Efforts to address poverty in conflict areas have primarily focused on providing cash or in-kind relief to vulnerable populations, although targeting capacity and the adequacy of benefits are generally poor.** Countries in conflict have struggled to resource programmes to address the immense needs of populations impacted by crisis. International donors are significant players in the social protection landscape of countries experiencing conflict or fragility, both as financiers of government-run programmes and as implementers of parallel humanitarian social assistance systems. Although this support offers funding and critical assistance to vulnerable individuals and households, the lack of coordination among development partners often results in a highly fragmented social protection landscape with overlapping programmes, poor beneficiary tracking, and volatile funding levels and coverage capacity. There is also often a lack of alignment between humanitarian efforts and national systems of social protection. This has been observed in refugee assistance programmes in **Jordan** and **Lebanon**[25] and humanitarian responses in **Yemen**,[26] among other cases.

◆ **Countries experiencing conflict or fragility face many practical challenges in delivering assistance to those who need it. They also often confront difficulties in enacting reforms or updating beneficiary registries due to instability or political deadlock.** These countries have among the lowest rates of social protection coverage, and are plagued by difficulties including sky-rocketing needs for assistance, high levels of displacement complicating beneficiary identification, a lack of effective control of geographical areas leading to their exclusion from coverage, and the destruction of infrastructure that would normally be used to deliver services. Compounding these challenges, political tensions and conflict can delay or derail reforms.

◆ **Fragile and crisis contexts weaken Governments' ability to effectively use social expenditures to reduce inequalities.** Countries in such circumstances face additional obstacles to financing and delivering social services, as crisis tends to reduce revenues, shift resources away from social expenditures, and challenge the delivery and quality of public services. One consequence is the proliferation of private services, leading to wealthier populations having greater access than their poorer counterparts. This can exacerbate inequalities.[27]

Further, the redistributive effect of expenditures is vulnerable to corruption and the elite capture of benefits programmes. In addition to challenges in mobilizing resources, countries experiencing conflict or fragility face some of the greatest challenges from corruption globally. Those in the Arab region are among the lowest performers on the transparency of public finances, and generally have weak controls over payroll and procurement processes.[28] Consequently, expenditures are vulnerable to elite capture, misdirection and profiteering. Benefits accrue to well-connected actors, weakening impacts on poverty reduction.

◆ **In addition to the reconstruction of physical infrastructure, reconciliation and the reestablishment of public services are central to achieving a durable post-conflict recovery.** In **Iraq**,[29] **Somalia**[30] and the **Syrian Arab Republic**[31] reconstruction plans aim to facilitate recovery from substantial damages. While all three plans contain pillars relating to the rehabilitation or replacement of infrastructure, they also include measures for national reconciliation, inclusive social development, reintegration of internally displaced persons and refugee-returnees, and improved governance to steer lasting solutions that boost social cohesion and restore conditions for economic growth and poverty reduction.

D. Policies to leave no one behind

Eliminating poverty in the Arab region requires Governments to take action to address inequalities in accessing economic rights, territorial disparities and long-standing challenges faced by groups at risk of being left behind. Integrated, inclusive policies must focus on equity and actions to address the drivers of inequality, discrimination and marginalization.[32] Such measures must be linked to overarching commitments to empower populations and provide financial and other resources to fulfil objectives. The following section considers some obstacles faced by such groups and examples of policy responses.

Table 1.2
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

 **Women** in the region face structural cultural and legal barriers to their access to economic opportunities. Compared to men, they are more likely to be unemployed and lack social insurance coverage.	**Jordan** launched the *Reaya* programme in 2020, a social protection programme seeking to empower and retain working mothers in the labour force. It offers financial support for childcare to facilitate a return to work at the end of maternity leave through direct payments from the Social Security Corporation to approved childcare centres or via subsidy payments for mothers to arrange childcare at home. *Reaya* also supports registered nurseries to cover a range of operational costs.[a,b] In 2021, the **Sudan** launched its Women's Land Rights Agenda 2021–2030 to address inequalities in land ownership policies, administration and customs. The plan aims to reform land and agriculture policies through legal and social measures to counteract discriminatory traditional norms that limit women's land ownership and inheritance rights.[c]
 Children are significantly more likely to live in poverty than adults,[d] but only 20.5 per cent of households in the region are covered by family cash benefits.[e] Child poverty is associated with lower school completion rates and risks of lasting consequences in terms of generational mobility.	Cash transfer programmes benefiting families with children are valuable tools to reduce child poverty. They are increasingly employed in the region, with the *Takaful* programme in **Egypt** being the largest example.The Wives and Children's Grant in **Libya** is currently the most universal child benefit, providing a monthly stipend to more than 1 million households. The benefit generally excludes children who do not hold Libyan nationality, however, except those with a Libyan mother.[f]

Table 1.2
Examples of policies to leave no one behind



Older persons face elevated risks of financial insecurity and additional vulnerabilities as their health declines. The region has considerable inequality among older persons as many do not receive pensions, particularly those who have not contributed to a pension scheme, a disproportionate share of whom are women.[g] Of those beyond the statutory retirement age, only 37.2 per cent receive a pension, less than half the global average coverage rate.[h] Further, while inflation has eroded the value of cash transfers and pensions, most Arab countries lack indexing mechanisms to compensate for decreased purchasing power.

Oman is among the minority of Arab countries with non-contributory social pensions for older people provided through an old-age benefit programme. Such measures make significant contributions to income security in old age, especially for women, as they provide income regardless of previous family or employment status.[i] As part of the social protection reform in Oman, a new universal old-age pension financed by the State budget provides a payment of around $300/month to all Omanis over age 60. Further reforms have unified social insurance old-age, disability and survivors' pensions to streamline contributory pension schemes and harmonize eligibility conditions and benefit formulas.[j]



Informal workers lack labour protections, generally receive lower wages than workers in the formal sector, and are frequently excluded from social protection systems.

Tunisia has launched a variety of programmes to extend social protection coverage to new categories of beneficiaries, including self-employed people, agricultural workers and low-revenue workers and artists. These programmes were elaborated through consultative processes with targeted stakeholders to tailor contribution systems and benefits to the needs of specific occupational groups. As a result, Tunisia has achieved relatively high rates of coverage for informal workers, with 81 per cent of the population covered by contributory health insurance and 61 per cent of workers contributing to a pension scheme, despite high levels of informality.[k]

Jordan launched the *Estidama++* Fund in 2022 to address structural gaps in social protection coverage and facilitate informal workers' registration in the social security system. The Fund offers coverage rewards for those signing up for the programme and short-term income support and contribution subsidies for informal workers. It has targeted a variety of groups with high levels of informality, including agricultural workers, tour guides, taxi drivers and self-employed workers. Notably, *Estidama++* benefits are open to non-Jordanian workers, and outreach campaigns have sought to encourage women and refugees to join the programme.[l]

Table 1.2
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

	**Persons with disabilities** face physical, social and institutional barriers contributing to exclusion and high poverty rates, including discrimination, insufficient social support, and more limited access to education and employment opportunities than people without disabilities.	**Lebanon** recently began rolling out its National Disability Allowance, a social grant providing monthly income support to persons with disabilities to help address elevated rates of poverty and higher costs of living compared to persons without disabilities. The programme initially targets youth aged 18 to 28 to support them in transitioning to higher education or joining the labour market. It is slated to gradually extend to cover all persons with disabilities.[m]
	**Residents of rural and remote regions** generally have fewer quality employment opportunities than urbanites, are less connected to basic infrastructure such as electricity and water, and must often travel long distances to attend school or obtain health-care services. In some countries, multidimensional poverty rates are as much as four times higher in rural areas than in urban ones.[n]	**Morocco** has several initiatives dedicated to reducing urban-rural disparities. These are largely guided by the *Programme de Réduction des Disparités Territoriales et Sociales*, which targets 12 regions with a total public investment of nearly 50 billion Moroccan dirhams. The programme aims to expand access to education and health services through the construction or renovation of facilities, and includes infrastructure investments to improve access to potable water, electricity and paved roads in rural areas.[o]
	**Internally displaced persons and refugees** are often among the poorest people in the region. Many have lost savings and assets, and face discrimination in their new communities, including formal exclusion from public services.	**Iraq** has suffered decades of conflict, which has left an estimated 1.2 million people internally displaced.[p] Internally displaced persons are underserved by social protection schemes, face a range of barriers to services and have higher rates of unemployment than non-displaced populations. In 2023, Iraq took steps to assess the eligibility of internally displaced persons to rejoin the social safety net programme, including by conducting household visits in camps to identify and enrol beneficiaries in monthly cash transfer programmes.[q]

Table 1.2
Examples of policies to leave no one behind



Migrant workers typically confront multiple challenges leaving them at a higher risk of poverty, including legal discrimination in terms of labour rights and minimum wages, vulnerability to exploitation and abuse by employers, and exclusion from social protection systems.

Algeria, as a signatory of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Migration for Employment Convention (1949), has integrated the principle of non-discrimination into many labour policies. The national minimum salary applies to all workers regardless of nationality, and the social insurance law extends coverage to expatriate workers (including domestic workers) on an equal basis as for Algerian employees.[r]

Sweeping social protection reforms adopted by **Oman** in 2023 restructured existing programmes and introduced new benefits, with non-Omanis gaining access to several forms of coverage. The reform gradually replaces existing systems reliant on weak employer liability provisions with coverage in national social insurance programmes for maternity and paternity, sickness and injury. It replaces the end-of-service indemnities system with a new provident fund for retirement, death and disability benefits.[s]

a ILO, 2020.
b ISSA, 2022.
c The Sudan, Ministry of Agriculture and IGAD, 2022.
d For illustrative figures, see the country profiles on the World Bank's Poverty and Inequality Platform.
e See the ILOSTAT Explorer, SDG Indicator 1.31 – Proportion of population covered by social protection floors/systems. 2020 data accessed on 25 July 2023.
f IPC-IG, 2022.
g ESCWA, 2022a.
h See the ILOSTAT Explorer, SDG Indicator 1.3.1 – Proportion of population covered by social protection floors/systems. 2020 data accessed on 25 July 2023.
i ILO, 2021.
j ILO, 2023c.
k ILO, 2021.
l ILO, 2022 and 2023a.
m UNICEF, 2023.
n ESCWA and others, 2023.
o See the Moroccan Stratégie nationale pour le développement rural.
p Data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, reported by UNHCR in the Refugee Data Finder. Accessed on 1 November 2023.
q ILO, 2023f.
r ILO, 2023b.
s ILO, 2023c.

E. The financing landscape

The financing landscape for SDG 1 is closely intertwined with issues related to SDGs 10 and 16. Progress requires Governments in the Arab region to tackle issues related to domestic resource mobilization (including by instituting equitable and efficient taxation systems and addressing illicit financial flows) as well as institutional and governance deficits (such as by eliminating corruption and increasing the transparency of public administrations). Further progress requires budgetary choices shifting resources towards pro-development investments – for instance, away from military spending and towards investments in human capital.

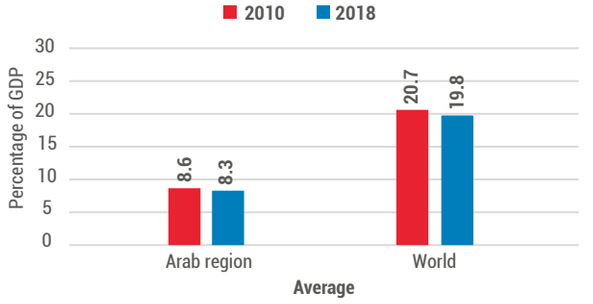
Public social expenditure plays a crucial role in poverty reduction and human capital development, encompassing investments in health, education, communities, and people's economic prospects and financial security. Social expenditures not only promote human well-being and social justice but also contribute significantly to social mobility, economic growth and development.

Even so, the region underutilizes social expenditure as a means to combat poverty and drive sustainable development. Although total public expenditure (34.6 per cent of GDP) is close to the global average (35.7 per cent), Arab countries drastically underspend on health, education and social protection compared to the rest of the world. These expenditures amount to just 8.3 per cent of GDP against a global average of 19.8 per cent. This disparity can in part be attributed to disproportionately large expenditures on other priorities, such as military and police

forces or energy subsidies. About 80 per cent of total social expenditures are directed towards current consumption spending on salaries and subsidies. This yields low returns in terms of enhancing productivity, compared to alternatives such as employment programmes, social insurance or early childhood development, and contributes to rising debt levels.

In addition to comparatively low resource allocation, the Arab region falls short of global averages for social spending efficiency, measured by results achieved per dollar invested. Comprehensive efforts to enhance the administration of public expenditures and make data-informed investment decisions can generate better outcomes in critical areas such as health, education and social protection, even without additional resources. Better management can help deliver high-quality, inclusive public services that achieve transformational impacts and open opportunities for marginalized groups.[33]

Figure 1.1
Health, education and social protection expenditure



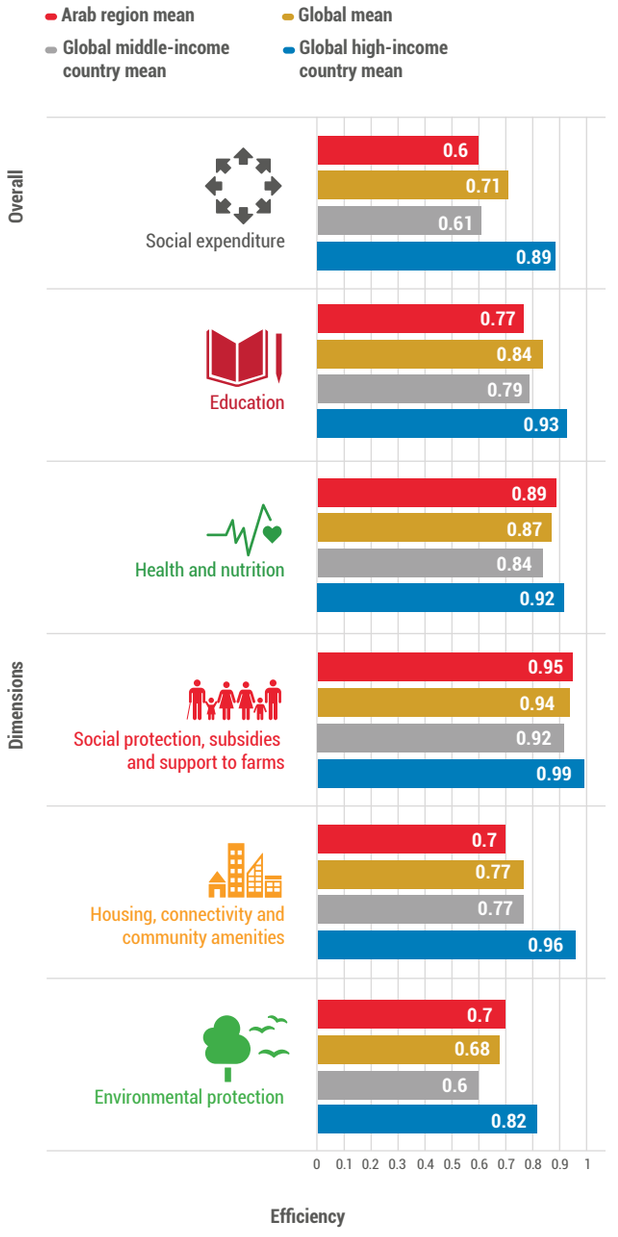
Source: ESCWA, UNDP and UNICEF, 2022a.

Social expenditure in Arab countries is considerably lower than the global average. Underlying structures to mobilize necessary resources are largely regressive, relying on indirect taxes that place a greater burden on poor and middle-class households than on rich ones. Income taxes as a share of total tax revenue are low, generally not exceeding 20 per cent, while taxes on property and wealth are either non-existent or negligible. Additionally, Arab tax systems suffer from significant leakages, with $7.5 billion lost annually due to corporate tax abuse. Consequently, tax revenues as a share of GDP stand at just 8 per cent regionally, compared to 18 per cent in middle-income countries globally.

Amid a contraction of fiscal space in most countries, resource mobilization strategies emphasizing progressive and effective tax systems can raise needed funds for robust social programmes to address poverty and inequality. Increasing tax collection, reassessing tax bases, enhancing tax equity and progressivity, and addressing inefficiencies are vital elements. Such work, however, must be accompanied by improvements in social services, such as health, housing and education, to cultivate trust and buy-in among taxpayers and reduce tax evasion. See the chapter on SDG 10 for more on this topic.

Sources: ESCWA, 2021b, 2022b; ESCWA, UNDP and UNICEF, 2022a.

Figure 1.2
Social expenditure efficiency



Source: ESCWA, UNDP and UNICEF, 2022a.

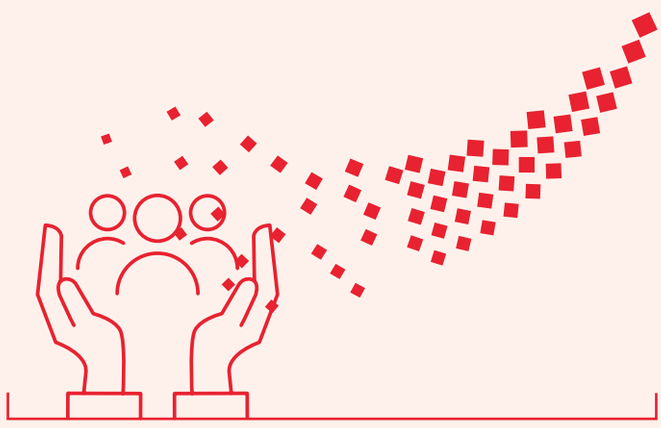
F. Regional dimensions

While poverty reduction and social protection policies are mainly implemented at the national level, the potential for regional cooperation should not be overlooked. Arab countries have several opportunities for regional collaboration to accelerate progress towards achieving SDG 1. These include:

- **Establishing vehicles to pool resources, such as a regional social solidarity fund, to guarantee a basic standard of living for everyone.** Coordinated efforts can support sustainable financing to address humanitarian needs and food shortages in least developed countries and countries experiencing conflict. Given low overall levels of wealth and income, the capacity of the least developed countries and countries experiencing conflict to raise resources through progressive taxation is limited. The region has enough wealth to make significant contributions to addressing such needs, however. In 2019, it was estimated that a solidarity tax of just 0.6 per cent on wealth held by the region's richest 10 per cent could raise enough funds to close the poverty gap in the least developed countries and the Syrian Arab Republic.[34]

- **Extending social protection systems to people living outside their countries of origin, including through a regional social security coordination agreement.** The Arab region hosts more than 40 million migrants and refugees.[35] Many are at an elevated risk of poverty and socioeconomic marginalization, with limited or non-existent access to social protection systems and other critical government services. International agreements such as the United Nations Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration,[36] the ILO conventions on Social Security Minimum Standards (1952) and Equality of Treatment (Social Security) (1962), and the ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation 2012 (No. 202) on non-discriminatory systems can serve as useful starting points for ensuring migrants' rights to social protection coverage.[37] Similarly, ensuring the portability of social insurance benefits can facilitate international mobility, economic diversification and the economic security of workers by maintaining coverage for those working outside their home countries. A multilateral social security agreement could facilitate this and advance the right to social protection for workers, building on the experiences of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.[38]

- **Structuring development partnerships to strengthen national capacities to deliver services,** for example through the implementation of social registries. Regional forums, such as the Council of Arab Ministers for Social Affairs and the Intergovernmental Committee on Social Development,[39] can facilitate information-sharing and cooperation to develop solutions that improve the coverage, shock responsiveness, financial stability and governance of social protection systems. One reference point is the 2021 Ministerial Forum Declaration on the Future of Social Protection in the Arab Region, in which social affairs ministers committed to working on four axes of reform, including: enhancing coverage to achieve universal social protection; building the resilience of social protection systems through increased shock responsiveness; improving financing for efficient and sustainable social protection systems; and improving governance and coordination through integrated approaches, including through enhanced data and monitoring and evaluation efforts, investing in registries and deepening engagement in social dialogue.



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6. See the Gulf Research Centre, Percentage of nationals and non-nationals in Gulf populations (2020).
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9. Ibid.
10. ILO, 2023d.
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24. In this analysis, countries experiencing conflict or fragility include Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.
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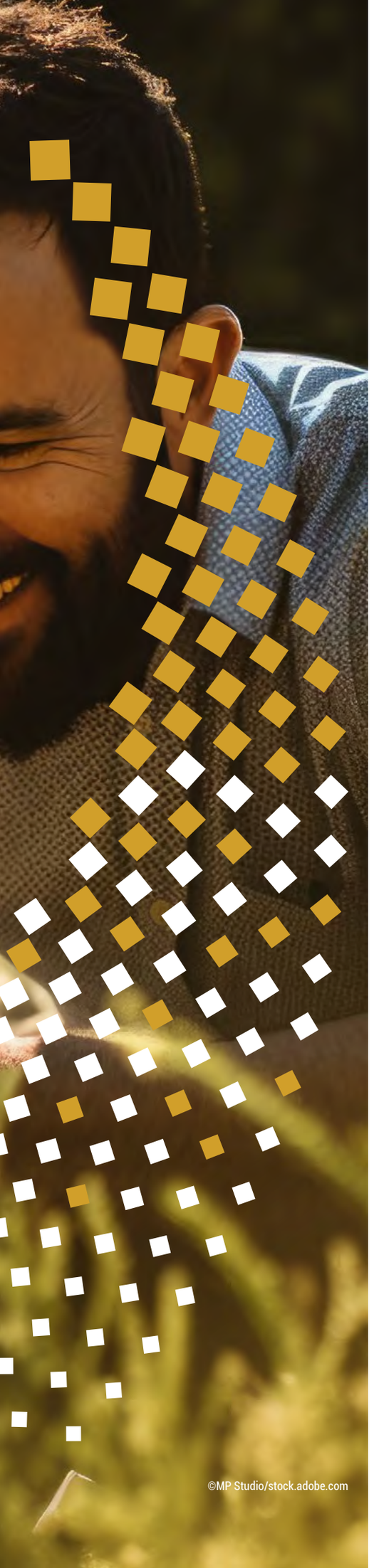

2 ZERO HUNGER

SDG 2

End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

A. Introduction

The Arab region is not on track to achieve SDG 2, losing ground on targets related to undernourishment and food insecurity, obesity among children and investment in agriculture. While most Arab countries have reoriented their SDG 2 policies over the past decade, making positive shifts towards fiscal, economic and environmental sustainability, policy and implementation gaps persist. People living in pockets of poverty and conflict are paying the highest price, with notable impacts on the health of the most vulnerable, including women and children. Moreover, food security policies have been ineffective at shielding countries from general global shocks and overlapping crises, emphasizing the need to build resilient food systems that capitalize on national and regional capacities.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).



Undernourishment is chronic in the Arab least developed and conflict-affected countries, with rates stagnating at high levels. The prevalence of undernourishment in 2021 was 41.1 and 23.5 per cent for these country groups, respectively, compared to 12 per cent for the region.



In 2021, a third of the Arab population experienced moderate or severe food insecurity. In conflict-affected countries, prevalence increased from 39.4 per cent in 2014 to 45.6 per cent in 2021, more than 1.5 times the global average of 29.3 per cent.



Stunting among children has declined across the region but remains alarmingly high in the least developed and conflict-affected countries. More than half the region's 10.6 million stunted children reside in least developed countries, where the prevalence of stunting was 31.2 per cent in 2022.



Obesity among children is on the rise. In 2022, the prevalence of obesity among children under age 5 reached 9.5 per cent, up from 8.8 per cent in 2000. The rate is presently 1.7 times the global average. Childhood obesity is markedly growing in the Mashreq and Gulf Cooperation Council countries, while trending down in the Maghreb and conflict-affected countries.

Regional SDG 2 data availability is improving. Data gaps persist in monitoring agricultural productivity and sustainability, which are crucial policy areas for the region.



Following a steady decrease between 2000 and 2015, the prevalence of anaemia in non-pregnant women aged 15 to 49 has been slowly increasing in the region from 32.7 per cent in 2015 to 33.2 per cent in 2019. Anaemia prevalence rates are particularly alarming in the least developed countries, afflicting 45.9 per cent of women in 2019.



Government funding for agriculture relative to its contribution to economic value added has been steadily declining in the region over the past two decades. The agricultural orientation index for government expenditures fell from 0.3 in 2001 to 0.23 in 2021 and is below the world average of 0.45. The index decreased sharply in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, from 2.8 in 2004 to 0.4 in 2021.

For an up-to-date view of SDG 2 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please visit the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 2

- Develop strategies that facilitate the adoption of sustainable climate-resilient farming practices and innovative cultivation techniques to address food insecurity, and invest in supplementary irrigation for rain-fed systems, taking into consideration the impact of climate change.
- Establish efficient extension systems that orient small-scale farmers towards context-based adaptive agricultural practices requiring few inputs and catering to local socioeconomic conditions, especially in the least developed and conflict-affected countries.
- Support small-scale farmers to access microfinance schemes and integrate into domestic and international value chains.
- Reform food subsidies, school feeding and other support programmes to expand nutritious dietary options and adopt regulations constraining the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children and young people.
- Establish financing mechanisms, including bonds, that focus on sustainable agriculture to attract impact investors interested in both financial and positive social and environmental returns.
- Diversify trade partners to hedge against price fluctuations and integrate agriculture in preferential trade agreements to improve interregional food trade.
- Develop regional food security data and information and an early warning system to monitor food security across the region and guide national and regional policies.



B. The policy landscape for SDG 2

Arab Governments, like all others, have an obligation to secure food for their populations. Food is a human right and a vital element of the universal "right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being".[1] While in the region, only **Egypt** has explicitly enshrined the right to food in its Constitution, all countries have policies that support food security in all dimensions.[2,3]

The broad policy thrust for countries continues to be securing food availability and affordable access to nutritious food, driven by the need to shield their populations from food shortages and price hikes. All countries are dependent on food imports, to varying extents, and many struggle to realize sufficient export revenues to sustain these imports. Trade imbalances are an ongoing challenge heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Regardless of climatic conditions and limitations in terms of arable land and water resources, Governments continue to consider local food production a policy priority. Land degradation, water scarcity and climate change impacts such as rainfall variability are markedly growing concerns across the region.

Food systems transformation: a growing movement to accelerate the SDGs

The Food Systems Summit 2021 and related 2023 stocktaking, held within the framework of the Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016–2025), brought global attention to the sustainability of food systems and their impacts on the health of people, the planet and economies.

By mid-2023, 20 Arab countries had convened national multi-stakeholder dialogues as part of the Summit process. Eleven articulated national pathways with concrete measures to achieve sustainable food systems by 2030.[a] A preliminary analysis of these pathways found a unanimous focus on policy and regulation, better data and human resource capacities as key means of implementation.[b] The extent to which these measures will be implemented has yet to be seen. In **Egypt**, for example, national dialogues developed a vision for a transition to a sustainable food system; establishment of an intergovernmental coordination body to monitor implementation should be a next step.[c]

[a] All Arab countries except Libya and the State of Palestine. The 11 countries with national pathways are: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Mauritania, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, the Sudan, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. See Member State Dialogue Convenors and Pathways in the United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub website.

[b] Analysis provided through the United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub.

[c] FAO, CIHEAM and UfM, 2021.

Achieving SDG 2 in the region is closely linked with the reduction of poverty (SDG 1), and, by extension, with job creation and income growth (SDG 8), the achievement of peace (SDG 16) and the facilitation of global trade (SDG 17). Food production is also closely linked to advancements in climate change adaptation (SDG 13), water management (SDG 6), fisheries management (SDG 14) and land restoration (SDG 15).

While the policy mix for achieving SDG 2 varies across countries, depending on national contexts and available resources, several **common trends** can be observed. These transcend income and geographic subgroupings. For more on food security policies related to fisheries and aquaculture, see the chapter on SDG 14.

◆ **Most Arab countries maintain high levels of food trade protection to protect and promote domestic agriculture and reduce reliance on imports, among other objectives.** While a few countries, such as **Jordan** and **Morocco,** cut tariffs on imported food from 2010 to 2019, the average applied tariff for the region over the same period increased markedly,[4] negatively affecting the affordability of a diversified and healthy diet. Most countries impose a high number of non-tariff restrictions, especially sanitary and phytosanitary measures, notably in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, followed by some North African countries. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, most Arab countries lowered tariff and non-tariff barriers to food trade, but measures were temporary.

◆ **All countries have some form of public stockholding policy through which they purchase, store and distribute selected strategic crops to smooth seasonal and year-to-year fluctuations.** Public stocks are replenished through imports and the purchase of domestic production. A positive shift in recent years has been towards local purchasing and supplying at market prices rather than fixed ones, as in **Egypt** and **Jordan.**



In addition to increasing food costs and limiting consumer choice, high tariffs on imported food have in some cases lowered the efficiency and competitiveness of local agriculture. They have stifled incentives for local producers to enhance productivity and quality.

In addition to being costly to maintain, stockholding policies based on purchasing domestic production, typically cereals, at guaranteed, above-market prices have in some cases skewed national production towards these products at the expense of others, resulting in less diversified diets.

◆ **Food subsidy programmes, common across the region, are undergoing significant reforms to reduce their fiscal burden.** Despite the political sensitivity of the issue, with access to basic foods at low prices seen as an entitlement, some Gulf Cooperation Council countries, such as **Saudi Arabia,** have phased out food subsidies. Middle-income countries, including **Egypt** and **Jordan,** have shifted from generalized to targeted food subsidies in the form of social protection programmes, using smart card systems. For an in-depth analysis of social protection policies, see the chapter on SDG 1.

In the absence of well-designed, targeted social protection programmes and the right institutions to effectively implement them, eliminating food subsidies could leave vulnerable households unprotected. This could lead to increased food insecurity and social unrest.

Weakly designed food subsidy programmes have unintentionally contributed to obesity by encouraging the consumption of unhealthy, high-calorie foods.

◆ **Most countries consider agriculture a key sector for national development. They continue to seek some level of food self-sufficiency in strategic crops by increasing agricultural production.** A positive development in several countries has been greater consideration of the sustainability of scarce natural resources, notably land and water. In the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, this has translated into investments in technology-driven agricultural solutions. In the middle-income countries, more comprehensive agricultural development policies aim at increasing agricultural productivity[5] and rationalizing irrigation water use. Both groups of countries are investing in improved transport, storage and conservation infrastructure, including cold chains, with a focus on reducing pre-market losses. For an in-depth analysis of food loss and waste policy measures, see the chapter on SDG 12.

There is a need to unlock the potential of rain-fed agricultural systems. Further high-return investments in small irrigation systems and water harvesting could widen the adoption of supplementary irrigation.

◆ **Comprehensive, multisectoral nutrition policies are starting to emerge, especially in the Gulf Cooperation Council and middle-income countries,** including **Egypt, Jordan, Morocco** and **Qatar.** Traditionally, nutrition has received less attention relative to other food security dimensions. Most countries have focused on preventing micronutrient deficiencies among women and children through mandatory fortification of wheat, milk, salt and other staples. Several countries have enacted policies to encourage breastfeeding, including laws to increase the duration of paid maternity leave and institute baby-friendly workplaces. In addition to mandatory nutritional food labelling, policies and regulations limiting the consumption of unhealthy foods rich in trans-fatty acids, salt and sugar are emerging across the region.

While nutrition policies exist in most countries, they are not always enforced and adequately implemented. Very few countries have adopted policies limiting the marketing of unhealthy foods to children. Better attention must be paid to food labelling, especially fat and sugar content. While early childhood nutrition is crucial for proper child development, this area still lacks concrete actions.

The region has yet to see multifaceted policies that address the underlying determinants of malnutrition.

◆ **Most countries have established school feeding programmes, although only around a third have framework national policies.** In 2018, school feeding benefited up to 85 per cent of school-enrolled children in the **United Arab Emirates,** 77 per cent in **Egypt** and 63 per cent in the **Syrian Arab Republic.**[6] Programmes in countries in conflict are heavily supported by international donors. Most middle-income countries have a dedicated national budget line for school feeding. Programmes are typically designed to secure adequate calorie intake from staple foods. In some countries, health policies have modified food offered to students in public schools to support more balanced, low-fat diets. Private schools have yet to follow suit.

School feeding programmes in some countries do not cover pre-primary and lower secondary schools. Countries generally also fail to complement these with other school programmes to improve the health of children and adolescents.



C. Policy trends by subregion

1. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

Gulf Cooperation Council countries are among the most food secure in the region. They have the highest dependency on food imports, with 85 per cent of food being imported, and are highly subject to the vagaries of global markets. Natural climatic conditions and water scarcity, compounded by climate change impacts, limit agricultural production. **Saudi Arabia** is the largest food producer among the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, accounting for over two thirds of total Gulf Cooperation Council production.[7]



◆ **The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have established high-level political oversight bodies to ensure the stable procurement of food as a matter of national security.** For example, the **United Arab Emirates** in 2020 established the Emirates Food Security Council. Involving representatives of multiple concerned ministries, the Council sets policy and monitors food security risks.[8] The strategic inventory management and control system for food and consumer goods of **Qatar** is a public-private endeavour launched in 2018 to monitor and control the strategic inventory of food.[9]

◆ **The Gulf Cooperation Council countries continue to invest in agriculture overseas, including through investment subsidies and guarantees, and the establishment of dedicated sovereign funds.** Examples of prominent sovereign funds investing in food production include the Saudi Agricultural and Livestock Investment Company,[10] which is owned by the Public Investment Fund and invests in large-scale agribusiness conglomerates focused on cereal, livestock, dairy and fisheries. In the **United Arab Emirates,** ADQ[11] invests in agribusinesses abroad and in agricultural technology solutions to expand local food production, in line with the country's National Food Security Strategy 2051.[12] The **Qatar** Investment Authority invests in local and international food and agribusiness sectors through a subsidiary, Hassad Food.[13]

Investments in agriculture overseas raise numerous concerns, particularly over land and water grabbing, resource competition, a lack of sustainability and sociocultural and geopolitical complexities. It is unclear if such investments have been effective in ensuring food security in crises. For example, during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian Federation restricted its food exports, including those produced on foreign-owned land. Alternative solutions could include the establishment of a few companies to acquire food globally at the regional (or subregional) level to ensure economies of scale and the ability to compete with the multinationals dominating global food markets. Overseas investments could be perceived as acceptable when no viable alternatives exist. They should be undertaken with a win-win perspective that caters to the needs and development objectives of local populations.

◆ **The Gulf Cooperation Council countries are seeking to increase production within environmental limits, leveraging smart agricultural technologies** to help optimize water use and curtail post-harvest losses. This can ensure year-round yields and help in moving Gulf Cooperation Council economies away from oil and gas. Food production using these technologies is still limited and costly, however. Investments in high-tech greenhouses, vertical farms, hydroponics and other water-conserving methods to produce fruits and vegetables have taken place in **Kuwait, Oman** and the **United Arab Emirates. Kuwait** and the **United Arab Emirates** are conducting advanced research on drought- and saline-tolerant crop varieties.[14]

◆ **The Gulf Cooperation Council countries stand out in terms of more advanced nutrition policies to reduce the consumption of sugar, salt and saturated fats, including through taxes and legislation aimed at the reformulation of foods and beverages.** By 2020, all Gulf Cooperation Council countries had introduced taxes on soft drinks and other sugar-sweetened beverages (such as a 50 per cent tax on carbonated drinks and 100 per cent tax on energy drinks), resulting in marked decreases in purchases.[15] **Qatar** has adopted comprehensive policy measures on nutrition policy dietary guidelines, food labelling standards, regulations constraining the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children, and media campaigns and counselling on healthy diets and nutrition.[16]

◆ **To guarantee the safety of imported food, Gulf Cooperation Council countries have reformed their food safety laws and adopted advanced food quality control systems while increasing subregional coordination.** The **United Arab Emirates** was among the early regional adopters of food quality assurance systems such as hazard analysis and critical control points, and in 2013 developed a cold chain transportation standard.[17] Subregional bodies active on these issues include the Gulf Standardization Organization, the Gulf Cooperation Council Committee for Food Safety and the Gulf Rapid Alert System for Food.

2. Arab middle-income countries

Most Arab middle-income countries have a relatively large agriculture sector. The agriculture, forestry and fishing value added as a percentage of GDP was between 10 and 11 per cent in **Algeria, Egypt, Morocco** and **Tunisia** in 2022.[18] Small farmers contribute a significant share of agricultural production in most of these countries.

Middle-income countries are highly exposed to hydrometeorological hazards, such as floods, heat waves, droughts and wildfires, that threaten food production. The occurrence of such events in the region has tripled, compared to a doubling worldwide.[19] While rain-fed agriculture continues to be the dominant mode of agricultural production, irrigation is a major water user.

◆ **Middle-income countries are seeking to modernize agriculture through policies to diversify production, keeping sustainability and resilience in mind.** Policies aim to increase contributions to economic development and job creation through high-value, export-oriented agriculture, and frameworks that incentivize private sector investments in agribusinesses and food processing. For example, the **Jordan** National Food Security Strategy 2021-2030 plans to maximize the potential of local food production by adopting improved agricultural practices and modern technologies for increased productivity and efficient use of limited natural resources. The **Morocco** Generation Green 2020-2030 is oriented towards creating a new generation of young entrepreneurs in agriculture, such as by connecting 2 million farmers to digital platforms that enable the optimization of irrigation and fertilizer use. Since 2009, the Agricultural and Rural Renewal Programme of **Algeria** has helped to incentivize farmers and remove barriers to foreign ownership and equipment imports. This has boosted the production of staple and higher-margin crops and reduced dependence on food imports.[20]

Some middle-income countries demonstrate a positive link between agricultural modernization programmes and integrated rural development as well as the reduction of rural poverty and social exclusion. Such programmes have in other cases failed to incorporate small traditional farmers into profitable value chains and maintained prevailing divides in rural areas. As a result, a dual system has emerged with high-value, export-oriented production on one side and low-yield, traditional small-scale farming on the other. Inclusive dialogue and consensus-building are needed to ensure that policies make the best use of available resources and include diverse perspectives from across societies. Agricultural modernization programmes are more impactful when associated with comprehensive agricultural policies that properly regulate inputs and outputs, and that focus on targeting farming communities at large to achieve optimal outcomes.

◆ **Most middle-income countries continue to support smallholder farmers and cooperatives,** typically with subsidies for agricultural inputs, including seeds, fertilizer, pesticides and animal feed. Small farmers also benefit from extension services promoting improved, yield-boosting techniques and the production of high-value crops for export. For example, **Algeria** increased fertilizer subsidies from 20 to 50 per cent as part of its economic recovery and renewal programme.[21] The Haya Karima (Decent Life) project in **Egypt,** launched in 2021 to reduce rural poverty, has established agricultural service centres and irrigation expansion projects benefiting small farmers.[22]

A rollback in support for small farmers has taken place in some countries, however, contributing to a deterioration in rural livelihoods. Spending on small farmer support remains much less than spending on food subsidies.

Unless properly designed, subsidy policies supporting farmers may result in helping wealthier landowners who do not need assistance.


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◆ **Improving irrigation water efficiency is a policy priority in several middle-income countries.** Traditionally, the focus has been on increasing supplies, including through water reuse, and reducing wastage, such as through drip irrigation. Other efforts have emphasized decentralized and inclusive irrigation water management. Some countries have increased irrigation water prices to recover water provision costs and reflect water scarcity and opportunity costs. Further investments are needed in supplementary irrigation for rain-fed systems, considering the impacts of climate change. For example, the National Water Plan 2020-2050 in **Morocco** is a long-term integrated water resource management plan that seeks the rational use of water resources in irrigation.[23] Water users' associations in **Egypt** play a major role in decision-making and have helped optimize the operation of irrigation canals by replacing individual farmer pumping with more efficient collective single-point pumping.[24] The National Plan for Sustainable Agriculture 2022-2025 of **Jordan** includes projects to improve efficiency in irrigation water use.[25]

◆ **Some middle-income countries have begun to strengthen the resilience of agricultural systems against climate disasters by incorporating climate-smart irrigation and other measures in their nationally determined contributions.** There is still a gap, however, in the comprehensiveness of climate resilience strategies and their operationalization through appropriate laws and institutional changes, such as the creation of dedicated authorities. Insufficient access to finance and to investments in climate-smart agriculture remains a barrier. In areas with rain-fed agriculture, farmers are left with limited coping options while confronting multiple vulnerabilities. **Tunisia** is undertaking Water 2050 prospective studies to assess the impacts of climate change on food security, the results of which will inform the development of the National Plan for the Adaptation of Tunisian Agriculture to Climate Change.[26] For an analysis of climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction policies, see the chapters on SDGs 11 and 13.

◆ **Middle-income countries have policies discouraging unhealthy foods, but implementation issues persist. Awareness lags, particularly in relation to children and young people, and due to a lack of appropriate labelling and marketing campaigns.** Maghreb countries have been more successful at curbing obesity among children compared to those in the Mashreq. National policies discouraging the consumption of foods rich in saturated fatty and trans-fatty acids are in place in **Jordan, Morocco** and **Tunisia. Morocco** has a policy limiting the marketing of unhealthy foods to children and a strategy to combat childhood obesity.[27] Both **Morocco** and **Tunisia** have a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages.

3. Arab least developed countries

Undernourishment in the Arab least developed countries is a chronic problem, affecting 4 out of every 10 people in 2021. More than 5 million stunted children reside in these countries. The prevalence of stunting among children under age 5 was 31.2 per cent in 2022.

Agriculture is significant to economies and livelihoods in most of the least developed countries. In the **Comoros,** it contributes more than a third of GDP (35.5 per cent) and a third of total employment (34 per cent). In **Somalia,** a clear outlier in the region, agriculture contributed 52 per cent of GDP, 80 per cent of employment and 90 per cent of exports in 2019. At the same time, agricultural lands in the least developed countries are degrading fast due to overgrazing, deforestation and poor agronomic practices, which increases vulnerability to climate change effects.

◆ **Food security policies in the least developed countries are largely driven by humanitarian aid and fall mostly in the realm of social assistance.** They help to meet short-term needs without necessarily resolving structural problems. In **Djibouti,** for instance, access to food is addressed through the distribution of food and coupons, whereas policies to develop the agriculture sector and improve its resilience to successive drought waves are underdeveloped.

◆ **A few of the least developed countries are elaborating comprehensive policies to develop and modernize agriculture by giving greater consideration to agroclimatic conditions and export opportunities.** Where good policies for promoting food security exist, implementation is hampered by poor coordination and limited national capacities. The **Comoros** recently adopted a value chain and rural agricultural entrepreneurship approach to food security, which constitutes one of the pillars of its Comoros Emerging Plan (Plan Comores Emergent 2020-2030). This policy accompanies the first-ever agricultural investment plan.[28] Within the frame of a longer-term vision for poverty reduction, food security and rural development, **Mauritania** adopted a National Plan for Agricultural Development (2015-2025)[29] with a focus on the intensification and diversification of irrigated agriculture to address declining rainfall. Another priority entails building the capacities of the public service and food producers.

4. Arab countries in conflict

Instability results in dire food insecurity due to disruptions in supply chains, damaged infrastructure, influxes of refugees and internally displaced persons, and limited capabilities to support them. Refugees and internally displaced persons are at a particularly increased risk of food insecurity as they depend on food aid. Their diets might be monotonous and not meet full micronutrient needs, increasing health problems. The humanitarian crisis in **Yemen** is the world's worst, with unprecedented levels of poverty and hunger.

◆ **Food security policymaking in countries in conflict is difficult and ineffective due to macro conditions, including weak governance, economic collapse, destruction of infrastructure and extremely strained government budgets, among others.** A humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach has yet to be put into practice, where food aid is carefully balanced with other forms of assistance, including nutrition education services, support to sustainable and resilient agricultural production, and institutional development. Nutrition policies that encourage consumption of traditional locally produced food are usually effective in such contexts. While humanitarian relief interventions have been instrumental in curbing food insecurity in the short term, they are ineffective in tackling structural problems, as is the case in **Yemen.**


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In **Palestine,** where over a third of the population was in need of food assistance prior to the onset of the war on Gaza in October 2023,[30] food insecurity cannot be seen as external to the conflict. Israel's control over water resources and economic blockages is forcing a dependence on Israeli food imports. In **Iraq,** the State is involved closely in the management of food systems through a multitude of decades-old institutions and programmes that suffer from weak human and financial capacities, leaving the population highly vulnerable to food insecurity.[31]

◆ **Donor-funded projects that focus on building adaptive agricultural capacities in conflict contexts are promising.** Countries could gain from scaling them up at the policy level. In conflict situations where market infrastructure falls apart, the focus must shift towards local production practices necessitating few inputs. While it is hard to innovate and encourage sophisticated technology in conflict situations, some donor-funded projects have succeeded in enhancing technology use for more resilient food production. In the **Sudan,** women benefited from an innovative World Food Programme hydroponics project that supported food-insecure communities to grow plants without needing soil or excess water. This helped to address basic needs and improve livelihoods.[32]

◆ **Where food security policies exist, they tend to mirror conflict-related imbalances and divisions, and miss opportunities to build social cohesion.** In the **Syrian Arab Republic,** for instance, the official Government in 2020 produced its post-war strategic vision for 2030,[33] connecting a short-term humanitarian perspective and development. The plan makes agriculture a high priority for post-war development, focusing on its potential for boosting economic growth, addressing regional disparities and promoting women's empowerment. It is unclear, however, if and how the plan would address inequalities, which it acknowledges have fuelled the war.

D. Policies to leave no one behind

Inequalities in access to food mirror inequalities in income: the hungry and malnourished are often the poor. As such, SDG 2 policies that leave no one behind cannot be dissociated from policies targeting the poor.

In the same vein, SDG 2 policies to leave no one behind are closely intertwined with policies targeting rural populations, for a number of reasons. Rural areas have historically been neglected and remain underdeveloped relative to urban settings.[34] Around 34 per cent of the rural population in Arab countries is poor. Poverty can be aggravated when combined with other sources of vulnerability, as is the case for women-headed households, landless smallholder farmers and populations in areas with increased climate vulnerabilities.[35] Rural access to water, sanitation and electricity – all essentials for food production and safe food consumption – lags behind access in urban areas.[36] Vulnerable employment is twice as prevalent in rural areas at 38 per cent compared to 15 per cent in urban areas.[37] All these factors hinder the development of a strong and productive agriculture sector.

The policy examples that follow should be read in conjunction with examples in other chapters that highlight policies supporting poor and rural populations across various aspects of development.


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Table 2.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

 **Small-scale and traditional farmers** often lack the economic and technical means to become part of a modernized agriculture sector and value chains. They are typically more vulnerable to climate change as they mostly practice rain-fed agriculture.	The Green **Morocco** Plan has an entire pillar aimed at promoting partnerships between smallholder farmers and private sector investors. Smallholders bring land and farming experience while private investors facilitate access to profitable value chains. In 2019, **Saudi Arabia** initiated a programme to help small farmers switch to organic farming as part of a goal to bolster organic output by 300 per cent by 2030. In 2019, **Tunisia** operationalized a fund to compensate farmers for damages caused by natural disasters. The Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems designation can help preserve traditional agricultural practices adapted to prevailing climate changes and risks. In 2023, nine designations were registered in five countries: one in **Algeria,** one in **Egypt,** three in **Morocco,** three in **Tunisia** and one in the **United Arab Emirates.**[a]
 **Women farmers** are at a particular disadvantage due to prevailing discriminatory gender norms. The division of labour in agriculture is unfair to women, who perform the most tedious, labour-intensive tasks.	In **Morocco,** inheritance laws and customs related to communal lands, termed *soulaliyate*, have precluded women from owning and controlling these typically agricultural properties. To resolve this situation, **Morocco** in 2019 adopted law number 62-17 on the management of *soulaliyate* communal lands. The law grants women and men equal rights in access to this land.[b]
 **Children and women** have high malnutrition rates. Deficient policies include food subsidies and school feeding programmes that have promoted high-calorie foods, creating a double burden of undernutrition and obesity, particularly among children and women.	The **United Arab Emirates** launched a National Nutrition Strategy 2022-2030 and associated multidisciplinary National Programme to Combat Obesity in Children and Adolescents. The Ministry of Health and Prevention launched the Mutabah online system to collect data on obesity and extra weight among school students.[c]
 **Refugees and internally displaced persons** are at an increased risk of food insecurity. They are highly dependent on food aid, and their diets may not meet their full nutritional needs. The food security status of refugees depends on existing national policies in host countries.[d]	**Lebanon** extended social assistance provided through the National Poverty Targeting Program to include food assistance via an electronic food voucher system being implemented by the World Food Programme (WFP) for a segment of Syrian refugees.[e] The Policy Framework on Displacement of **Somalia** requires authorities and other actors to assist and protect internally displaced persons in emergency situations by addressing their needs for food and supporting their voluntary return with a return package that includes food.[f]

[a] See FAO on Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems in the Near East and North Africa.

[b] See Morocco, Voluntary National Review 2020.

[c] The United Arab Emirates, Ministry of Health and Prevention, 2022.

[d] ESCWA, Pathfinders and WFP, 2023.

[e] For more on the National Poverty Targeting Program, see About Us.

[f] See the Policy Framework on Displacement Within Somalia.

E. The financing landscape

Amid fiscal limitations, Arab countries face challenges in balancing priorities between spending to meet daily needs through food imports and stockholding and consumer food subsidies, and making high-return, long-term investments in agricultural development to enhance outputs, including through farmer subsidies.

1. Trends in spending on food imports and consumer subsidies

In 2021, **food imports** constituted 12 per cent of the region's total merchandise imports, higher than the world average of 8 per cent.[38] The proportion was highest in the least developed and conflict-affected countries (for example, 34 per cent in **Palestine** and 39 per cent in **Yemen**). In the least developed countries, the value of food imports surpasses that of total merchandise exports, meaning that these countries cannot secure the foreign currency needed to import food. The COVID-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine have sizeably increased food import and production bills.

Food subsidies targeting consumers outweigh subsidies to farmers. For example, **Egypt** allocated $4.19 billion in 2015-2016 for food support, more than 10 times the support to farmers, which amounted to $368 million.[39] A trend in some countries, notably middle-income countries, is towards rationalizing food subsidies through improved targeting.

Available data on national budget expenditures on **school feeding programmes** show a range between $1 million and $90 million (table 2.2). If expenditures are considered against GDP, the financial burden on the Government is clearly higher for countries such as **Djibouti** than for **Egypt** or **Iraq,** for example. Per child cost is highly variable, from as low as $5 in **Egypt** to $328 in **Djibouti,** which could signal inefficiencies in internationally supported programmes. In 2020, five Arab countries had state budget lines dedicated to school feeding **(Egypt, Iraq, Mauritania,** the **Sudan** and **Tunisia).**

Debt swaps are being used to finance nutrition programmes. For example, the WFP raised funding to implement nutrition programmes through debt swaps amounting to $18 million in **Egypt** and $2 million in **Mauritania.**[40]

Taxation on unhealthy foods can generate revenue for nutrition programmes. Taxes on sugar-sweetened drinks, which are generally associated with obesity among children and type 2 diabetes, have been implemented in **Bahrain, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates.**

Table 2.2
National budget expenditures on school feeding programmes

Country	Expenditures (dollars)	Reporting year
Morocco	90,000,000	2013
Egypt	55,368,086	2020
Tunisia	26,551,000	2020
Iraq	17,000,000	2020
Jordan	7,060,000	2013
Sudan	4,943,994	2020
Djibouti	959,350	2013

Source: WFP, 2020.

2. Trends in spending on agriculture

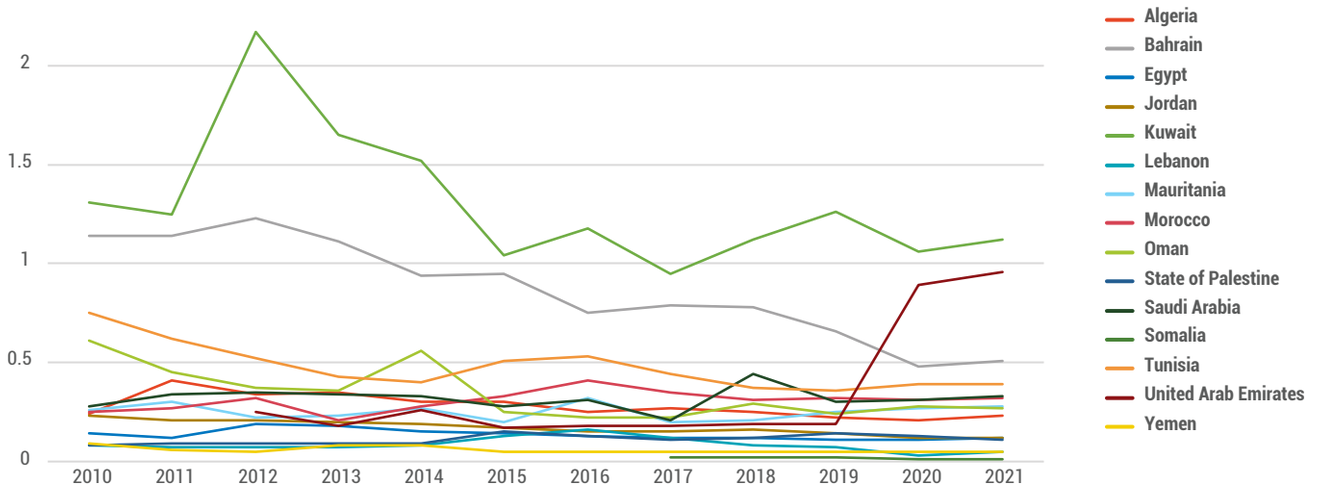
The role of agriculture in the economies of the region is shrinking. Since the 1990s, the share of the sector in regional GDP has continued to decline, reaching a mere 5 per cent in 2021. Similarly, **employment in agriculture** has been steadily dropping, accounting for 18 per cent of total employment in 2019, half the 1990 value. Compensatory gains in labour productivity are evident, especially in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Agriculture value added per worker has steadily increased in the region, doubling between 1995 and 2019.[41]

Nevertheless, investments in agriculture are low and not commensurate with the sector's share of the economy. The **agricultural orientation index,** which reflects the share of government expenditure on the sector relative to its contribution to GDP, is indicative (figure 2.1). In 2021, almost all countries in the region with available data had an index value less than or equal to 0.5 (except for **Kuwait** at 1.21, the highest score in the region, and the **United Arab Emirates** at 0.96). This meant that agriculture was receiving

a lower share of government expenditure relative to its contribution to GDP. The lowest value was in **Somalia,** where the contribution of agriculture to GDP is the highest in the region at about 53 per cent. Countries with a low score could in principle benefit from increased spending on agriculture.

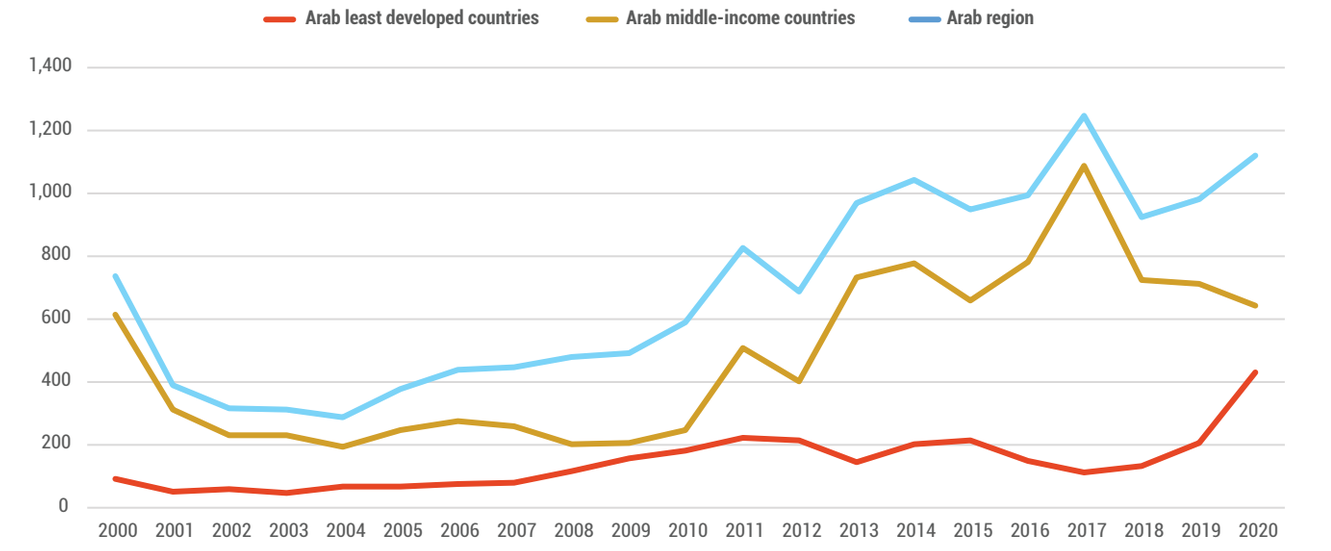
Total official flows into agriculture are generally on the rise. In 2020, the Arab region received $1.1 billion in official development assistance for agriculture, compared to $0.7 billion in 2000. Arab middle-income countries are the largest recipients. Support to the least developed countries has picked up since 2017[42] (figure 2.2).

Figure 2.1
Agricultural orientation index scores for government expenditure, 2010 to 2021



Source: United Nations Global SDG Database, accessed on 13 December 2023.

Figure 2.2
Official development assistance provided for agriculture, 2000 to 2020 (Constant dollars, millions)



Source: ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, accessed on 21 August 2023.

Additional investments to enhance agricultural outputs in selected Arab countries could be as high as $63.2 billion in **Iraq,** $45.5 in **Algeria** and $43.2 in **Morocco** (table 2.3).

Several Arab countries are seeking to attract private sector domestic and foreign investments in agriculture and agrifood systems by enhancing the business and regulatory environment and developing basic infrastructure. **Morocco** is a leading example, starting with its Green Morocco Plan and Generation Green. Over a 10-year period (2008 to 2018), **Morocco** secured an investment of 104 billion dirhams,[43] with 40 per cent from public investment and 60 per cent from private investment. Each dirham of government support generated 2.85 dirhams in private investment.[44]

Table 2.3
SDG 2 costing in selected Arab countries

Country	Additional investments to enhance agricultural outputs (billions of dollars)	Reference document
Iraq	63.2	**Iraq** Vision 2030
Algeria	45.5	**Algeria** National Vision 2030
Morocco	43.2	**Morocco** Generation Green 2020-2030
Egypt	18	**Egypt** Sustainable Agricultural Development Strategy
Oman	13	**Oman** Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy towards 2040
Lebanon	5.5	**Lebanon** Agricultural Strategy
Tunisia	4.8	**Tunisia** Development Plan
Jordan	0.5	**Jordan** Economic Growth Plan

Source: ESCWA, Arab Financing for Development Gateway, accessed on 12 February 2023.



F. Regional dimensions

Strengthening regional cooperation among Arab countries could ease fiscal burdens and sustain food security, particularly during shocks. Some examples include the following.

- **Intraregional trade in food and agricultural inputs:** The region has yet to harness the full potential of regional and bilateral trade arrangements and agreements, which have not yet resulted in any visible increase in regional trade in food and agricultural inputs. Presently, intraregional trade in all goods (including food) represents a mere 10 per cent of total trade. Among the barriers to food trade are food safety considerations, which could be addressed through the adoption and enforcement of common good agricultural standards and practices.[45] The Arab Food Safety Initiative for Trade Facilitation, recently introduced by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization in partnership with numerous national Arab food safety authorities, regional organizations and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), could help in that respect.
- **Regional food security data, information and an early warning system:** An evident data challenge hinders adequate monitoring and tracking of food security policy impacts in the region. Countries could benefit from jointly upscaling monitoring, tracking and reporting on anomalies in food supplies to allow evidence-based adjustments. A dedicated regional network could facilitate exchanges of experiences, lessons learned and evidence to build capacities for anticipatory action against natural hazards and other shocks to food systems.[46] Such a system exists, for example, under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Since 2002, the ASEAN Food Security Information System[47] has taken multiple actions to build the capacity of member countries to collect reliable food security statistics and forecast agricultural production; share data and information related to food security required for policy planning and implementation; and enhance collaborative efforts to advance food security.
- **Regional strategic food reserves:** Several countries lack the capacities and financial means to individually sustain strategic food reserves, and could collectively benefit from regional or subregional strategic food reserves with cost-sharing arrangements.[48] ASEAN member countries since 1979 have had an agreement to coordinate their national food stocks to maintain a minimum level of strategic crops (mainly rice) to meet emergency requirements.[49] The successful operation of such a mechanism partly depends on the availability of a regional data and information centre.
- **Regional nutrition coordination mechanisms:** Arab countries could benefit from a regional nutrition coordination mechanism to accelerate actions to address maternal and child undernutrition.

Under the League of Arab States' Subcommittee on Ending Hunger in the Arab Region, the United Nations and regional partners developed the Arab Regional Strategic Framework and Action Plan for Zero Hunger in 2021. It provides state and non-state actors with a common framework for allocating resources, monitoring progress and ensuring accountability. The framework covers seven priority areas for the Arab region, namely: agriculture and water productivity; rural infrastructure and food value chains; social protection programmes; healthier, more affordable and more sustainable diets; resilient agriculture; conflict mitigation; and trade facilitation, import diversification and the functioning of agriculture-related markets. Adoption of the framework is underway.



Endnotes

1. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
2. See FAO, Right to Food Around the Globe database, accessed on 18 September 2023.
3. Article 79 of the Egyptian Constitution stipulates: "Each citizen has the right to healthy and sufficient food and clean water. The State shall ensure food resources to all citizens. The State shall also ensure sustainable food sovereignty and maintain agricultural biological diversity and types of local plants in order to safeguard the rights of future generations". Article 80 goes on to specify that "Each child shall have the right to […] basic nutrition […]".
4. The average tariff on imported food in the Near East and North Africa region rose from 13 per cent in 2015 to 32 per cent in 2019 (FAO and others, 2023). The Near East and North Africa region includes Iran.
5. Egypt as an outlier in terms of achieving agricultural productivity growth in the past decade, due to water use improvements and a shift to high-value crops.
6. WFP, 2020.
7. Oxford Business Group, 2022.
8. See more on food security in the United Arab Emirates.
9. Gulf Times, 2018.
10. See Saudi Agricultural and Livestock Investment Company (SALIC) home page
11. See ADQ's Food and Agriculture Portfolio.
12. See the National Food Security Strategy 2051 of the United Arab Emirates.
13. See Hassad Food's "About Us".
14. Oxford Business Group, 2022.
15. Al-Jawaldeh and Megally, 2021.
16. FAO and others, 2020.
17. Ibid.
18. See World Bank data, Agriculture, forestry, and fishing, value added (% of GDP) – Arab world, accessed on 13 December 2023.
19. Banerjee and others, 2014.
20. See the FAOLEX database on Algeria.
21. Algeria Invest, 2022.
22. Egypt Today, 2023.
23. Moroccan National Portal, 2019.
24. See Egypt: The role of water users' associations in reforming irrigation, Global Water Partnership.
25. See Jordan, Second Voluntary National Review 2022.
26. See Tunisia, Second Voluntary National Review 2021.
27. See Morocco, Voluntary National Review 2020.
28. See Comoros, Voluntary National Review 2023.
29. See Mauritania's National Agricultural Development Plan.
30. USAID, 2022.
31. Fathallah, 2020.
32. Popovska, 2019.
33. ESCWA, 2020.
34. Overall, the region is characterized by low public spending on rural infrastructure and services. Spending is as low as one twentieth the equivalent per capita spending in urban areas (FAO, 2020).
35. ESCWA, Pathfinders and WFP, 2023.
36. Rural and urban divides at the Arab regional level are evident in access to water (95 per cent urban versus 80 per cent rural), sanitation (94 per cent urban versus 82 per cent rural) and electricity (98 per cent urban versus 83 per cent rural). See the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.
37. ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, accessed on 21 August 2023.
38. See World Bank data on Food imports (% of merchandise imports) – Arab world, world, accessed on 1 March 2024.
39. WTO, 2018.
40. WFP, 2021.
41. See World Bank data on Agriculture, forestry, and fishing, value added per worker (constant 2015 US$) – Arab world, accessed on 1 March 2024.
42. ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, accessed on 21 August 2023.
43. Equivalent to about $10.4 billion as per January 2024 exchange rate.
44. See the Main Achievements of the Green Morocco Plan.
45. ESCWA, 2018.
46. ODI and WFP, 2022.
47. See more on the ASEAN Food Security Information System.
48. FAO, 2022.
49. See the Agreement on the ASEAN Food Security Reserve.

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3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

SDG 3

Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

A. Introduction

Overall, the Arab region is making good progress on SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), with gains achieved on a number of health indicators, such as maternal and infant mortality, the incidence of tuberculosis and access to vaccines. Challenges persist in areas such as universal health coverage, sexual and reproductive health, and access to affordable health care. The burden of non-communicable diseases is high and continues to grow across the region.

Health inequalities are deepening between and within countries, and are largely driven by gender, geography, levels of education and poverty, and migration status. Protracted conflicts, forced displacement and occupation are disrupting health systems, with major direct consequences on populations, notably women and girls. These are adversely affecting mental health and well-being, reproductive and maternal health, nutrition and non-communicable diseases. The occurrence of long-term injuries has increased.[1]

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and global crises

The COVID-19 pandemic clearly demonstrated that people marginalized before the virus ran a higher risk of infection. Workers who could not afford to stay home and migrant workers living in difficult housing conditions were cases in point. Gender disparities in terms of income, literacy, access to the Internet and ability to quarantine put women at a higher health risk. Response measures often did not consider these factors.

The pandemic put health systems under immense pressure, exposing vulnerabilities in infrastructure and revealing deficiencies in funding, equipment and workforces. This was more the case in countries in conflict such as **Iraq,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Yemen,** and under occupation as in **Palestine,** where the pandemic further destabilized already weakened health systems. Stark inequalities in COVID-19 vaccine distribution emerged, with high-income countries like the **United Arab Emirates** administering 264 doses per 100 people compared to 4 per 100 in **Yemen.**

Limited fiscal resources forced some countries to divert funding from essential health areas such as non-communicable diseases, reproductive health and mental health, redirecting it to immediate COVID-19 response efforts. This posed significant threats to the health of the region's population overall.

More recently, the war in Ukraine and concurrent global inflation have affected the availability and affordability of critical health-care items, including pharmaceuticals and medical equipment.

Sources: Dejong and Fahme, 2021; CNN COVID-19 vaccine tracker, accessed on 23 October 2023.

The One Health approach

Zoonotic diseases, such as COVID-19, present a substantial threat to global health. Factors such as increased human mobility, international travel and trade, urbanization and climate change provide opportunities for diseases to pass between animals and people and to spread fast across borders. The effective management of threats to health at the human-animal-ecosystem interface calls for the integrated, multisectoral and multidisciplinary One Health approach. It allows a greater understanding of the drivers of disease and encourages suitable strategies to manage health risks originating at the human-animal-ecosystem interface.

Qatar has effectively implemented the One Health approach for investigating zoonotic diseases such as the Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) and others. It is currently working on a national plan, in the context of the Qatar National Vision 2030, to better sustain and advance One Health activities, and avert and manage health threats from the human-animal-ecosystem interface.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023; Bansal and others, 2023; Sharek, 2023.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed on 24 January 2024).



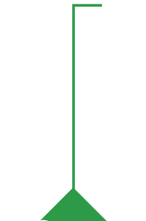
The Arab region has reduced **maternal mortality** but the current ratio remains high, roughly double the global target of less than 70 per 100,000 live births. This issue is particularly challenging in the least developed countries, where slightly less than one in three women gives birth without skilled health personnel.



Neonatal and under-5 mortality rates have declined in the region, to 16.5 per 1,000 live births and 34.4 per 1,000 live births, respectively, in 2021. But rates remain higher than global targets. The rate in the least developed countries is around double that of the regional average for both indicators.



Mortality attributed to non-communicable diseases[2] is slowly declining in the region (from 16.2 per cent in 2015 to 14.7 per cent in 2019). It affects men slightly more than women (16.5 per cent compared to 12.7 per cent, respectively, in 2019).



The region is far from achieving **universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning.** The proportion of women of reproductive age who have their family planning needs satisfied with modern methods has increased (from 61.4 per cent in 2010 to 64.1 per cent in 2023) but remains below the world average (77.6 per cent). The situation is challenging in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (52.5 per cent) and least developed countries (39.3 per cent).



The **adolescent birth rate** is slowly decreasing in the region (43.6 per 1,000 adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 in 2023, down from 52.7 in 2015). But the rate remains higher than the global average (41.3 per 1,000), notably in the least developed countries.



Progress towards **universal health coverage** is improving at different paces, but the regional average remains below the global average. Almost two in three people (63 per cent in 2021) benefit from universal health coverage. Progress has been difficult in the least developed countries and countries in conflict.



Out-of-pocket health expenditure in the region is twice the world average (31.3 per cent compared to 16.4 per cent in 2020).[3] The percentage tends to be higher in the least developed countries and lowest in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.



Access to vaccines in the region is at the global average or better for diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTP), measles and pneumococcal conjugate (PCV) but not for the human papillomavirus (HPV).



The least developed countries struggle with **malaria**; incidence is above the world average and has continued to increase since 2015.

Trends in the **harmful use of alcohol** among adults are mixed. Since 2010, alcohol use has increased in the Maghreb and risen slightly in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries while decreasing in the Mashreq and least developed countries. Use is higher among men. Overall, the regional average (0.4 liters in 2019) remains negligible compared to the world average (5.5 liters).

Traffic deaths in the region (20.2 per 100,000 population in 2019) surpass the global average (16.7 per 100,000). Mostly men are affected, at a rate almost three times that for women.

New HIV infections remain well below the global average, with 0.036 new HIV infections per 1,000 uninfected population compared to 0.192 globally in 2021. The trend is upward, however, especially among young people aged 15 to 24 in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, which had 0.104 new HIV infections per 1,000 uninfected population in 2021, compared to 0.065 in 2015.

Mortality caused by air pollution is an increasing concern. **Mortality due to unsafe water and sanitation** continues to be a high risk in the least developed countries and countries in conflict.

The region's **capacity to prevent, detect, assess, notify and respond to public health risks and acute events** according to the International Health Regulations has been declining[4] since 2016 and is presently at the world average. Capacity in the least developed countries is particularly low.

For an up-to-date view of SDG 3 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please visit the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.



On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 3

- Better targeting of subsidized health insurance schemes and other health policy measures based on more and better-quality disaggregated data, and the expansion of mandatory health insurance programmes.
- Improving the infrastructure of primary health-care centres in rural and remote regions and refugee camps while offering incentives to qualified health workers to deploy to these locations.
- Strengthening digital health and health information systems and developing digital health laws and regulatory standards to support data security and interoperability.



- Accelerating health accreditation programmes, regulating the private health-care sector and building public-private partnerships to meet needs for affordable, responsive and quality health services.
- Introducing programmes to improve health workforce governance, regulation, information and skills to increase the production and retention of health professionals.
- Supporting the more integrated delivery of sexual and reproductive health programmes and services and enhancing coordination mechanisms among different providers (Government, private sector, development partners and civil society).
- Escalating the policy response to non-communicable diseases as well as policy coordination and enforcement for more effective prevention and control.
- Strengthening the application of mental health policies, bolstering funding for related services and implementing mental health promotion and educational activities to end stigma around mental health.
- Exerting greater efforts at the international level to enforce international humanitarian law to protect health-care systems and personnel from targeted attacks in conflicts.

B. The policy landscape for SDG 3

Achieving SDG 3 is intricately intertwined with the realization of other SDGs that affect key determinants of health. For instance, SDG 1 (no poverty) and SDG 2 (zero hunger) can significantly impact health outcomes. SDG 4 (quality education) shapes behaviours and lifestyles with high impacts on health. SDG 5 (gender equality) is crucial for addressing gender-based health disparities, while SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) underpins disease prevention. SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) supports equity in access to care through universal health coverage grounded in primary health care. SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) is essential for improving physical and social environments, and securing resources for health and well-being. SDG 13 (climate action) supports more climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable health systems, and helps ensure that health is at the centre of climate change mitigation policies. SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) empowers national institutions to put in place and monitor ambitious SDG responses. SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals) mobilizes partners to follow-up on and support the achievement of health-related SDGs.[5]

The majority of Arab countries have included the right to health in their constitutions.[6] All have adopted legislation and/or national policies and plans on health. The region's SDG 3 policy landscape has more commonalities than differences.

◆ **Most States are extending the coverage of health insurance schemes to reach more people.** Common approaches have included reviewing income levels under subsidized civil health insurance schemes and expanding coverage to more population groups, such as migrants and refugees, older persons, the unemployed, the self-employed and informal sector workers.

Across the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, health systems offer nationals free or highly subsidized health insurance. Policy approaches are evolving to secure the coverage of migrants. In **Saudi Arabia,** for example, the 1999 Cooperative Health Insurance Law requires all non-Saudis to be covered by mandatory health insurance.[7] Disparities in enrolment fees and coverage modalities, however, both between nationals and migrants[8] and between those working in the public and private sectors, remain critical barriers to universal coverage.

Middle-income countries are extending health insurance coverage to the most vulnerable groups by subsidizing their contributions. For example, the Universal Health Insurance Law issued by **Egypt** in 2018 provides coverage to everyone except military personnel.[9] Those unable to pay their contribution fees receive free health care funded by the Government.

Subsidized health insurance systems face challenges in terms of targeting efficiency. Criteria for identifying beneficiaries often do not effectively use means-tested benefit approaches, such as household-adjusted equivalent expenditure or needs-based assessments, to accurately target and help intended groups. Limited access to accurate and up-to-date data on the health status, income levels and health-care needs of the population also hinder the effective targeting and tailoring of interventions. Inefficiencies and fragmentation within health systems combined with poor coordination result in duplicated efforts and increased costs.

Source: ESCWA, 2022b.

The programme is to be implemented over a 15-year period. Enrolment is optional for Egyptian nationals residing abroad and for foreigners living or working in Egypt. By 2019, approximately 56.9 million Egyptians were covered by this scheme, up from 51.1 million in 2015.[10] In **Tunisia,** health-care insurance was extended to low-income families, persons with disabilities and unsupported children under the National Programme of Assistance to Needy Families[11] at no or reduced fee.

Similar policies are being adopted in the least developed countries. For example, the **Comoros** enacted a law in 2017 on a compulsory national health insurance system[12] being established with donor support.[13] The National Health Insurance Fund of **Mauritania** extended its coverage in 2019 to benefit all citizens, including those in the informal sector, on a voluntary basis against a fixed fee. But this remains out of reach for the poorest due to high cost.[14]

◆ **Countries of different income levels are strengthening primary health-care delivery systems at the community level,** including in underserved rural areas and refugee camps, to reduce the burden on public hospitals, increase access to comprehensive health services and achieve universal health coverage. Key efforts[15] include infrastructure development, particularly the construction and renovation of primary health-care facilities, and improved referral networks between primary health-care centres and hospitals.

Based on its National Health Strategy, **Saudi Arabia** has built new clinics and upgraded existing facilities, leading to tangible improvements in child and maternal health, infectious diseases and non-communicable diseases, especially in rural and remote communities.[16]

Algeria established a network of 1,714 polyclinics that offer, at a minimum, medical consultations, dental care, care for mothers and children, nursing care, health education and prevention activities, vaccination and care for first-line emergencies.[17] In **Lebanon,** the primary health-care network grew to 212 centres by 2020. Syrian displaced persons were granted access to these services with funding from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The Plan Santé 2025 of **Morocco** focuses on strengthening primary health care, particularly in rural regions, with an emphasis on maternal and child health and non-communicable disease interventions. The policy involves developing health-care infrastructure, including new health centres, and enhancing governance and resource allocation. It has increased access to services, aided by mobile medical units and improved quality of care at primary facilities. The policy also promotes preventive health care through awareness campaigns, resulting in more individuals seeking preventive services. Implementation has exceeded targets,[18] with notable increases in antenatal care, child visits, diabetes diagnosis and treatment, and rural primary health-care visits.

A family health model centred on multi-professional teams within primary care centres has been adopted particularly in the least developed and some conflict-affected countries to enhance overall population health and alleviate the burden of high out-of-pocket expenditures. Such an approach is prioritized, for example, in the National Health Policy (2014–2023) of **Iraq,** the first Roadmap Towards Universal Health Coverage (2019–2023) of **Somalia** and the National Health Sector Strategic Plan (2017–2020) of the **Sudan**.

In **Mauritania,** the Government sought to address the high percentage of out-of-pocket health expenditures borne by households (constituting almost 47 per cent of current health expenditure in 2020) through the national social transfer programme, *Tekavoul*. It provided cash transfers to the poorest households, linked to health-care usage and participation in awareness sessions. Although such measures aim to widen coverage and address financing challenges, potential barriers such as care quality need consideration to enhance effective enrolment and implementation.

Source: WHO Global Health Expenditure database, accessed on 7 April 2023.

Sustainable financing is still needed to improve the infrastructure of primary health-care centres in rural and remote regions and refugee camps, ensure the availability of medical treatments and supplies, and offer incentives to qualified health workers to deploy to them.

In almost all Arab countries except **Palestine,** rural areas have a higher likelihood of experiencing health-care deprivation. Rural residents lack insurance coverage for extended periods and have lower access to certain services, such as tests for chronic illnesses. Most government health-care spending is directed towards hospitals primarily situated in urban regions, disproportionately benefiting urban areas over rural ones.

Source: ESCWA and Economic Research Forum, 2019.

Recent efforts to improve primary health care in the **Sudan** were challenged by the insufficient transfer of funds from the central Government, and the lack of written policies for health directorates to manage such a transformation. Protracted unrest, particularly with the rapid escalation of violence since early 2023, could potentially impede all ongoing efforts and hinder progress that has been made.

Source: As reported by the Federal Ministry of Health in the Sudan, Sudan Common Country Assessment, 2016.



◆ **Most countries have policies on sexual and reproductive health, maternal health, and the health of infants, children and adolescents, but lack integrated services[19] for improved outcomes.** A global World Health Organization (WHO) policy survey shows that with few exceptions, Arab countries have covered between 75 and 99 per cent of 16 related policy areas.[20] Typically covered areas include family planning and contraception; antenatal, childbirth and postnatal care; and child health. Less covered areas comprise cervical cancer prevention and control, early childhood development, adolescent health and violence against women (see chapter on SDG 5 for legislation on combatting violence against women).

In most countries, sexual and reproductive health programmes continue to be managed independently from the national health-care system. Responsibility within the Government for these programmes may be with a ministry other than the health ministry. The private sector, development partners and civil society organizations play key roles in several countries (e.g., **Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine** and the **Sudan**), resulting in fragmented service planning and implementation.[21]

The focus of sexual and reproductive health services integrated in primary health care in most countries is maternal health care, child health and family planning.[22] Other essential services, such as screening for reproductive cancers and sexually transmitted infections, are offered in primary health-care facilities in some countries, such as **Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Tunisia** and the **United Arab Emirates.** Some also include services related to the prevention and management of gender-based violence; in **Lebanon,** these services are delivered in humanitarian aid programmes.[23] HIV/AIDS services are integrated into existing sexual and reproductive health services in primary health-care facilities in a few countries, including **Morocco, Oman, Tunisia** and the **United Arab Emirates. Oman** is the only country that incorporates all elements of sexual and reproductive health into primary health-care services, promoting an optimal use of human, financial and infrastructure resources.[24]

In the least developed countries, the focus continues to be on reducing morbidities and mortalities related to sexual and reproductive health. Examples include the new 2021 strategy of **Djibouti,** which emphasizes capacity-building and incentives to enhance sexual and reproductive health services. the 2019–2023 strategy of **Somalia** aims to reduce in-country disparities and improve access to these services as part of primary care.

Most countries in the region have plans, strategies or programmes on family planning and other reproductive rights but these are not always supported by a legal framework. For instance, although **Egypt, Jordan, Morocco** and **Tunisia** have plans, strategies or programmes on family planning and are dedicated to securing access to a wide range of family planning methods, they do not have regulations that guarantee access to contraception for women. The Criminal Code in the **Syrian Arab Republic** prohibits advertising, promoting, selling or procuring contraception and its use. Nonetheless, relevant national strategies and development plans commit to family planning.

Abortion on demand is only legal in Tunisia. It is permitted in some countries based on certain legal grounds, such as saving a woman's life, the preservation of her mental or physical health, rape or incest and foetal impairment. Post-abortion care in all countries is lacking given that abortion is not legal.[25,26]

Many countries do not have policies that comprehensively cater to the sexual and reproductive health needs of adolescents and youth, notably young women, youth in rural areas and youth with disabilities.[27] Where policies exist, multiple challenges discourage access to care and result in poor outcomes, including sociocultural norms and taboos, gender power dynamics and inequalities, and conflict and fragility. Remarkably, in 2019, **Tunisia** adopted its National Strategy for the Promotion of the Health of Teens and Young People. In 2020, it established a network of youth-friendly clinics to facilitate access to sexual and reproductive health services.

The integration of sexual education in school curricula has been slow. Policies exist in some countries, such as

Lebanon, Palestine, the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Tunisia.** In 2010, **Lebanon** issued a decree to introduce reproductive health education and a gender curriculum in schools yet implementation lags.[28]

Most countries have national policies and guidelines that support high-quality midwife-led care as well as sound midwifery education and training programmes. They limit the range of interventions that midwives are authorized to provide, however, even though global standards allow them to perform most sexual and reproductive health interventions. Given these constraints and an overall shortage and inequitable distribution of care providers, especially in rural and underdeveloped areas, the region meets only an estimated 79 per cent of needs for essential sexual and reproductive health interventions. This shortfall is particularly acute in least developed countries and countries in conflict.[29]

Youth and men are not included in sexual and reproductive health services in primary health-care facilities focused on women and children.

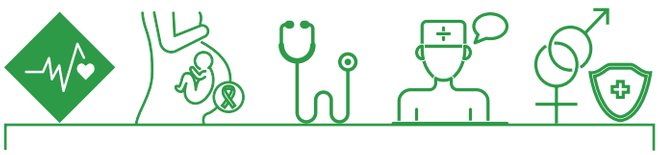
Sociocultural norms often hinder women and couples from making free and responsible decisions about family planning and contraception. Choices often hinge on factors such as education, income level and geographic area.

The accessibility and quality of sexual and reproductive health services vary depending on social class, displacement status and geographic location, and on marital status, with unmarried youth continuing to be left out of services and education.

New sexual and reproductive health problems resulting from vulnerabilities due to conflict and forced displacement are emerging in countries affected by protracted crises (see more on harmful practices in Chapter on SDG 5).

The least developed countries have limited reliable data on sexual and reproductive health. In some instances, as in the **Sudan,** cultural norms, social stigma and traditions contribute to the lack of evidence on critical health indicators and impede efforts to address harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation.

Sources: UNFPA and MENA Health Policy Forum, 2017; UNICEF, 2021.



◆ **To address the increasing burden of non-communicable diseases, many Arab countries have developed multisectoral strategies or action plans for various diseases and common risk factors, including unhealthy diets, sedentary lifestyles, smoking and alcohol consumption.** Countries without an integrated policy are mostly those that are least developed or in conflict, namely **Djibouti, Libya, Somalia,** the **Sudan,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Yemen. Jordan** lacks an integrated policy[30,31] but monitors non-communicable diseases and related risk factors.

A common approach entails integrating the treatment of non-communicable diseases into primary health-care centres, as stipulated in the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases (2013–2017) of **Iraq** and the Non-communicable Diseases Prevention and Control Plan (2016–2020) of **Lebanon. Tunisia** developed and validated a Multisectoral Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases (2018–2025) to mobilize resources for equitable access to early diagnosis and treatment. The **Comoros** recently adopted a National Policy to Combat Non-communicable Diseases (2020–2029), with a particular focus on the prevention and coverage of treatment for diabetes.[32]

In the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, where non-communicable diseases are responsible for almost 75 per cent of all deaths and disabilities,[33] there is a clear focus on the promotion of healthy lifestyles. For example, the National Programme for Healthy Living (2013–2017) of **Kuwait** emphasizes obesity and diabetes. **Saudi Arabia** implemented a comprehensive strategy on healthy eating in 2018 as part of its broader efforts to encourage healthier living. The Saudi Government launched the Obesity Control and Prevention Strategy 2030, which establishes national targets to reduce obesity and diabetes by 3 per cent and 10 per cent, respectively, by 2030.

Access to health-care services and medications for non-communicable diseases continues to be a challenge for refugees. In **Jordan,** the proportion of Syrian refugees suffering from such diseases and unable to access health-care services and medications due to high cost increased from 24 per cent in 2014 to 58 per cent in 2015.

Source: The United Nations Country Team Common Country Assessment of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, 2017.

All countries except Somalia and the State of Palestine are parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which entered into force in 2005; Morocco has

yet to ratify it.[34] Only some countries have implemented the convention, however, and enforcement differs widely,[35] falling short on SDG target 3.a, which requires stepping up implementation. The convention requires parties to take both demand- and supply-side reduction measures. Among the general obligations is the adoption of a comprehensive multisectoral national tobacco control strategy; only the **Comoros** and **Lebanon** have yet to take this forward.[36] Some convention measures that have been introduced include:[37]

- **Imposing taxes on cigarettes:** all countries with data available[38] have taxed cigarettes to reduce their affordability. Only four countries, namely, **Egypt,**[39] **Jordan, Morocco** and the **State of Palestine,** have set the tax rate at equal to or more than 75 per cent of the retail price, which is the rate proven effective in reducing demand for tobacco products. Taxes work especially well in deterring the young, who are more sensitive than adults to price increases.
- **Banning smoking in public places:** six countries, **Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya** and the **State of Palestine,** have completely banned smoking in all public places. Other countries have partial or no bans. Compliance is mostly low to somewhat moderate.
- **Introducing health warnings on cigarette packages:** five countries (**Djibouti, Egypt, Mauritania, Qatar** and **Saudi Arabia**) require large health warnings on cigarette packages with specific characteristics.[40] **Saudi Arabia** requires plain packaging, a policy that scraps promotional, marketing and advertising features on tobacco packs. Other countries have introduced warnings that do not fully conform to appropriate criteria.
- **Banning tobacco advertising, promotion or sponsorship:** several countries (**Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, Qatar, Saudi Arabi,** the **State of Palestine,** the **Sudan,** the **United Arab Emirates** and **Yemen**) have introduced bans on all forms of direct and indirect advertising. Others have bans that are not as comprehensive.
- **Implementing mass media campaigns:** five countries (**Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco,** the **State of Palestine** and **Tunisia**) have recently[41] implemented mass media campaigns to educate the public on the harmful effects of tobacco use and second-hand smoke for a minimum period of three weeks in line with specific standards.[42] Other countries have undertaken media campaigns that do not completely follow these standards.
- **Improving access to tobacco cessation services: Qatar** established a national help line to assist those seeking to quit smoking, along with an informative website and various options for nicotine replacement therapy. The anti-smoking programme of **Saudi Arabia,** offered in smoking clinics, resulted in nearly 30 per cent of participants successfully quitting smoking in 2019.[43]

In terms of non-communicable diseases, more needs to be done to strengthen the policy response, enforcement efforts and multisectoral action. Cooperation with sectors such as education, agriculture, transport, urban planning and finance is critical since prevention goes beyond the health sector. Coordination is required to address the structural and environmental factors that influence these diseases.

Gaps in government funding and a lack of regulatory measures to promote healthy diets are evident, particularly in middle- and low-income countries. There is untapped potential for using digital health for surveillance. Fragmented data systems hinder effective reporting and management.

Greater monitoring and assessment of intervention programmes and policies is required. This would enhance data availability and relevance, and better inform programme and policy design.

Reorienting services to non-communicable diseases is needed and can be managed by enhancing the skills, numbers and composition of primary health-care personnel, and integrating prevention and management into well-established primary health-care services.

The region is way behind on interventions that address the commercial determinants of health and make a difference in terms of nutrition and non-communicable diseases. The media's role in marketing unhealthy food to youth necessitates particular policy action.

Source: Abdul Rahim and others, 2014.

◆ **Several countries have developed a national digital health/e-health strategy or policy to institutionalize the use of information and communications technology for health and well-being.** They include **Bahrain, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia** and the **Sudan.**[44] **Oman** has embedded its digital health strategy in its national health strategy. Progress in implementation varies among these countries.[45]

A few other countries, namely, **Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia** and the **State of Palestine,** are developing digital health strategies.[46] **Lebanon** has elaborated a Vision for Digital Health Transformation that paves the way to a comprehensive digital health strategy and action plan, accompanied by results and monitoring and evaluation frameworks. The vision is guided by the National Health Strategy launched in early 2023. One strategic direction is the strengthening of the national health information system to enhance the resilience and adaptability of health care,[47] and achieve more efficient, effective and targeted delivery.

Many countries progressed in using digital health solutions as part of the COVID-19 response. Nevertheless, such use was relatively limited given the potential of digital health to dramatically improve health systems and health-care delivery. Examples include the following:[48]

- **Telemedicine,** a health-care service delivery tool, was used mostly by the private sector in various countries, including **Egypt** and **Saudi Arabia,** among others, for online consultations, patient referrals, diagnostics, and inpatient care and management.
- **Mobile applications,** such as the Electronic Mother and Child Health application (e-MCH) and the application for non-communicable diseases (e-NCD), were used in **Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine** and the **Syrian Arab Republic** for the diagnosis and management of patients.
- **Electronic contact tracing** was used in **Tunisia.**
- **Electronic inventories and registries** were deployed in the **Sudan** to support the home delivery of medicines, mainly to patients with non-communicable diseases.

In the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, the digitization of health-care systems predates the COVID-19 pandemic and was already bringing substantial benefits, including improved health-care quality and physician performance, more accurate patient health monitoring, and better chronic disease management, diagnostics and preventive care. These technologies were instrumental in crisis management during the pandemic, enabling data-driven decisions and efficient resource allocation. Examples of selected measures to promote digital health include:

- The National E-health and Data Management Strategy (2016–2020) in **Qatar,** which sets standards and policies to improve the national e-health ecosystem, ensure the availability of high-quality digital health information and enhance patients' safety and engagement in managing their health.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- The Health Sector Transformation Programme[49] in **Saudi Arabia,** under its Vision 2030, which plans to restructure and digitize the health sector and enhance the quality of care by expanding e-health services. A suite of applications, including Sehhaty, Seha, Mawid, Wasfaty and Tabaud, provides effective virtual programmes such as health consultations, specialized clinics and virtual home care services.
- Investment in technology and digital health infrastructure by the **United Arab Emirates.** Malaffi, a health information exchange platform initiated by the Department of Health in Abu Dhabi, now connects the entire health-care sector, linking 45,000 authorized users with hospitals and 2,000 public and private health-care facilities.

Data security concerns and risks to people and health systems emanating from conflict and political unrest hamper the use of digital technologies.

The weakness or fragmentation of digital governance in most countries; the lack of national digital architecture plans, policies and standards to attain interoperability; and inadequate strategic planning limit the impact of investments in digital health.

Weak public-private partnerships in implementing digital health projects in several countries leave the private sector as the main provider but without sufficient supervision and coordination, leading to further fragmentation.

Inadequate national capacities for managing digital health limit the ability to implement solutions suitable for national contexts. Further, language, socioeconomic factors, disability status and digital literacy can all be barriers and must be considered in developing applications.

Source: WHO, 2022a.

◆ **Most countries continue to expand the capabilities of their health data collection and management systems.** These efforts are critical in fighting communicable and non-communicable diseases, and guiding evidence-based health programme planning and policymaking. The compilation of quality health data remains a challenge for several middle-income and least developed countries due to government coordination challenges, the fragmentation of health information systems, and low human and technical capacities. The following are some examples of efforts to enhance health data collection and management:

- **Tunisia** continues to increase the coverage of its information system on causes of death and to enhance the quality of registered data. Through

collaboration with different partners and active data collection efforts, the rate of coverage increased from 40 per cent in 2017 to 61 per cent in 2020. Quality remains at a medium level, however; further efforts are needed to achieve intended results.[50]

- The Ministry of Health of **Libya,** in collaboration with WHO, plans to improve its health information management by expanding district health information software to reach all municipalities.[51] Nonetheless, further comprehensive reporting is needed, particularly in light of the absence of a national health data repository and standardized guidelines for data management and assessment. Financial constraints pose a significant challenge.
- A fragmented health information system was reported in **Somalia** until 2017, when district health information software was introduced for the collection, reporting and analysis of health data. A Health Information System Strategic Plan for 2018–2022 addressed monitoring gaps. By 2021, reports indicated that the system was more updated and efficient in integrating disease surveillance, response mechanisms and public health alerts.

◆ **Over the past decade, almost all countries[52] have developed a standalone policy or plan and/or legislation on mental health or have integrated mental health into policies for general health,[53]** recognizing the importance of mental health as a right.

Mental health services are mostly integrated into primary health care. This can help to destigmatize mental illness but may require capacity-building and training to change stigmatizing attitudes among health professionals. Financing schemes for mental health are mainly limited to contributions and formal employment. They are mostly covered, like other health services, through a hybrid model of public, private and out-of-pocket payments.[54] A trend towards the de-institutionalization of mental health care has picked up in some countries. **Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates** have moved mental health services into community settings.[55]

Although some least developed countries and countries in conflict have developed a mental health policy or plan and/or legislation, the extent to which these have been operationalized is debatable, given insufficient human and financial resource allocations. Civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are the main actors in the field. Payment for mental health services in most countries is almost entirely out-of-pocket.[56]

Examples of policies, plans and legislation on mental health include the following:

- The National Plan for the Promotion of Mental Health (2017–2020) in **Algeria,** which focuses on strengthening the regulatory framework for mental health, training health personnel, developing mental health research and establishing a mental health information and communications system.[57]
- The Mental Health and Substance Use Prevention, Promotion and Treatment Strategy (2015–2020) in **Lebanon,** which prioritizes strengthening mental health governance and the provision of mental health services in community based-settings for all, especially vulnerable groups. It underscores coordinated research on mental health and the implementation of activities to promote mental health and prevent substance abuse disorders.[58]
- The provision of mental health support under primary health care in **Bahrain** to make mental health services more accessible and reduce stigma associated with seeking help for mental health issues.
- The issuing of the first mental health law in 2019 (Law No.14) in **Kuwait** to improve treatment and rehabilitation and to protect individuals suffering from mental health issues.
- The development of a national policy on mental health in the **United Arab Emirates** in 2019 to foster public and private efforts to promote comprehensive care, including preventive, curative and rehabilitative services. A mental health-care draft law was passed in 2021 to protect the rights of people who seek mental health care and to facilitate the rehabilitation of psychiatric patients into society.

The region has poor enforcement of mental health policies and no effective monitoring in health-care settings.

Resources are generally inadequate, both in terms of the number of mental health professionals and the amount of funding. Services are limited.

There is still stigma around mental health in many countries, including among health-care professionals. This can discourage people from seeking help and prevent the provision of effective mental health services.

Differences in perceptions of mental health have gender dimensions, with women generally having more positive and open attitudes.

In countries affected by conflict and crisis, mental health issues are more prevalent among female youth, partly due to sociocultural norms that permit boys to spend more time outside homes than girls.

Sources: Zeinoun, 2023; UNICEF, 2021.

The health workforce and governance

Despite the health workforce being a key health system resource, the region faces constraints related to workforce production and availability of skills. While Gulf Cooperation Council countries and least developed countries (**Djibouti, Somalia,** the **Sudan** and **Yemen**) have limited production capacities, middle-income countries (**Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco** and **Tunisia**) and countries in conflict (**Iraq, Libya,** the **State of Palestine** and the **Syrian Arab Republic**) have imbalances in the mix of skills. The increase in the number of institutions for health education has not kept pace with population growth, keeping the density of health professionals low, especially in **Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Somalia,** the **Sudan** and **Yemen.**

In the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, a continual increase in the density of health professionals has been largely due to the recruitment of expatriate health workers. These countries face high turnover as a result, however. Middle-income, least developed and conflict-affected countries struggle with the unmanaged migration of health workers and their mobility from the public to the private sector due to limited employment options, among other issues. The geographic distribution of health workers is inequitable within countries, with low retention in rural and remote areas. Concerns with performance and motivation also exist.

Health workforce governance in the region is marked by common challenges, including:

- Inadequate workforce development policies and strategies: very few countries (**Jordan, Somalia,** the **Sudan** and **Yemen**) have developed health workforce strategic plans.
- Inadequate regulatory frameworks.
- Limited health workforce governance capacities: responsible departments in health ministries are generally weak, and lack leadership and management capacities and adequate cross-sectoral cooperation.
- Lack of effective health workforce management systems: strong systems, including staffing norms; strategies for recruitment, deployment and retention; regulations on the working environment and performance management; and data for planning and training are prime elements to deliver quality health services. They require improvement in most countries.
- A dearth of accurate and up-to-date data and information on the health workforce, labour market dynamics and health workforce financing.
- A lack of strategic planning to address health workforce challenges.

Sources: WHO, 2018, 2020a, 2023b.

C. Policy trends by subregion

1. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have relatively well-developed health systems providing quality health services to their citizens. All countries score high on the Universal Health Coverage (UHC) Service Coverage Index, ranging from 70 in **Oman** to 82 in the **United Arab Emirates** in 2021. Out-of-pocket expenditure is low, even below the global average. Health insurance for expatriates is extended mainly through an employer-funded package, creating a dual-tier system and a shift from collective risk-sharing to a private insurance model.

◆ **Several Gulf Cooperation Council countries are initiating reforms to encourage private sector and foreign participation in health care.** This transition[59] marks a strategic shift from Governments being both investors and operators of health-care facilities to primarily focusing on strategic governance, planning and oversight, acting as policymakers and regulators. In tandem, private sector expertise and resources are leveraged to meet growing health-care needs, including by significantly contributing to infrastructure development, efficiency, innovation and service quality as well as the production and distribution of medicines

and health technologies. By emphasizing patient experiences, the private sector could also help position some Gulf Cooperation Council cities as global medical hubs. Examples of reforms to promote private sector and foreign participation include the following:

- **Saudi Arabia** introduced amendments to private health-care regulations. Resolution No. 683151 of 1436 H (2015 G) opened the door for foreign parties to own hospitals, pharmacies and medical treatment centres in the kingdom, provided that they already operate health-care facilities outside Saudi Arabia.
- In the **United Arab Emirates,** Law No. 22 of 2015 was introduced to facilitate the regulation of partnerships between the public health system and the private sector in Dubai. A similar law in 2019 regulates public-private partnerships in Abu Dhabi. The operationalization of both laws has faced delays and a lack of clear implementation procedures.

Greater reliance on the private sector in health-care delivery, particularly in a dual-tier system, can potentially exacerbate disparities due to higher costs. This necessitates government oversight and comprehensive regulation to ensure quality, access and affordability for all. Governments need to ensure that increased private funding does not automatically result in the deterioration of public sector services for marginalized populations.

Source: Kronfol, 2012.

2. Arab middle-income countries

Arab middle-income countries face increasing demand for health services from growing populations and challenges in financing the sector. Health systems confront the re-emergence of infectious diseases in some cases as well as an increasing burden from non-communicable diseases.

Middle-income countries have a relatively high share of out-of-pocket health expenditure. All are above 30 per cent of current health expenses and, in some cases, are as high as 55 per cent, such as in **Egypt.**[60] Despite reforms, significant inequalities in accessing affordable treatments and paying for health-care services and medications remain. Particularly vulnerable populations include poor households, older persons, people with chronic diseases, people with disabilities and refugees.

◆ **While middle-income countries have largely managed to end epidemics of communicable diseases, they must maintain and develop national programmes to closely monitor, prevent and treat these diseases,** some of which have recurred among refugee populations. For example:

- Facing one of the highest hepatitis C infection rates in the world, **Egypt** in 2014 launched a nationwide initiative (100 Million Healthy Lives) through which it tested some 60 million high-risk people and treated some 4 million. This helped to bring down the infection rate considerably. Egypt plans to sustain its efforts until the epidemic is eradicated.[61]
- **Jordan** in 2020 established the National Epidemiology and Infectious Diseases Centre to enhance the country's readiness to face emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases. One priority for the Centre from 2023 to 2025 is to expand the availability and integration of high-quality monitoring data to guide national policymaking.[62]
- **Morocco** continues to increase resources for its National Tuberculosis Control Programme, mobilizing national and international partners around the eradication of the disease. Tuberculosis continues to take lives in Morocco due to social, economic and environmental determinants of health that require combined efforts under a multisectoral framework.[63]

◆ **Middle-income countries are investing heavily to expand health system infrastructure and workforces.** For example:

- **Morocco** is upgrading its network of public hospitals, allocating 1 billion dirhams annually since 2016. To address its medical staffing deficit, it has increased the budget allocated to the Ministry of Health to hire more medical and paramedical personnel, including for university hospital centres.[64] Complementary efforts are still needed to enhance the performance and distribution of existing personnel.



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Collaboration with international and civil society partners to extend health care to refugees

Partnerships among various stakeholders have been instrumental in extending and maintaining health-care services for vulnerable populations in the middle-income countries. International donors provide crucial support by strengthening health-care infrastructure, building capacities, increasing preparedness for future health crises and bridging funding gaps. In **Jordan** and **Lebanon,** where prolonged refugee crises have strained health-care systems, collaboration with the United Nations system and NGOs has been pivotal. The health response strategy in Lebanon, A New Approach: 2016 & Beyond, focuses on coordinating efforts among the United Nations, international NGOs and civil society to prioritize essential health-care services for both Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities. Similarly, Jordan has engaged in partnerships with the United Nations and actively involved civil society organizations in health-care planning to ensure continued free and subsidized access to health care for Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

The presence of multiple actors in health care can lead to fragmentation and inefficiencies in service delivery, especially with short-term projects. The lack of sustainable funding may also hinder the continuity of services, while the influence of donors may divert resources from local needs. There is consequently a need for careful coordination, sustainability planning and efforts to ensure that long-term domestic investment in health care is not neglected.

Source: Atrache, 2021.

3. Arab least developed countries and countries in conflict

Arab least developed countries have low levels of government health spending. Households remain the main source of health financing, which results in health-related expenses pushing people into poverty. In the **Sudan,** households contribute to nearly 57 per cent of health financing, the highest rate of out-of-pocket expenditure among Arab countries with data available.[65] Persistent health challenges include high under-5 child mortality in the least developed countries; at 68.4 deaths per 1,000 live births, the rate is nearly twice the regional average and more than double the 2030 SDG target 3.2 of under 25 deaths per 1,000 live births. Almost 30 per cent of women in the least developed countries still give birth with unskilled health personnel.

Protracted conflicts have devastated already fragile health-care systems in all conflict-affected countries. They have experienced deteriorating bed capacity and constraints on delivering critical inpatient care, responding to the re-emergence of communicable diseases and providing needed care to patients with non-communicable diseases, especially given large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons. The destruction of health facilities (see box), limitations on emergency transport and restricted access to operational health-care centres have cut supply for primary health care. Extended conflicts have hindered sufficient medical supplies and led to a rapid shortage of qualified health-care personnel.

◆ **Rehabilitation of health infrastructure and the improved availability of essential medications are top health sector priorities for the least developed countries and countries in conflict.** For example:

- The National Development Programme for Post-War Syria (Syria Strategic Plan 2030) in the **Syrian Arab Republic** focuses on rebuilding medical facilities using digital health maps that incorporate morbidity rates and population density. The plan also aims to relocate pharmaceutical manufacturing facilities to safe areas to enhance national coverage.
- The Well and Healthy **Libya:** National Health Policy 2030 seeks to address systemic issues causing shortages and limited access to medicines. The availability of medicines in hospitals stands at 41 per cent, and at only 10 per cent in primary health-care centres and 13 per cent in warehouses.[66] Libya faces recurrent stockouts of vaccines, reproductive health supplies and family planning medications, and medicines to treat mental illnesses. The implementation of related health reforms remains heavily dependent on unified governance and funding allocations.

◆ **International partners are increasingly major players in supporting the least developed countries in strengthening their national health systems and enhancing access to health care, including for vulnerable populations.** For example:

- The **Comoros** received $30 million from the World Bank in 2019 to strengthen its national health system and improve primary health-care quality.[67]
- The World Bank granted $19.5 million in 2022 to **Djibouti** for enhancing reproductive, maternal and child health for both refugees and local communities.[68]

The targeting of health-care systems in conflicts

Deliberate attacks on health-care systems and medical personnel have characterized wars in Arab countries in conflict. This goes against international humanitarian law, which calls for protecting care workers and facilities in all circumstances.

The latest war on the Gaza Strip is no exception. The first three months saw close to 600 attacks on health-care facilities in **Palestine** (304 attacks in the Gaza Strip and 286 in the West Bank). More than 600 deaths and 700 injuries were reported on premises. Around 118 health institutions (94 in the Gaza Strip and 24 in the West Bank) and 291 ambulances (79 in the Gaza Strip and 212 in the West Bank) have been hit. This is in addition to arbitrary arrests and detainments of health workers. As noted by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to health, "the practice of medicine is under attack. […] The healthcare infrastructure in the Gaza Strip has been completely obliterated".

Moreover, the severe blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip, including, among other aspects, the cutting off of water and limited deliveries of food, water and medical supplies, has increased the risk of outbreaks of infectious diseases. In one week, cases of diarrhoea among children under age 5 increased from 48,000 to 71,000, amounting to around 3,200 new cases per day. Prior to the war, diarrhoea cases in children under 5 were on average 2,000 per month.

Attacks on the health-care system have long-term cumulative impacts at all levels. They reduce access to and use of health services by communities; increase fragmentation and funding instability; cause losses of infrastructure, equipment, medical supplies and personnel; and have negative repercussions on health workers personally and professionally. Underlining the importance of adhering to international humanitarian law in conflict situations is critical. So is the need to support data collection on the impacts of attacks on health-care systems in order to properly inform responses and enhance accountability.

Sources: Hyzam, 2022; UN News, 2024; OHCHR, 2023; University of California Berkley, 2023.

D. Policies to leave no one behind

Inequitable access to health services and staggering variation in the quality of health care available to different groups are clear markers of inequality in the region, with reverberating implications over the life cycles of individuals and communities.

The following is a sample of policies in some Arab countries to reduce disparities in health care and improve health outcomes for all:.

Table 3.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind



The poor and uninsured (including the unemployed, self-employed individuals and those in the informal sector) face barriers in accessing health services, especially if they are not recipients of insurance or subsidized packages. This results in them shouldering the financial burden of out-of-pocket expenses to access medical care.	The Health Strategy (2018–2022) of **Jordan** broadened the scope of subsidized civil health insurance to include low-income households (with an income between JD 300 and JD 500), a policy change that aims to enhance health-care accessibility and reduce financial barriers, ultimately striving for greater health equity. In 2017, the Parliament of **Morocco** voted to expand national health coverage to include self-employed individuals and independent workers by 2025. This is expected to benefit approximately 11 million individuals, constituting about 30 per cent of the population.

Table 3.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

	**Non-national residents and migrant workers** often have limited access to fair and affordable health-care services due to their employment status, lack of comprehensive health insurance and exclusion from formal health-care systems. This leads to difficulties in affording essential medications and high health-care expenses that impose substantial financial burdens and increase vulnerability.	To extend health-care coverage to additional categories of workers in the **United Arab Emirates,** the Department of Health in Abu Dhabi introduced flexible health insurance packages in 2013. These were specifically designed for entrepreneurs and investors, aiming to provide them with health coverage at reduced and competitive costs, with options to upgrade if needed.
	**Older persons,** especially those living with one or more chronic illnesses, require long-term quality care. This increases the need for geriatric and gerontological education and training for health professionals and para-professionals. Shortages in most Arab countries are evident with a ratio of not more than 1 geriatrician for every 100,000 older persons. The lack of universal health protection hinders the provision of adequate medical care to older persons, negatively affecting their health and well-being.	**Egypt** is working to advance training and research on geriatrics. The faculty of medicine in Ain Sham University offers a degree programme in geriatric medicine, involving theoretical training, a residency programme and a clinical training course.[a] **Algeria** and **Jordan** have taken steps to ensure health coverage for older persons. Law No. 10 of 2010 on the protection of older persons in Algeria grants free access to public health care to all persons aged 60 and above. In 2017, Jordan expanded subsidized health insurance coverage under its civil health insurance law to all persons aged 60 and above.[b]
	**Women and girls** of childbearing age are subject to disproportionate health risks, including maternal mortality, unmet family planning needs and limited access to affordable contraceptives. Unmarried women, particularly in disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions, are at a higher risk of illegal abortions. Furthermore, services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, including unintended pregnancies, remain limited.	In **Egypt,** the Family Development Strategy (2015–2030) includes a dedicated pillar on improving access to family planning and reproductive health. The National Project for the Development of the Egyptian Family (2021–2023) aims to provide free and safe family planning and reproductive health services to women aged 18 to 45, including through the establishment of a family insurance fund to incentivize commitment to family planning. The project also seeks to strengthen penalties for child marriages, child labour and unregistered births. Additionally, the Supporting Egyptian Women's Health initiative, under "100 Million Healthy Lives", intends to reach 28 million Egyptian women across the country, offering general reproductive health check-ups, early breast cancer detection and screenings for non-communicable diseases.
	**Persons with disabilities** often encounter disparities in accessing equal health care due to physical barriers, discrimination, inaccessible information, high costs and insufficient policy support.	In the **United Arab Emirates,** the National Policy for Empowering Persons with Disabilities (2017) includes measures to improve health-care access and services, comprising fitness and wellness and physical and socioemotional well-being. The policy adopts an inclusive approach to integrating people with intellectual disabilities to ensure their full access to health-care services.
	**Refugees and internally displaced persons** face multiple barriers to health care, including a lack of awareness of available services and the cost of health consultations, treatment and medications. Formalization and documentation issues also hinder the health-care access of **asylum seekers and irregular migrants,** especially in fragile and conflict contexts.	**Egypt** grants refugees and asylum-seekers access to all health services provided in public facilities for free or at low cost, similar to Egyptian citizens.[c]

Table 3.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

People with HIV and AIDS are still at risk of stigma and discrimination, a lack of domestic investment in related health services and an absence of adequate information systems.	**Jordan** introduced its National Policy on HIV and AIDS and the World of Work in 2013. This policy prioritizes ensuring that employees living with HIV and AIDS access health care while maintaining the confidentiality and privacy of their HIV status and medical details. This creates an environment where employees can access health care without concerns of stigma or bias. The policy guarantees delivering appropriate medical treatment, care and support to HIV-positive workers, including access to vital services such as antiretroviral therapy.
People living in remote areas have limited access to reliable and quality health care, which increases their vulnerability to adverse health consequences.	In **Algeria,** an executive decree initiated an "institutional twinning" programme in 2016, connecting hospitals in the developed northern regions with those in the underdeveloped and remote southern areas of the country. The programme facilitates the sharing of resources, medical expertise and personnel to reduce health-care disparities, enhance health-care access for residents in remote areas and provide health-care services to underserved southern regions.
Children and adolescents in the region are often at risk of being left behind when it comes to health equity and outcomes due to various factors, including economic disparities, a lack of access to quality health care and limited educational opportunities, especially related to their sexual and reproductive health. All these factors increase their vulnerability.	In **Palestine,** the 2016 School Health Policy aims to provide comprehensive health services to school-age children and adolescents. This includes regular health check-ups, vaccinations and health education programmes. The policy incorporates mental health support and counselling services within schools to address students' psychological well-being, and promotes parental involvement in students' health, fostering collaboration between schools and families.

[a] ESCWA, 2018.
[b] ESCWA, 2022a.
[c] See UNHCR, Health – HELP Egypt.


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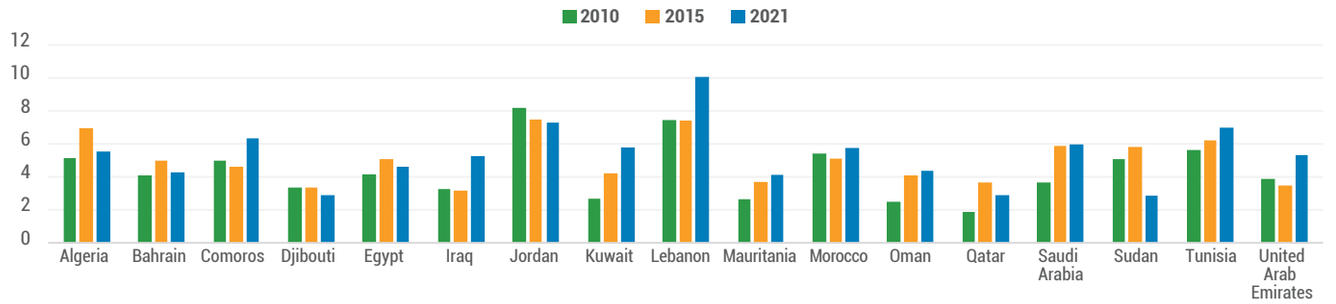
E. The financing landscape

Current health expenditure as a share of GDP in most countries of the Arab region is lower than the global average of 7.3 per cent. Large variations exist among countries, with **Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia** and the **Comoros** spending 10.1, 7.3, 7 and 6.3 per cent, respectively, in 2021 (figure 3.1). These shares are higher than in other Arab countries, including the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, where spending stood at 6 per cent in **Saudi Arabia,** 5.8 per cent in **Kuwait,** 4.4 per cent in **Oman,** 4.3 per cent in **Bahrain** and 2.9 per cent in **Qatar.** Although there is no recommended level for spending on health, increased and effectively targeted health expenditure by Governments is linked to better health outcomes, especially in developing countries. Low allocations typically indicate that health is not a priority,[69] fiscal space is limited or the population is fairly young.[70]

Increasing public spending on health is essential for progressing towards universal health coverage. This entails expanding domestic government spending on health as a share of total health expenditure and as a share of general government expenditure. Funding through pre-payment and pooling schemes should replace direct out-of-pocket spending borne by households and non-pooled health plans. This shift is referred to as the health financing transition. The further countries progress through this transition, the greater the protective capacity of the health system and the lesser the burden of health spending on the vulnerable.[71]

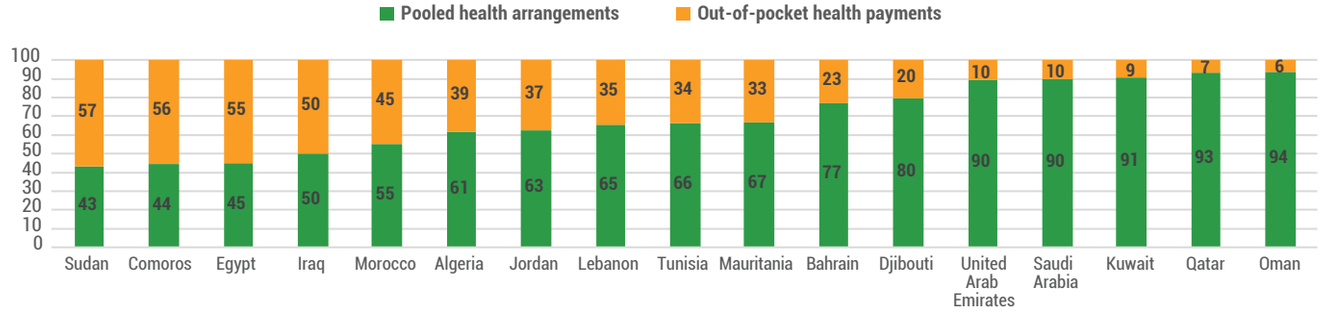
Looking at **health spending by type of finance** for 2021 (figure 3.2), it is clear that the financing mix varies among countries. The proportion of out-of-pocket spending generally tends to increase as income level decreases. Spending on health in high-income countries mostly involves pooled health arrangements, comprising government schemes, compulsory contributory health-care schemes and voluntary health-care schemes.

Figure 3.1
Current health expenditure (Percentage of GDP)



Source: WHO Global Health Observatory, Health Financing Indicators, accessed on 15 December 2023.

Figure 3.2
Health expenditures by financing scheme, 2021 (Percentage)



Source: WHO Global Health Expenditure Database, Data Explorer, Health Expenditure Data – Financing Schemes, accessed on 16 December 2023.

Most countries seem to be advancing through the **health financing transition,** with an increase in the pooled share of health spending for greater financial risk protection, albeit at different paces (table 3.2).[72]



Table 3.2
The health financing transition in selected Arab countries

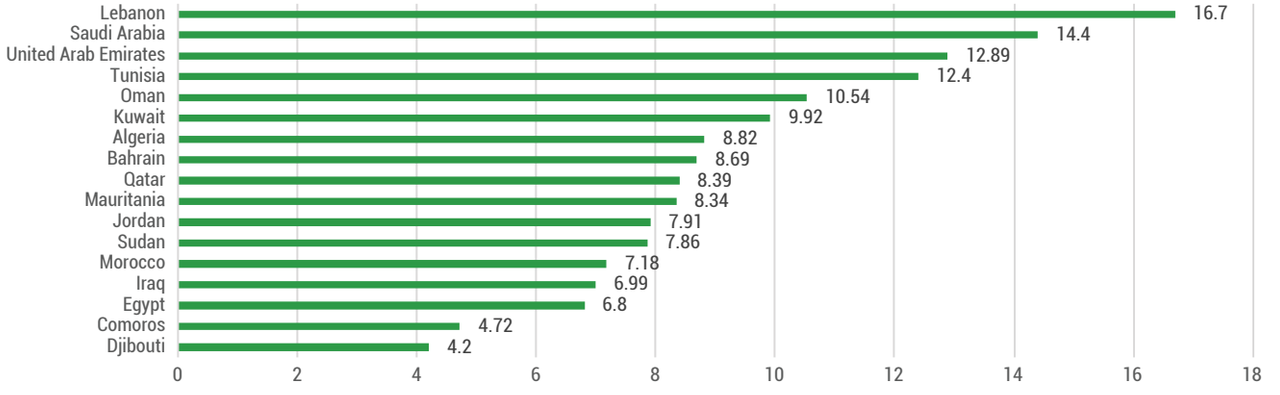
Countries	Health financing transition
Djibouti, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Oman, Qatar and the **United Arab Emirates**	Fast progress: there is an average annual increase in pooled health expenditures per capita and a decrease in out-of-pocket payments per capita, resulting in a rapid increase in the pooled share of health spending.
Iraq, Morocco and **Saudi Arabia**	Slower progress: the rate of the annual increase in pooled health expenditures per capita is faster than that of out-of-pocket payments per capita, resulting in an increase in the pooled share of health spending, albeit at a slower pace than in the first category.
Algeria, Bahrain and the **Sudan**	No progress: the rate of the annual increase in out-of-pocket payments per capita is faster than that of pooled health expenditures per capita, resulting in a decrease in the pooled share of health expenditure.
Comoros	No progress: the rate of the annual decline in out-of-pocket payments per capita is faster than that of pooled health expenditures per capita.

Source: ESCWA, 2022b.

The **share allocated to domestic government health expenditure from general government expenditure** indicates the priority given to health compared to other public spending. It is expected that this share would increase with higher GDP per capita. This is not the case for several countries, however (figure 3.3). The shares of higher-income Gulf Cooperation Council countries seem to compare with those of middle-income countries.

This could be due to the large contribution of the hydrocarbon sector to the GDP per capita level in Gulf Cooperation Council countries. **Egypt** and **Iraq** appear to have a somewhat lower share than other middle-income countries with similar GDP per capita levels, while **Lebanon** and **Tunisia** have a higher share. By and large, Arab countries do not tend to give high priority to health expenditure compared to other areas of public spending.[73]

Figure 3.3
Domestic government health expenditure, 2021 (Percentage of general government expenditure)



Sources: WHO Global Health Observatory, Health Financing Indicators, accessed on 15 December 2023.

Private health insurance is growing in some countries across different economic groupings (table 3.3). Voluntary health insurance spending as a share of current health expenditure is the largest in **Lebanon,** reaching 26 per cent in 2021.

Support from donors and international agencies to the health sector varies (table 3.4). In 2021, **Djibouti,** the **Comoros** and **Mauritania** had the highest shares of support relative to their health expenditure. This has mostly entailed funding for development projects and budget support.[74]

Funding for emergency humanitarian responses has increased since 2011 for countries affected by conflict but is still inadequate to meet basic social and health needs.[75]

The **funding of health services for refugees in countries hosting large refugee populations** remains challenging. Initiatives such as the Global Concessional Financing Facility were launched to narrow the gap in development and humanitarian funding to refugees and host communities in **Jordan** and **Lebanon.**[76] The facility has supported efforts to strengthen health, education and basic service delivery in Jordan, and to improve housing, water and sanitation services in Lebanon since 2016. Jordan and Lebanon received $459.45 million and $95.13 million, respectively, in facility concessional financing from 2016 to 2022, which catalysed concessional loans of $2.73 billion to Jordan and $432.45 million to Lebanon.[77]





Table 3.3
Voluntary health insurance schemes as a percentage of current health expenditure for selected Arab countries

Country	2010	2015	2021
Algeria	1	1	1
Bahrain	8	9	11
Comoros	1	3	3
Djibouti	0	1	1
Egypt	1	8	3
Iraq	0	N/A	0
Jordan	6	16	14
Kuwait	1	1	1
Lebanon	15	19	26
Mauritania	3	1	1
Morocco	1	1	1
Oman	4	3	5
Qatar	7	6	7
Sudan	1	1	3
Tunisia	1	5	5
United Arab Emirates	7	7	3
Yemen	1	1	N/A

Source: WHO Global Health Expenditure Database, Data Explorer, Health Expenditure Data – Financing Schemes, accessed on 17 December 2023.
Note: N/A = not available.

Table 3.4
External health expenditure as a percentage of current health expenditure for selected Arab countries

Country	2021	Country	2021
Algeria	0.6	Jordan	8.3
Comoros	25.6	Lebanon	10.4
Mauritania	23.8	Morocco	3.6
Djibouti	44.9	Sudan	10.4
Egypt	0.6	Tunisia	2.0
Iraq	0.8		

Source: WHO Global Health Observatory, Health Financing Indicators, accessed on 17 December 2023.
Note: External sources include direct foreign transfers managed by development agencies residing in a country and foreign transfers to governmental agencies.

F. Regional dimensions

Regional collaboration exists in a few SDG 3 areas but could be further strengthened to build resilience during health emergencies.

Examples of existing regional collaboration include the following:

- **In maternal, child and adolescent health, the League of Arab States and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) developed the Multisectoral Arab Strategy for Maternal, Child and Adolescent Health 2019–2030.**[78] It serves as a reference framework for countries to develop policies and take actions to achieve the highest attainable standard of equitable physical and mental health and welfare for every mother, child and adolescent. One pillar of the strategy is to enhance capacity, resilience and preparedness support for mothers, children and adolescents in armed conflicts, wars and natural disasters.
- **A regional strategy to strengthen midwifery and nursing practices**[79] **was developed by the League of Arab States and UNFPA, and endorsed by the Arab Council of Health Ministers in 2022.** The strategy strives to empower midwifes and nurses to deliver a wider set of high-quality sexual and reproductive health services based on community needs, and in line with the principle of leaving no one behind.
- **To prioritize and advance the region's health finance agenda, the League of Arab States, UNFPA and WHO have developed the Regional Health-Friendly Budgeting Strategy**.[80] Launched in 2023, this serves as a comprehensive framework for Arab countries to enhance the financing of health-care needs, ensuring that health services are adequately funded and accessible to all, and ultimately contributing to improved health outcomes and the well-being of people across the region.



Examples of areas that could benefit from strengthened regional collaboration include:

- **A regional emergency preparedness and response programme:** such a programme necessitates a multifaceted approach, starting with strengthening the capacity of health-care systems with investments prioritizing the training of health-care workers, securing essential medical supplies and ensuring the availability of health-care facilities. The establishment of robust coordination mechanisms at both the national and regional levels is important to facilitate effective communication and collaboration among health-care providers, government agencies and international partners. Adequate resource allocation for emergency preparedness and response is also necessary, encompassing funding for research, surveillance and the formation of emergency response teams.

  Building on the COVID-19 pandemic experience, several key strategies could be incorporated in the regional emergency preparedness and response programme. These include ensuring fair and equitable access to vaccines through targeted distribution and vaccination campaigns, and increasing investments in digital health information systems to improve data collection, analysis and sharing, which facilitates disease monitoring and rapid responses. Accelerating regional progress towards digitized health systems could also improve health and medical supply chain management.
- **Cross-regional coordination to address the health and well-being of refugees, migrants and internally displaced people:** comprehensive, cross-regional collaboration is needed. It should extend beyond health-care service delivery to tackle the social determinants of health,[81] and consider individuals traversing migration routes, residing in humanitarian settings and living in host communities. By combining immediate and long-term action plans with technical and financial support, the region can better respond to the evolving needs of displaced populations and enhance overall public health and well-being.

Endnotes

1. Saleh and Fouad, 2022.
2. The four major non-communicable diseases are cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory disease.
3. See the World Bank data, Out-of-pocket expenditure as percentage of current health expenditure, accessed on 24 January 2024.
4. Several countries in the region have experienced prolonged conflict and political instability since 2011. These have severely disrupted health-care systems and disease surveillance and limited the ability to respond to public health emergencies.
5. WHO, 2023c.
6. Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya (the draft constitution adopted by the Constitution Drafting Assembly of Libya in July 2017), Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.
7. Saudi Council of Health Insurance, Laws and Regulations.
8. Migrants mostly depend on individual or employer-sponsored private health insurance schemes.
9. Military personnel are insured by different schemes.
10. See Egypt, third Voluntary National Review 2021.
11. National Programme of Assistance to Needy Families.
12. See Les Comores, Tableau de la situation de l'égalité femme/homme.
13. See L'assurance maladie généralisée bientôt opérationnelle.
14. See Mauritania, Voluntary National Review 2019.
15. Katoue and others, 2022.
16. See Saudi Arabia, Voluntary National Review 2023.
17. See Algeria, Voluntary National Review 2019.
18. World Bank, 2020.
19. Integrated sexual and reproductive health packages should include family planning services, maternal and child health care, medical assistance to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, post-abortion care, HIV prevention and management, other sexually transmitted infections, reproductive cancers and infertility.
20. WHO, 2020c. Exceptions include Somalia (less than 50 per cent) and Saudi Arabia and Yemen (less than 75 per cent). The 16 policy areas cover: family planning/contraception; sexually transmitted infections; cervical cancer prevention and control; antenatal care; childbirth; postnatal care; pre-term newborns; child health and development (includes seven subcategories); adolescent health and violence against women.
21. UNFPA and MENA Health Policy Forum, 2019.
22. Ibid.
23. Kabakian-Khasholian and others, 2020.
24. UNFPA and MENA Health Policy Forum, 2019.
25. Ibid.
26. UNFPA and MENA Health Policy Forum, 2018.
27. UNFPA and the American University of Beirut, Faculty of Health Sciences, Center for Public Health Practice, 2022.
28. Ibid.
29. According to UNFPA (2022), the region has 78,200 midwives; 130,000 more full-time midwives will be needed by 2030.
30. WHO, 2023a.
31. See the WHO Noncommunicable Diseases Data Portal, accessed on 12 December 2023.
32. See the Comoros, Voluntary National Review 2023.
33. World Bank, 2023.
34. See the United Nations Treaty Collection.
35. WHO, 2023e.
36. See Implementation Database for the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, Treaty provisions, General and other obligations, Comprehensive multisectoral national tobacco control strategy – C111, accessed on 23 October 2023.
37. WHO, 2023e.
38. No information has been reported for Djibouti, Somalia or the Syrian Arab Republic.
39. The tax rate in Egypt is 74.9 per cent of the retail price.
40. Relevant characteristics comprise: the inclusion of mandated and rotating health warnings on all cigarette packages and retail labelling, indications of the harmful consequences on health from tobacco use that are large, clear and visible and in all principle languages of a country, and pictures or pictograms. See the WHO Noncommunicable Diseases Data Portal, accessed on 12 December 2023.
41. Between July 2020 and June 2022.
42. An effective media campaign involves: (a) implementing the campaign as part of a comprehensive tobacco control programme; (b) forming a deep understanding of the target audience prior to the campaign through research; (c) pre-testing and refining communications materials for the campaign; (d) designing a rigorous media plan and process for purchasing air time and/or placement to ensure effective and efficient reach to the target audience; (e) working with journalists for publicity and coverage of the campaign; (f) evaluating the process after conclusion to assess implementation effectiveness; (g) evaluating outcomes to assess impact; and (h) airing the campaign on television and/or radio for a minimum of three weeks. See the WHO Noncommunicable Diseases Data Portal, accessed on 12 December 2023.

43. See the Ministry of Health Strategy (2020–2024).
44. WHO, 2022a.
45. WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA, 2022.
46. WHO, 2022a.
47. Lebanon, Ministry of Public Health, 2023.
48. WHO, 2022a.
49. See more on health sector transformation in Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030.
50. See Tunisia, Voluntary National Review 2021.
51. WHO, 2023f.
52. Libya, Oman and Somalia did not develop a policy or legislation on mental health. No data are available for the Comoros, Mauritania and the State of Palestine.
53. WHO, 2020b.
54. Only Egypt indicated that it had estimated and allocated human and financial resources for the implementation of its mental health plan launched in 2015. Although Lebanon did not indicate estimates and allocations, it noted that total government expenditure on mental health as a percentage of total government health expenditure was 5 per cent.
55. Lea Zeinoun, 2023.
56. WHO, 2020b.
57. See Algeria, Voluntary National Review 2019.
58. Lebanon, Ministry of Public Health, 2015.
59. Arab Health by Informa Markets, 2020.
60. See the WHO Global Health Expenditure database, accessed on 23 October 2023.
61. WHO, 2023d.
62. Jordan News, 2023.
63. See Le ministère de la Santé lance l'extension du plan stratégique national de prévention et de contrôle de la tuberculose 2021–2023.
64. See Morocco, Voluntary National Review 2020.
65. WHO Global Health Expenditure database, accessed on 23 October 2023.
66. United Nations Libya, Common Country Analysis, 2021.
67. World Bank, 2019.
68. World Bank, 2022.
69. See WHO data on health expenditure, accessed 15 December 2023.
70. ESCWA, 2022b.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. UNICEF, 2018.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid.
77. GCFF, 2022.
78. UNFPA and League of Arab States, 2020.
79. UNFPA, WHO and League of Arab States, 2022.
80. Bahrain News Agency, 2023.
81. See the extensive analysis of social determinants affecting the health of migrants globally and in the region as provided in WHO, 2022b.

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4 QUALITY EDUCATION

SDG 4

Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

A. Introduction

Arab countries have progressively expanded access to schooling and reduced gender gaps in education since 2000. Inequalities and uneven quality in instruction, however, continue to hinder progress on the SDGs and impact students from all walks of life. Many education systems struggle to adequately serve poor students, rural communities, girls and women, refugees, internally displaced persons and persons with disabilities, thereby deepening inequalities and constraining social and economic development.

To get on track to achieve SDG 4 (Quality education), Arab countries need holistic, clear and well-resourced policies to improve the quality and relevance of learning outcomes through curriculum reforms at all stages of education. Policies to enhance critical thinking and skills acquisition are required to achieve SDG 4 and equip students for success in school, work and life, based on foundational literacy and numeracy, problem-solving, technical and vocational competencies, and other key life skills.

The COVID-19 crisis has deepened learning poverty in the region and introduced new obstacles that threaten long-term consequences if they are not adequately addressed. The pandemic led to widespread school closures; on average, Arab countries fully closed schools for 25.2 weeks between 2020 and 2022, and at least partially closed schools for 45.4 weeks. This cost students estimated losses of between 0.5 and 1.1 learning-adjusted years of schooling, and put millions of students at an increased risk of dropping out. Learners from disadvantaged groups have been disproportionately affected. Without remedial action, the region could lose $800 billion in income over the course of these students' lives.

Sources: UNESCO online dashboard, Global Monitoring of School Closures Caused by COVID-19; UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2021.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).

Available SDG 4 data present a mixed picture of regional progress in ensuring a quality education for all.

Primary school completion rates increased from 75 per cent in 2000 to 82 per cent in 2022, including 81 per cent for girls and 84 per cent for boys. **Lower secondary completion rates** grew from 55.2 to 67.5 per cent during this same period, although this remains well behind the global average of 76.6 per cent.[1]

Since 2000, **net secondary school enrolment** has increased from 51.9 to 63.5 per cent. Despite this progress, the region remains below the global average of 66.3 per cent. It still has a gender gap, with 61.3 per cent net enrolment of girls compared to 65.6 per cent of boys.

Enrolment in pre-primary education has been steadily expanding in the region, rising from 27.2 per cent in 2002 to 46.1 per cent in 2020. While this rate of increase has allowed the region to close the gap somewhat with the global average, it remains significant. Worldwide, the participation rate in pre-primary education is 74.6 per cent.

In 2020, 13.9 per cent of **primary school-aged children were out of school,** including 15.5 per cent of girls and 12.4 per cent of boys. This figure is much greater than the global average of 8.8 per cent.

In terms of school infrastructure, the region exceeds global averages in the **number of schools with access to electricity, computers, schools, Internet, handwashing facilities, single-sex sanitation facilities and drinking water.**

Adult literacy rates improved from 64 per cent in 2000 to 74 per cent in 2020 but remain well behind the global average of 87 per cent. Although the gender gap has decreased substantially since 2000, women are still more likely to be illiterate than men, with a total literacy rate of 66 per cent.

The proportion of primary teachers with required qualifications declined from 2005 to 2020, falling from 93.8 to 83.6 per cent. The region is now slightly behind the global average of 86.2 per cent. In contrast, **the proportion of secondary teachers with the required credentials** was 88.3 per cent, exceeding the global average of 83.8 per cent.

According to international standardized test data compiled between 2011 and 2015, approximately 57 per cent of the region's students did not achieve **minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics.** While this is comparable to global averages, it is below the proficiency levels achieved in Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, Oceania, and Europe and North America.[2]

Regionally, more data are needed for a full picture of SDG 4 progress. Incomplete data render it difficult to fully understand enrolment and completion trends in some levels of education. Indicators of student performance are often outdated and incomplete. Beyond the SDG framework, disaggregated data on funding for education by level and location are frequently unavailable, as is information related to groups at risk of being left behind. Improving the environment for generating and using education data should be of critical importance to policymakers, as improved collection and reporting can facilitate real-time monitoring of education systems, improve the efficiency of resource allocation and inform effective policy decisions.

For an up-to-date view of SDG 4 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.



On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 4

- Accelerate curriculum reforms that emphasize critical thinking and problem-solving capabilities for students, and facilitate their learning, employability, individual empowerment and active citizenship.
- Integrate values related to gender equality, human rights, tolerance and engaged citizenship into curricula to create a cultural shift towards sustainable development.
- Evaluate continued shortcomings in education systems and schooling facilities that discourage or prevent female students and students with disabilities from accessing their right to quality education.
- Prioritize education spending by using benchmarks such as the 4 to 6 per cent of GDP or 15 to 20 per cent of government expenditure targets established by the Education 2030 Framework for Action.
- Elevate equity considerations in spending decisions to ensure no one is left behind, including by prioritizing resources for underserved regions and vulnerable groups.
- Strengthen monitoring frameworks and data collection to allow real-time analysis of education system performance and the efficiency of spending choices.
- Invest in bridging digital divides and training teachers on effectively using e-learning tools to increase the reach and flexibility of education systems and their resilience to crises.
- Establish policies for remedial and catch-up learning and for the recognition of non-formal learning to enable the integration or reintegration of students with disruptions in their education into formal educational systems.



B. The policy landscape for SDG 4

The success of efforts to achieve SDG 4 is closely tied to progress on other SDGs; investments in education can accelerate achievement of the 2030 Agenda as a whole. For example, quality education and continuous learning can prepare individuals with skills to find gainful employment and earn livelihoods for themselves and their families, contributing to SDGs 1 and 8. Education is a key enabler of social mobility, with the potential to reduce inequalities in line with SDG 10. Ensuring equitable access to quality education for women and girls is a necessary condition for realizing gender equality and advancing SDG 5. As recognized in SDG target 4.7, education offers opportunities to instil values and knowledge to promote sustainable lifestyles and advocate for social justice, tolerance, a culture of peace and quality institutions, which can positively impact SDGs 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16. Given these interlinkages, Arab Governments frequently feature educational initiatives in plans to advance in different policy areas.

The region is far from realizing education's transformative potential. A failure to address inequities in education systems reinforces inequality and poverty. The following section presents common trends in approaches to education across country income levels and geographic subgroupings.

◆ **Nearly all countries have established the legal right to education, with public provision of free and compulsory schooling.** Nineteen Arab country constitutions identify education as a State responsibility, although not all frame this obligation in terms of rights. Compulsory schooling requirements range from 6 years in the **Comoros** and **Iraq** to 12 years in **Egypt** and the **United Arab Emirates**.[3]

◆ **To improve the quality of education, countries have reformed curricula and increased teacher qualifications.** A recent analysis of 18 national education plans in the Arab region[4] found that 15 plans include an emphasis on improving the quality of instruction, and 17 plans contain provisions for improving teacher qualifications and skills, expanding professional development opportunities for instructors or reducing pupil-to-teacher ratios. Curriculum reforms have encompassed a range of measures to strengthen learning outcomes, such as unifying national standards, emphasizing subjects deemed important for student success (such as science and technology, with fewer reforms targeting fields in the humanities and the arts), and introducing a focus on important life skills such as creativity and problem solving. Tools such as qualification frameworks have been used to strengthen the consistency of education quality and student outcomes.

◆ **Countries have increased the use of technology in education.** A growing emphasis on technological literacy and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education is part of an effort to ensure that students are adequately equipped with skills to succeed in the twenty-first century economy. Accordingly, many countries are introducing new programmes in STEM disciplines, dedicating more time to these subjects in the ordinary curriculum, and strengthening technical and vocational institutions specialized in such topics. This increased focus on technology has included the expansion of e-learning programmes and tools to improve the flexibility, reach and resilience of education systems, a process accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts to implement such solutions are vulnerable to the risks posed by persistent digital divides, however. The shift to e-learning during the pandemic allowed learning continuity but left millions of students behind. An estimated 40 per cent of students in the Middle East and North Africa were unable to take advantage of distance education programmes due to the unavailability of programming or a lack of tools to access alternative learning modalities (for example, electricity, Internet or a home computer).[5] This experience illustrates the importance of further investment in digital infrastructure to strengthen the resilience of education systems to crisis. For further analysis of the risks of digital divides, see the chapter on SDG 17.

◆ **Gender equality and disability inclusion in education are priorities in most countries, but inequalities persist.** At the regional level, the gross gender enrolment gap for primary and secondary education fell from 12 to 5 per cent between 2000 and 2020, representing major progress, although the disparity is still higher than the global average of 1 per cent.[6] Despite progress in expanding girls' enrolment in schools, sociocultural norms continue to hinder their access to education. Gaps widen at higher levels of education,

Despite broad legal guarantees of access, millions of school-age children do not participate in formal education due to difficulties accessing schools, conflict, household poverty or other barriers. In some countries, the right to education is defined as only applying to nationals, excluding migrant and refugee populations.

Economic challenges hinder efforts to scale up education and make well-targeted investments to improve the quality of instruction. Within countries, further obstacles comprise an uneven distribution of qualified teaching staff and other essential resources, contributing to inequalities in learning opportunities. Professional development frameworks for teachers are not present in all countries. In many cases, education systems face challenges attracting talent to the teaching profession.

Source: World Bank, 2015.



particularly affecting rural and poor women and girls. Threats to girls' education often include parents prioritizing male children's eventual economic prospects, a lack of female teachers, safety concerns around travelling to school and early marriage. These problems are most severe in countries experiencing conflict, where girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys.[7]

At least 17 Arab countries[8] have established protections for the rights of students with disabilities to access education, with many also taking steps to enhance the physical accessibility of learning environments to facilitate the inclusion of such students in the general educational system. A variety of barriers, however, continue to impede access to and the quality of education for students with disabilities. These obstacles include negative attitudes among teachers, parents and other students towards disability; difficulties accessing transportation; continued shortfalls in accessibility in many learning environments; low levels of funding for inclusion initiatives; and insufficient training on disability for teaching and support staff.[9] Further policy attention and resources are needed to ensure that students with disabilities are not left behind and enjoy equitable access to quality education.

◆ **Countries are increasing attention to early childhood education.** Although the rate of participation has risen rapidly to 46.1 per cent, the region continues to underperform compared to others. Examples of the prioritization of early childhood education include:

- The development of a pre-primary curriculum in **Palestine**.
- The establishment of dedicated departments within the ministry of education in **Qatar** and the **United Arab Emirates**.
- Strategies to encourage enrolment in **Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco,** the **Sudan** and **Tunisia**.

Pre-primary education is not compulsory in any Arab country, however. Only **Algeria** offers a year of pre-primary education free of charge.[10] The lack of freely available early childhood education is a significant barrier to access, particularly in areas with high rates of poverty.



Investments in early childhood education have larger impacts than those targeting later years of education. They boost children's school readiness and provide strong foundations for future learning. Early childhood education investments have also been shown to reduce gaps between socially advantaged and disadvantaged children at the start of primary schooling. Achieving universal early childhood education would improve the efficiency of Arab education systems and long-term student outcomes, with potential to promote economic growth. Returns as high as 10 per cent have been estimated for early childhood education spending targeting disadvantaged children.

Sources: UNESCO, 2022c; UNICEF, 2019.

◆ **Higher education is a policy focus, with an emphasis on both the accessibility and quality of learning.** In several Arab countries, access to public universities is free or nearly free of charge for national students. Governments offer a range of scholarships and housing and meal stipends to support students in accessing post-secondary education. Higher education systems are diversifying through public and private, technical and transnational university offerings in a number of countries.

Efforts to improve the effectiveness of higher education institutions have focused on establishing standards, facilitating strategic planning and governing accreditation.[11] Quality assurance institutions have still not been introduced in many countries, however.[12] Those that exist often lack full transparency and independence, and tend to focus on "inputs", such as credit hours, rather than "outputs", such as student achievements and learning gains.[13] With high youth unemployment rates impacting job prospects for university graduates, more efforts are needed to align learning outcomes and graduate skills with labour market needs.

Since 2010, the region has seen a steady increase in its gross enrolment rate for tertiary education, climbing from 25 to 33 per cent in 2020. But this rate remains below the global average gross enrolment rate of 40 per cent, and has increased at a slower pace than in the rest of the world.

◆ **Many countries have responded to persistently high youth unemployment rates with a focus on technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and partnerships with the private sector, seeking to ensure that skills acquired in school match employers' needs.** Such policies can play a major role in facilitating learning-to-earning transitions that enable young graduates to obtain decent work, and in reducing the sizeable population of youth who are not in education,

employment or training (NEET). In 2022, 30.7 per cent of all youth and 42.9 per cent of female youth in the region were in the NEET category, underscoring the urgent need to ensure opportunities for young people (for additional information, see the chapter on SDG 8).

To address this problem, countries have reinforced TVET learning pathways through a variety of measures, including modernizing curricula, diversifying programmes to meet labour market demands and enhancing cooperation with the private sector to better anticipate skills needed by employers. Further efforts have comprised strengthening quality assurance mechanisms and extending professional development options for instructional staff.

The pace of TVET reforms has varied across the region. Most systems continue to suffer from insufficient funding, short-term skill anticipation, limited opportunities for students to gain hands-on experiences and rigid access criteria. Additionally, limited opportunities to transition between TVET and higher education, social stigma around TVET and the perception that it is a second-class education track have limited its attractiveness to prospective students. Accordingly, TVET enrolment is significantly below that of other education channels, accounting for roughly 12 per cent of enrolments at the secondary level.

Sources: European Training Foundation, 2021; ILO, UNICEF and European Training Foundation, 2023; ESCWA, 2020.

Initiatives to improve alignment between TVET educational outcomes and labour market needs also encompass national qualifications frameworks to ensure consistent learning outcomes for graduates. Seven countries **(Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia** and the **United Arab Emirates)** have adopted these frameworks, and another seven **(Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Qatar, Lebanon,** the **State of Palestine** and the **Sudan**) are at various stages of developing them. Governments have endeavoured to improve such systems in collaboration with the private sector to boost student employability.[14]

◆ **Non-formal education is an increasingly significant part of the region's educational landscape.** This refers to structured programming outside the formal educational system that is organized by an educational provider, which might be a non-governmental organization, private organization or community group. Non-formal education can complement formal education by offering opportunities to develop professional and life skills. Within the region, a growing share of people use such programmes. A survey of seven countries has found that the most popular offerings are those seen as improving employment prospects, including languages, computer skills and mathematics.[15] Other non-formal education programmes launched with State support include courses in communities to combat adult illiteracy. Examples of such programmes are common in the region, and are mentioned in the Voluntary National Reviews of **Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Saudi Arabia** and **Tunisia.** Religious institutions play a significant role in delivery, frequently supporting literacy education and sometimes offering instruction in other subjects.

In some cases, non-formal education programmes serve not as complements to but as replacements for formal education, particularly in environments where conflict and displacement have made formal education inaccessible. Non-formal education programmes have supported out-of-school children to maintain learning and eventually to transition into formal education systems. Such approaches are of great significance in the region, which despite having around 5.8 per cent of the world's population hosts more than one quarter of the world's refugees and more than one third of internally displaced persons.[16] Many students have seen their access to schooling disrupted; non-formal education programmes often offer the only option for them to continue their schooling. Programmes aiming at remedial instruction for out-of-school students have been launched in countries including **Iraq, Lebanon** and the **Syrian Arab Republic,** where government and humanitarian partners have implemented initiatives to develop foundational literacy and numeracy skills, to provide streamlined versions of curricula to help students who have missed two or more years of school in reintegrating into their classes, and to offer vocational training.[17,18]

Most countries in the region lack sufficient procedures to recognize non-formal learning and ensure reintegration into formal education. Given the important role that non-formal education systems play, developing such procedures can help guarantee that students relying on such programmes are not excluded from other learning and employment opportunities.

Source: Cacich and Aboudan, 2022.



C. Policy trends by subregion

1. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

The relative wealth of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and higher levels of education spending compared with the rest of the region have allowed more rapid progress on many SDG 4 indicators. The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have achieved the region's highest mean and expected years of schooling, the lowest pupil-to-teacher ratios and the highest per student education spending. These countries face challenges related to the efficiency of expenditure, however.[19] Despite their achievements, they lag behind global averages on outcomes such as those measured by standardized test scores.[20,21] To address these shortcomings, Gulf Cooperation Council countries have made efforts to improve student learning outcomes, enhance international competitiveness, and lay foundations for increased innovation and participation in the global knowledge economy.

◆ **Gulf Cooperation Council countries are reforming curricula and teaching methods to improve student skill acquisition and learning outcomes.** In all these countries, education is central to key policy and vision documents to accelerate the nationalization of workforces and use the knowledge economy to drive economic diversification. Reforms have included the introduction or reinforcement of standards for skills-based curricula (as in **Kuwait,**[22] **Oman,**[23] **Qatar,**[24] **Saudi Arabia**[25] and the **United Arab Emirates**[26]), strengthening accountability and quality control systems (as in **Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates**) and adopting new recruitment and professional development systems for teaching staff (steps taken in **Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates**).

Gulf Cooperation Council countries have used educational reforms to spur innovation, in particular through an emphasis on STEM education. This has included modernizing STEM curricula and increasing learning time dedicated to these subjects. Countries have prioritized the availability of information and communications technologies and infrastructure in schools, and have emphasized developing students' digital literacy. This has included the introduction of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence into classrooms, with **Oman**, for example, integrating AI competencies into the national curriculum.[27] Several countries have also introduced competitions and awards to incentivize innovation and increase youth interest in science and technology. Examples include the Skills Competition and Innovation Award in **Oman,** the National Scientific Creativity Olympiad in **Saudi Arabia** and the hosting of the UN Youth Hackathon 2021 in the **United Arab Emirates.**

◆ **Gulf Cooperation Council countries lead in developing digital learning platforms, a trend accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic.** The Madrasati platform of **Saudi Arabia** has received international recognition as a top system for distance learning. Initiatives such as the Madrasa platform and The Digital School in the **United Arab Emirates** are making free e-learning resources available for students throughout the region, with an emphasis on mathematics, sciences and computer programming.


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◆ **The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have launched several initiatives to better integrate their education sectors, particularly in higher education.** Steps include mutual recognition of credentials, the establishment of the Arabian Gulf University, support for student and teacher exchange programmes, and joint research and development initiatives to spur innovation and strengthen cooperation among institutions of higher learning.[28]

◆ **Migrant student education in the Gulf Cooperation Council subregion is largely delivered by private institutions, with varying levels of quality.** A massive migrant population constitutes an estimated 52 per cent of the total population of these countries.[29] Migrant children comprise an estimated 25 per cent of all children, with the proportion rising each year. Whereas most Gulf Cooperation Council countries charge enrolment fees or impose admission quotas that limit migrant student access to the public education system, **Bahrain** and **Saudi Arabia** offer free access to public schools for expatriate children who are able to study in Arabic and meet other requirements. In practice, most migrant children in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries attend private schools following international curricula.

As a result of high demand, **the private education sector has expanded rapidly in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries,** predominately through for-profit schools. The prevalence of for-profit institutions risks deepening inequalities among students in Gulf Cooperation Council countries, as student access to quality education depends in large part on parents' ability to pay. Further, while authorities regulate private schools, there have been cases of such schools being declared unfit for national students yet acceptable for migrant students, suggesting a lower concern for learning outcomes for the latter.[30]

2. Arab middle-income countries

Although the Arab middle-income countries[31] have successfully increased enrolment rates and the average length of education, they face continuing challenges in improving the quality of education delivered by school systems and reducing deep inequalities in access. Rapidly growing student populations combine with high levels of youth unemployment, averaging 23 per cent and exceeding 40 per cent in some countries. These factors have driven countries to enact reforms to increase focus on learning outcomes and student employability.

◆ **Many middle-income countries have focused on modernizing curricula and upgrading teacher training to improve student learning outcomes.** Common objectives of curriculum reforms include increasing the emphasis on communications, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving and information and communications technology; enhancing vocational education; and developing life skills (as in the Education 2.0 policy of **Egypt** and the education strategy of **Algeria**, *L'école algérienne*). **Jordan** established the National Centre for Curricula Development in 2017 to continuously evaluate and develop educational materials to improve student learning outcomes.

Teacher qualification and training has been another focus area for many middle-income countries, with continuous professional development programmes and increased use of digital resources comprising key elements. In **Egypt**, for example, the 2018 education strategy foresees an expansion of digital learning resources, with virtual resources gradually replacing traditional textbooks. The GENIE programme of **Morocco** has stressed increasing teacher training and the use of information and communications technology in education, resulting in a greater integration of these tools in the classroom.

◆ **Middle-income countries have introduced initiatives to extend education access to underserved regions and populations, with a focus on rural areas and groups at risk of being left behind.** The efforts of **Morocco** to address urban-rural inequalities include the *Écoles Communautaires* programme, which creates education centres for rural students that offer qualified teaching staff, Internet access and transportation. Further support comes from the *Programme de l'impulsion du capital humain des générations montantes*, which supports early childhood education in rural areas by creating places for some 15,000 children. To tackle high dropout rates, **Tunisia** has elaborated a "second chance" education pathway that reintegrates students into classes after a period away from school and supports those at high risk to complete their education.

Some countries have offered support to low-income households to allow students to complete their education, including through social protection systems. The *Takaful* programme in **Egypt,** the National Aid Fund cash assistance programmes in **Jordan** and the *Tayssir* programme in **Morocco** offer cash transfers to poor families and include conditionalities tied to school attendance. Conditionalities are not

universal, however. The *Programme National d'Aide aux Familles Nécessiteuses* in **Tunisia** benefits more than 90,000 school-aged children from low-income families without monitoring school attendance rates. Other measures, such as school meal programmes, support healthy learning environments and promote school attendance for students from poor households.

◆ **Governments are increasing efforts to align educational outcomes with labour market needs to improve youth employment prospects, including through improved TVET systems.** The *Assurance Qualité* programme in **Algeria** measures universities according to the employment rates of their graduates, and universities increasingly have liaison offices that seek to connect students with employers. In **Jordan**, a new TVET strategy has sought to encourage the development of employment-ready skills, while the sustainable development strategy of **Egypt** underscores the role of technical education in meeting labour market needs. In **Palestine**, TVET is being integrated into the curriculum for grades 7 to 9 to provide students with stronger life skills foundations and support employability. Additionally, all middle-income countries have either adopted or begun developing a national qualifications framework, except those experiencing conflict or crisis. Such measures help standardize learning outcomes. When developed in cooperation with the private sector, they help to ensure that learning outcomes better align with employers' needs.



Jordan: engaging the private sector in aligning training and the job market

In a region with high youth unemployment, estimated at 27.3 per cent, Jordan has among the highest rates for people aged 15 to 24, at 40.3 per cent. As part of its National Strategy for Human Resource Development (2016–2020), Jordan committed to addressing this problem through increased attention to TVET and reforms to improve the alignment of education outcomes with the needs of the economy.

Jordan took important steps in this direction in 2019 by adopting a national qualifications framework and a Technical and Vocational Skills Development Law. The latter established the Technical and Vocational Skills Development Council to bridge the gap between training and skills required by the labour market. The Council includes representatives from the private sector, comprising key industries such as tourism, manufacturing, commerce, construction, communications and health.

This approach has deepened public-private collaboration in elaborating qualifications systems. It has allowed employers to steer the content of curricula and participate in the development of national and sector education standards.

Sources: ILO, 2020; UNESCO, TVET Country Profiles: Jordan.

◆ **To enhance the quality of education, some middle-income countries are working to improve the management of schooling systems through enhanced annual reporting processes, data portals and reforms of evaluation.** For example:

- **Algeria** launched a national information system in 2017 to support the management of the education system, with modules on evaluation, human resources, infrastructure, distance learning and more.
- **Tunisia** launched a new evaluation system in 2021 to collect information on student learning outcomes in the second, fourth and sixth grades.
- **Egypt, Jordan, Morocco,** the **State of Palestine** and **Tunisia** are among the few countries in the region to regularly publish a national education monitoring report.[32]

◆ Arab middle-income countries host more than 8 million refugees and asylum seekers, over 85 per cent of the total in the region and nearly one fourth of the global total. **They have launched a variety of responses to the educational needs of school-aged refugee children. Algeria, Morocco** and **Tunisia** have each adopted policies to allow refugee students in specified age ranges to enrol in public schools free of charge. In **Egypt**, refugee students from South Sudan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen are permitted to attend public schools on an equal footing with local students. Despite these legal rights to education, some refugees continue to have difficulties accessing services, however, typically due to administrative barriers and procedures or the inability to study in Arabic. In **Jordan**, which hosts more than 3 million Palestinian and Syrian refugees, school-aged refugee children are entitled to education through a variety of channels, including schools for Palestinians run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), public schools in host communities (sometimes through double-shift programming) and schools established in refugee camps.[33] **Lebanon** has not ratified the United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to the status of refugees, and separate systems govern education access for Palestinian and other (predominantly Syrian) refugees. The majority of Palestinian students are educated in UNRWA schools, as the Lebanese law does not guarantee their right to a publicly provided education. For those unable to access UNRWA schools, annual circulars establish the conditions under which Palestinian students may enrol in public schools. About half of Syrian students have been enrolled in formal education, with many schools operating a second shift in the afternoon for about 65 per cent of this population.



3. Arab least developed countries

Arab least developed countries face additional challenges in enacting transformative education policies. In the five countries with available data, the mean years of schooling is just 4.8. These countries generally have education systems marked by high dropout rates, substantial geographic and gender disparities, and high pupil-to-teacher ratios. Increasing access and completion rates are major priorities, with all least developed countries identifying SDG 4 targets as key policy objectives.

◆ **Several least developed countries have integrated education into their social protection systems.** For instance, the National Programme for Family Solidarity in **Djibouti** and the *Tekavoul* National Social Transfer Programme in **Mauritania** both include provisions that condition support to recipients on the health and school attendance of children within the household. Other examples include the Shamel programme in the **Sudan,** which provides a variety of benefits to eligible communities, including a school feeding programme for eligible students. Both **Djibouti** and **Mauritania** also maintain school feeding programmes to encourage access to education.

◆ **In most cases, the least developed countries have tried to increase the efficiency of spending by using geographic targeting to focus on areas that have traditionally been underserved by national education systems.** The social protection schemes mentioned above have prioritized regions and communities with higher levels of poverty. The Priority Education Areas initiative of **Mauritania** aims to strengthen support in areas with high poverty rates and low school completion, covering meal programmes, teacher training and incentive systems, parental education campaigns and capacity development.

◆ **Countries have focused on increasing teacher training standards as part of a broader effort to enhance the quality of education. Somalia** introduced a new teacher policy in 2021 to regulate registration, licensing, recruitment, deployment and instructor conduct. In **Mauritania**, a professional development support fund encourages continued skill acquisition, and in the **Sudan** the National Institute for Teacher Training offers continuing education programmes to improve the qualifications of in-service teachers. **Djibouti** has emphasized teacher training and reports that, above the pre-kindergarten level, all public teachers hold all required qualifications.

◆ **Standardization and reporting are weak. None of the least developed countries surveyed had a national monitoring and reporting framework for their educational**

systems. As a result, they lack the disaggregated data necessary to inform evidence-based policy reforms and maximize the efficiency of resource allocation. Some efforts to address this gap include the Transitional Education Project of the **Comoros** to improve the national use of data through the development of statistical yearbooks involving 50 pilot schools. Overhauls of information management systems in **Mauritania** and **Somalia** aim to boost data collection.[34]

4. Arab countries experiencing conflict and fragility

Arab countries experiencing conflict and fragility[35] suffer from many of the same problems faced by the least developed countries, with added difficulties posed by the destruction of educational facilities and high levels of displacement. Conflicts in **Iraq, Libya,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Yemen** have resulted in the destruction of some 9,000 schools[36] and displaced millions of children, severely hindering the ability of many to access their right to education. Countries experiencing conflict or fragility are further hindered by deep deficits in available data on education, challenging efforts by policymakers and development partners to design evidence-based interventions.

◆ **Some countries experiencing conflict have transitional education plans that attempt to directly address the legacies of conflict and recover from deep disruptions.** They include the need to repair infrastructure, re-establish or strengthen the administration and management of education systems, find solutions to provide remedial education opportunities and reintegration pathways for large numbers of out-of-school children, address shortages of qualified teaching staff, and provide additional support (including social and emotional learning) to ensure safe learning environments. Examples of such policies include the National Education Strategy of **Iraq** (2022–2031), the National Education Sector Plan of **Somalia** (2022–2026), the General Education Sector Strategic Plan of the **Sudan** (2018–2023) and the Transitional Education Sector Plan of **Yemen** (2019–2022).

◆ **Most countries experiencing conflict or fragility in the region have launched plans to reintegrate internally displaced persons into the education system and provide social and emotional learning programmes to address conflict-related stress and trauma. In some cases, resource constraints have limited the implementation of post-conflict education plans. Iraq** prioritized the integration and education of children of internally displaced families in its 2018-2022 Poverty Reduction Strategy. The Ministry of Education in **Libya** established a committee dedicated to the affairs of displaced and migrant persons to develop solutions specific to the conditions of affected students, teachers and ministry employees. The National Policy on Refugee-Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons of **Somalia** affirms the right to education and outlines steps to establish or expand services to accommodate returned or integrated internally displaced persons. In both the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Yemen**, education ministries participated in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Capacity Development for Education programme, which provides training on social and emotional learning to help children overcome conflict-related stress and trauma. Similar initiatives have been undertaken by other organizations in parts of **Libya**.

◆ **More than in other country groupings, non-State actors are major players in the education systems of countries experiencing conflict or fragility, as capacity limitations create demand for alternative forms of service delivery. This can pose challenges to implementing coherent education policies in line with long-term development goals, however.** In **Somalia,** weak institutions have led to the privatization of the education sector amid protracted insecurity. This resulted in nearly half of children and youth being denied their right to education due to an inability to pay. Private institutions remain predominant and serve 87.5 per cent of primary and 91.5 per cent of secondary school students, although the Government is seeking to reestablish public management of the sector. “Mixed-management schools” have been one result. Another has been the contested ownership of many institutions.

International institutions and donors offer invaluable support to students, teachers, responsible ministries and other stakeholders in countries experiencing conflict. Such bodies provide capacity-building and funding for specific programmes. Examples include the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) paying teacher salaries in some parts of **Yemen** and UNESCO supporting the development of an Education Management Information System.[37] Likewise, the League of Arab States has worked with civil society to establish schools for displaced children in the **Sudan**.[38] Education interventions can be valuable in operationalizing the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Alignment of education initiatives with development and peacebuilding objectives can improve social cohesion, education system resilience and psychosocial support while fostering the continuity of learning. Realizing this ideal has proven difficult, however. It is important for humanitarian actors and government counterparts to increase coordination and anchor operations within long-term strategies.[39,40]

D. Policies to leave no one behind

Education can be a powerful tool for promoting social mobility, fostering values of tolerance and equality and preparing students for quality employment. Yet education systems may also exacerbate inequalities if they lack a focus on equity and inclusion. While Arab countries have introduced measures to address the needs of marginalized groups, systemic inequalities continue to affect target populations and reduce the efficacy of policy interventions. The following section considers some systemic inequalities and examples of education policies to address them.

Table 4.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

 **Female students** continue to be at a distinct disadvantage in many parts of the region, as social norms and practices lead to girls not attending school or dropping out at higher rates than male students.	In **Palestine,** the Ministry of Education and Higher Education's Education Sector Strategic Plan for 2017–2022 sought to rid teacher training of harmful gender stereotypes and called for reviewing the gender sensitivity of curricula and teaching materials.[a]
 **Students with disabilities** face disadvantages related to the inaccessibility of learning environments as well as teaching staff who are not trained to accommodate their educational needs.	The **United Arab Emirates** has established regulations to improve the accessibility of education for persons with disabilities, including by renovating school buildings and classrooms, providing educational diagnostic services and assistive technologies to support integration into the general educational system, offering classes with sign language and braille, and committing to providing equal opportunities for students with learning disabilities in the institution closest to their residence.[b]
 **The poorest children** confront multiple barriers to accessing education, including the cost of supplies and school fees, and are at a relatively high risk of being pulled out of school to work and support their families.	In **Egypt,** the community school model has helped extend the umbrella of the general education system to out-of-school children in deprived areas lacking access to public schools. Community schools follow a flexible multi-grade approach and are managed through partnerships between the Ministry of Education, non-governmental organizations and local communities.[c] The strategic plan for pre-university education of Egypt seeks to extend this model further, including by applying it to technical schools.[d]
 **Children in areas experiencing conflict** encounter barriers including the destruction of educational infrastructure, displacement and trauma.	In **Libya,** the Ministry of Education sought to increase access to schooling by obliging institutions at all levels to allow displaced students to enrol and complete their academic year. Counselling and psychosocial support services have benefited more than 30,000 children.
 **Refugees and internally displaced people** often experience difficulties in registering for school or accessing public services in general. Many countries do not guarantee their right to education.	In **Morocco,** recent policy reforms have allowed refugees to enrol in the national school and training systems. The children of refugees and immigrants are eligible for food programmes, school transportation services and student pensions.

Table 4.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

	Students in rural and remote regions often struggle to gain quality education due to the absence of schools or long distances required to access schools.	To overcome disadvantages in rural communities, **Algeria** has programmes such as scholarships for day- or full-time boarding students (particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds). Remote learning through the National Bureau for Distance Education and Training offers education to students unable to attend schools in person, from preschool through secondary levels.[e]

[a] UNICEF, 2021.
[b] See the UNESCO education policy profile, the United Arab Emirates, accessed 5 April 2023.
[c] See UNICEF on Education Programmes in Egypt, accessed on 5 April 2023.
[d] See Egypt's, Strategic Plan for Pre-University Education 2014–2030.
[e] See the UNESCO education policy profile, the United Arab Emirates, accessed on 5 April 2023.

E. The financing landscape

Financing for education in the Arab region is challenged on two fronts:

- Spending has generally fallen short of the levels of investment needed to ensure universal access to high-quality education.
- Spending is generally inefficient, with learning outcomes regularly lagging behind those in countries with similar levels of expenditure.[41]

Arab countries must revamp education financing to overcome these challenges, particularly in light of the urgent need to close learning deficits exacerbated by conflicts and the COVID-19 crisis. Many countries have young populations, which will increase future education financing needs.

In 2015, UNESCO member countries adopted the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action as a roadmap for achieving inclusive, equitable and quality education. While recognizing the diversity of national contexts, the declaration includes two financing benchmarks:

- Allocating at least 4 to 6 per cent of GDP to education and/or
- Allocating at least 15 to 20 per cent of total public expenditure to education.

Within the Arab region, most countries are falling short on these benchmarks. Table 4.2 summarizes spending allocations according to the latest data.


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Egypt is unique in the Arab region in having a constitutional provision requiring that the Government spend at least 4 per cent of GDP on education, although recent budgets have fallen short of this benchmark.

Table 4.2
Expenditure on education

	Percentage of GDP spent on education	Percentage of government expenditure on education
Saudi Arabia	**7.8 (2020)**	**18.8 (2021)**
Tunisia	**7.3 (2016)**	**22.7 (2015)**
Algeria	**7.0 (2020)**	**15.4 (2022)**
Morocco	**6.8 (2020)**	**16.9 (2021)**
Kuwait	**6.6 (2020)**	11.9 (2020)
Oman	**5.4 (2019)**	12.2 (2020)
State of Palestine	**5.3 (2018)**	**17.7 (2019)**
Iraq	**4.7 (2016)**	14.0 (2016)
United Arab Emirates	3.9 (2020)	11.7 (2020)
Djibouti	3.6 (2018)	14.0 (2018)
Jordan	3.2 (2021)	9.7 (2021)
Qatar	3.2 (2020)	8.9 (2021)
Egypt	2.5 (2020)	12.3 (2020)
Comoros	2.5 (2015)	13.4 (2015)
Bahrain	2.2 (2020)	9.3 (2022)
Mauritania	1.9 (2020)	10.4 (2022)
Lebanon	1.7 (2020)	9.9 (2020)
Somalia	0.3 (2019)	4.4 (2021)
Sudan	NA	12.5 (2021)

Source: UNESCO UIS data reported by the World Bank, Government expenditure on education, total (percentage of government expenditure), and Government expenditure on education, total (percentage of GDP), accessed in April 2023.

Collectively, countries with available data spend an estimated 5 per cent of GDP on education. At least 10 countries fall below the international benchmark of 4 per cent. They collectively require **$11.8 billion** to close the funding gap, with **Egypt** alone accounting for $7.2 billion of the total. To achieve the more ambitious level of 6 per cent of GDP for education funding, these countries would need an infusion estimated at **$43.3 billion.**[a]

[a] Figures are indicative and derived by applying the latest available data on the percentage of GDP spent on education to the latest available data on GDP (2022 for all countries except Lebanon, where the latest GDP data are for 2021). Note that actual education spending shortfalls are higher than indicated, as data are unavailable for Libya, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

While levels of public education investment are insufficient in the Arab region, household expenditure on education is above global averages. This risks deepening inequalities by tying access to quality education to the ability to pay. Globally, households account for 29.7 per cent of education spending. In the Arab region, this figure is around 36 per cent, and is close to or greater than 50 per cent in **Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania** and the **United Arab Emirates.**[42]

In addition to increasing the size of investments in education, countries have significant room to boost efficiency and the equity of education spending. In general, achievements are underwhelming, with most countries attaining lower expected years of schooling and lower harmonized test scores than countries with similar levels of expenditure.[43]

Improving the equity of educational expenditures can support the accomplishment of national educational objectives while strengthening equality of opportunity and social mobility. Equitable education financing requires Governments to make informed and effective decisions on the allocation of resources across geographic areas, levels of education, and targeted populations or groups.[44] Examples of reallocations that can improve overall outcomes include investing more in early childhood education or directing funds to students from poorer regions and households. Research suggests that a 1 per cent increase in the share of public education resources directed to the poorest 20 per cent of students would be associated with a 2.6 to 4.7 per cent reduction in learning poverty rates.[45]

Alongside curriculum and pedagogical reforms, enhancing the efficiency and equity of education spending will require countries to invest in quality education management systems, and collect and make policy choices based on detailed, real-time data on spending, the characteristics of students and communities, and the results of expenditures.



F. Regional dimensions

Regional cooperation in education policy can deepen ties among Arab countries, improve the quality of education and training, and improve the region's competitiveness by cultivating skills needed for the twenty-first century economy. The components of such efforts could include:

- **Developing common frameworks for skills development and credential recognition.** One notable effort, the MENA Life Skills and Citizenship Education Initiative,[46] provides a regional framework for reimagining education around four dimensions: learning, employability, individual empowerment and active citizenship. The framework includes 12 core life skills to operationalize at the country level and integrate into curricula to ensure that students are equipped for success in school and work and can make active and positive contributions to society. All countries in the region have endorsed the initiative; implementation is ongoing.

  Regional cooperation could also be enhanced by assuring the mutual compatibility of National Qualification Frameworks or developing a regional qualification framework to serve as a point of reference for assessing international experiences and credentials. National Qualification Frameworks offer a quality assurance tool by clearly defining learning outcomes at various levels. They encourage transparency and accountability in learning institutions, and can help resolve skills mismatches by aligning learning outcomes with the needs of the private sector.[47] As mentioned earlier, only seven Arab countries have adopted such frameworks **(Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia** and the **United Arab Emirates).** Systematizing qualification standards and credential recognition at the regional level could also facilitate labour mobility. Experiences of such alignment in other parts of the world include the Caribbean Vocational Qualifications System of CARICOM and Europe's Bologna Process. These could offer models for developing a common Arab qualifications framework.

- **Strengthening cooperation across educational institutions through regional networks for student exchanges, joint research and partnerships** could facilitate exchanges of ideas and knowledge; boost trade, investment and entrepreneurship; and



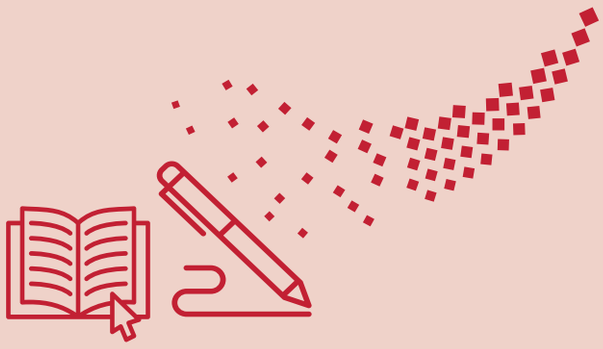


enhance cultural awareness through deeper people-to-people ties among participating countries. The Erasmus+ Programme in the European Union is a particularly powerful example of a successful educational exchange initiative, one with positive impacts on employment, skills development, entrepreneurship and participants' sense of regional identity.[48]

- **Increasing technical and financial assistance for education, particularly to support the region's least developed countries,** is an effective investment in development given the high returns of education and significant financing needs in these countries. Maximizing the results of such aid requires a focus on quality and ownership by the beneficiary country and capacity development within recipient educational institutions.[49] The Gulf Cooperation Council countries are already active in supporting least developed countries and countries experiencing conflict to strengthen their education systems and in funding higher education scholarships for students wishing to study at universities in Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

Gulf Cooperation Council countries are active development partners, funding education initiatives throughout the region and around the world. Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the **United Arab Emirates** are major providers of official development assistance, contributing more than $420 million in non-humanitarian bilateral education funding in 2020. The majority of such funds go to Arab countries. **Egypt**, the **State of Palestine,** the **Sudan** and **Yemen** are the top recipients. In addition, Gulf Cooperation Council countries extend scholarships to students from developing countries to pursue their studies in Gulf universities.

Source: See OECD's, Development Co-operation Profiles.



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5 GENDER EQUALITY

SDG 5

Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

A. Introduction

Some progress on SDG 5 is evident in the Arab region, including in amending legislation to support gender equality and the empowerment of women and women's increased presence in political decision-making. Yet major challenges persist. The region is not on track to achieve this goal. The representation of women in leadership positions is well below global averages. Law enforcement and legal gaps and inconsistencies continue to be concerns. Violence against women occurs largely unabated in private and public spheres, and harmful practices remain a significant problem in some countries. Marked variations exist between urban and rural areas in access to sexual and reproductive health care and contraceptive use, largely hinging on women's level of education and socioeconomic status. Women still disproportionately bear the responsibility for unpaid care work, a factor in low female labour force participation and gender gaps in economic opportunities and outcomes.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).



A little over one third of women in the Arab region[1] will likely endure intimate partner violence, with the rate significantly increasing in some settings, including conflict-affected areas.[2]



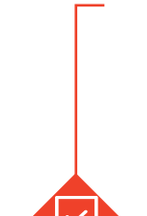
20.4 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 years were married or in a union before age 18 in the Arab region in 2020, slightly higher than the world average, reaching 33.5 per cent in Arab least developed countries.



Female genital mutilation is still practised in a number of Arab countries.[3] The prevalence for girls and women aged 15 to 49 varies from 99.2 per cent and 90.1 per cent in Somalia and Djibouti, respectively, to 7.4 per cent in Iraq.[4] Over the past 20 years, progress has been made in reducing the regional rate of female genital mutilation, from 71.0 per cent in 2001 to 54.3 per cent in 2021 for girls aged 15 to 19 years.[5]



Women held 18.2 per cent of seats in national parliaments in the region in 2022, close to a fivefold increase from 3.8 per cent in 2000 and a slight decrease from the 2015 level of 18.8 per cent. The share compares to 26.5 per cent globally.



Women are also underrepresented in local government, where they held 19.5 per cent of seats in 2023 compared to 35.5 per cent globally. Significant regional variation exists, with women constituting 31.7 per cent of elected members in local deliberative bodies in the least developed countries in 2023 compared to 25.5 per cent and 8.0 per cent in the Maghreb and Mashreq subregions, respectively, and 1.3 per cent in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.



The proportion of women in managerial positions is especially low. It increased from 9.1 per cent in 2000 to 12.1 in 2011 regionally, only to decrease again to 9.4 in 2013. It stood at a mere 12.4 per cent in 2021, a slight rise from 9.7 per cent in 2015, compared to a world average of 28.2 per cent.

Increasing education levels among women in the region and amendments to labour laws have not effectively translated into greater female economic participation. The female labour force participation rate stood at 19.8 per cent in 2022, less than half the global average of 47.9 per cent. This compares to 70.3 per cent for men.[6] The female unemployment rate stood at 19.9 per cent in 2022, three and a half times higher than the world average of 5.8 per cent.



A key factor influencing the low economic participation of women is unpaid care work, which is significantly unevenly distributed between women and men in the region. Women perform 80 to 90 per cent of all unpaid care tasks, spending on average 4.7 times more time on these than men.[7]

Advancing gender equality has a catalytic effect on the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. It drives progress on all dimensions, including poverty and hunger eradication; greater prosperity and more inclusive growth; inclusive, just and peaceful societies; and protection of the environment and natural resources. If SDG 5 is not attained, all SDGs will be compromised.

Source: UN Women, 2018.

Data are insufficient to measure regional progress for most targets under SDG 5.

For an up-to-date view of SDG 5 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 5

- Engaging constructively with religious institutions to rethink the relationships between religion and human rights, justice and equality, and support amendments to gender-sensitive personal status laws.
- Promoting greater coherence among different legal frameworks and regulatory systems to close existing loopholes, and ensuring consistency and greater enforcement in applying laws to advance gender equality and protect women's rights.
- Supporting shifts in the attitudes of public servants and legal personnel to push for the effective implementation of legislation that combats violence and discrimination against women and promotes their economic inclusion.
- Focusing on punitive and preventive measures in combatting sexual harassment and violence against women; prevention has proven to be effective and cost-efficient.
- Ensuring binding budgetary commitments to implement national frameworks and legislation on combatting violence against women, and more effectively using macroeconomic policies to promote economic opportunities for women and enhance their participation in the labour force.

- Developing adequate care-related legislation and extending benefits to both men and women to encourage the sharing of unpaid care duties and to enable women to reconcile career and care responsibilities; and considering the expansion of care benefits to the large share of women workers in the informal sector.
- Developing an evidence base and gender-disaggregated data comparable across countries and over time to support necessary reforms in laws, policies and institutions as well as the assessment of reforms and gender-responsive budgeting initiatives.

B. The policy landscape for SDG 5

In the Arab region, as is the case globally, gender inequality results from discriminatory, patriarchal social norms and practices. Patriarchal beliefs that privilege and empower men govern many aspects of life, with laws often reflecting and perpetuating discrimination and codifying inequality. While barriers to gender equality persist, several countries have advanced on eliminating gender discriminatory legal provisions. Substantial legislative progress has been made towards combatting violence against women and girls and enhancing female labour participation and gender equality in the workplace.

A proliferation of policies and legislative changes, however, has yet to have a catalytic or transformative impact on women's equality and participation in the economy or politics.

- Policy changes related to gender equality and women's empowerment and rights are often driven more by international frameworks than national priorities.
- By and large, the debate on gender issues is mostly confined to closed circles (national women's machineries) that are already well aware and convinced of the concepts. There is a lack of regulatory frameworks requiring the integration of gender considerations into the work of different national institutions. Consequently, buy-in and the willingness to actively support and participate in change suffers.
- Policies and legislative amendments are not taking place as part of an agenda with a well-defined objective for what needs to be achieved. Governments have no clear vision for gender equality.
- A glaring policy gap exists in addressing indirect and entrenched discrimination against women. Legal standards, policies and rules viewed as gender neutral and that seem to treat everyone equally might end up being gender blind or less fair to women (for example, by not having a quota system or requiring employees to work full-time).



Changing the architecture of development funding and its conditions to support alignment with national gender equality strategies can improve progress on SDG 5 in the region. This will help ensure effectiveness in planning and the mainstreaming of national gender concerns in sectoral development projects and programmes.



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- Gender equality continues to be considered a stand-alone issue. It has yet to be mainstreamed across policies (fiscal, monetary, sectoral employment, industrial, skills development, active labour market, entrepreneurship, loan disbursement, etc.).
- Work on social and behavioural changes is inadequate. This is needed alongside legislative changes to address negative social norms and practices that drive domestic as well as other forms of violence and discrimination against women, and to ensure progress on gender equality.[8]



There is little coherence and consistency in legislation for women's equality in the region. Personal status (family) laws are informed by man-made understandings of religious injunctions. If these laws are not changed, labour laws and penal codes aimed at promoting equal rights for women will fail to produce the desired outcomes. For instance, amending the Labour Law in **Saudi Arabia** to promote women's economic empowerment and the Penal Code in **Lebanon** to combat domestic violence without introducing commensurate changes to personal status laws will not be effective. Personal status laws maintain the guardianship system in Saudi Arabia and serve as the final reference for domestic violence in Lebanon. Moreover, progressive reforms to family law based on the principle of equality will not translate into empowerment and equality for women if they are not reflected in related legal frameworks. Changes to the Family Law in **Tunisia**, for example, did not boost economic participation for women given unaddressed inconsistencies with the Labour Code. More comprehensive and coherent legal reforms are imperative to accelerate the attainment of gender equality.

Source: ESCWA, 2023b.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women

Barriers to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment became more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the disadvantaged position of many women. This was demonstrated on several fronts, including: a significant increase in reports of gender-based violence and a decrease in the provision of and access to related prevention, protection and response services; a disruption in the availability of reproductive and sexual health services; a further disproportionate increase in unpaid care responsibilities; and an adverse impact on the economic participation of women, especially those working in the informal sector and service sectors hit hardest by the pandemic, as well as small and medium entrepreneurs with limited access to technology and finance. The International Labour Organization estimates that the pandemic caused about 1.1 million women in the region to lose their jobs in 2020. This carries a high societal cost given already low economic participation levels among women before the crisis.

The response of Arab countries to the pandemic varied in size but not in composition. Marginal budgets were allocated for policies to protect against gender-based violence. Ninety per cent of the regional stimulus package aimed at safeguarding employment and economic activities, with a mere 6 per cent considered gender-sensitive.

Factors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, including confinement, economic difficulties and intensified patriarchal norms, accelerated the already growing trend of online violence against women, based on research in **Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco,** the **State of Palestine, Tunisia** and **Yemen**. It was found that 49 per cent of female Internet users in Arab countries felt unsafe and affirmed a link between online and offline violence against women. Among women subjected to online violence in 2020, 44 per cent said that it escalated offline. The lack of gender-specific legal frameworks for combatting online violence intensifies the impacts.

Sources: UNDP, 2021; UN Women, 2021; EuroMed Rights, 2021; UN Women, 2022.

C. Policy trends by theme

1. Gender-based violence

Discriminatory attitudes and beliefs that privilege men affect rates and forms of violence against women in the Arab region. Compounding factors include poverty, uneven education and instability. While considerable variation exists in the prevalence of different forms of violence, across the region and within countries,[9] overall, intimate partner violence is the most common type.[10]

Countries have adopted more or less similar approaches to addressing violence against women.

◆ **Several countries have enacted laws on domestic violence or more generally addressing various forms of violence against women. They include Bahrain, Djibouti, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates. Algeria has introduced amendments to the penal code to protect women from domestic violence.**

- Some enacted laws addressing domestic violence include prosecution, punishment, prevention, protection and reparation provisions.[11]
- Most legislation does not clearly consider the issue of child custody when a protection order is in effect.
  - Law No. 58 of 2017 on the Elimination of Violence against Women in **Tunisia** exceptionally provides custody to women with a protection order and underlines the interest of the child regarding visitation schedules.
- Legislation tends to focus on only some kinds of violence committed by members of a household without addressing violence committed by previous partners.[12]
  - The 2015 amendment of the Penal Code in **Algeria** criminalizes various forms of violence against women, including violence committed by a current or former spouse, which is not common in the region.[13]



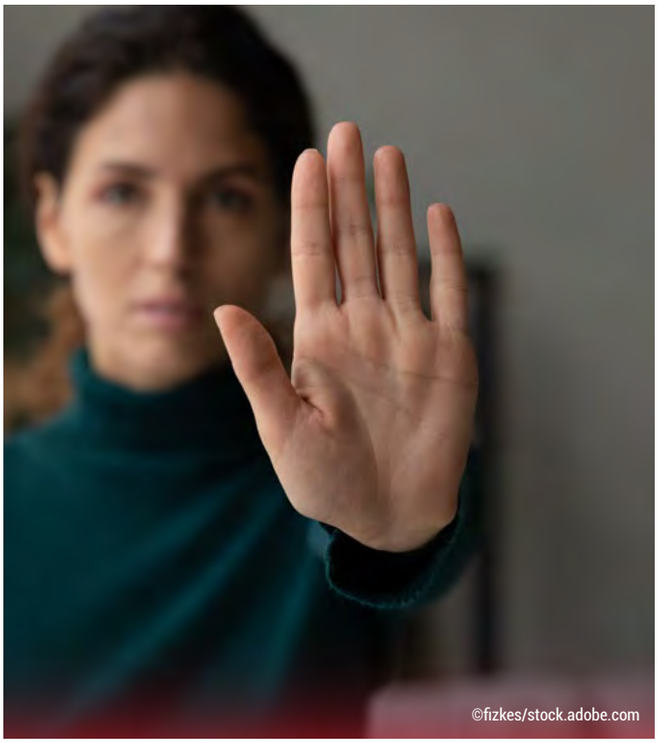
Weak enforcement and inconsistencies between different legal regimes (i.e., family and customary laws) interfere with the proper implementation of legislation aimed at ending domestic violence.

Provisions for implementation, including sustained or adequate funding and strong buy-in from governments, are often lacking. Inadequate training of relevant personnel, including judges, prosecutors and lawyers, also hinders implementation.

Limited awareness among gender-based violence survivors of available shelter services, the shortage of such shelters and their services, and prevailing sociocultural aspects play significant roles in restricting access to support.

Insufficient data on gender-based violence present another major challenge, even in countries with national strategies to stop violence. Improving data collection following globally agreed standards is critical to shape a better understanding of the nature and scale of the problem, and inform effective policies and solutions.

Sources: ESCWA and others, 2019a; ESCWA and others, 2019b; UNFPA, 2013; presentation on Data Collection on VAW in Order to Enhance Service Provision at a workshop, Services to Protect Women Survivors of Violence in the Arab Region, 26-29 July 2021.



- Legislation tends to follow a definition of violence that is narrow in scope.[14]
  - In 2020, **Lebanon** amended its law on Protection from Domestic Violence to include economic and psychological violence in addition to physical and sexual violence.[15]
  - In Law No. 10 of 2019 on Protection from Domestic Violence, the **United Arab Emirates** defines violence as physical, emotional, sexual and economic.[16]
- Even though some domestic violence laws refer to sexual violence, they do not explicitly criminalize marital rape.
- Some legislation notes the need to establish specialized units with trained staff to support proper implementation.[17,18]
- Only five countries with laws to protect against domestic violence have national plans or strategies on violence against women **(Bahrain, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia** and the **United Arab Emirates)** with a national mechanism mandated to oversee, monitor and review implementation.[19]
- Three other countries (**Egypt, Iraq** and the **State of Palestine**) have developed national strategies to address violence against women and established a national mechanism for implementation but do not have legislation on the issue.[20]

A good practice that should be followed is to enact stand-alone laws on stopping domestic and other forms of gender-based violence that criminalize violence in all its forms (physical, sexual, psychological and economic); address prevention, protection and reparations; and acknowledge violence as a manifestation of unequal power relations between genders.

National strategies and action plans must complement domestic violence laws by setting attainable and well-financed goals, identifying partner organizations, specifying the responsibilities of relevant entities, and defining prevention and protection programmes to address gender-based violence.

Source: ESCWA and others, 2019a.



Countries from different economic groupings have enacted and/or amended laws to protect women against sexual harassment in various spheres, including in public places and/or within the workplace.

- Thirteen Arab countries (**Algeria, Bahrain,** the **Comoros,**[21] **Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia** and the **United Arab Emirates**) have legislation that defines sexual harassment, with the act prohibited within criminal or labour laws or in stand-alone legislation.[22]

Some legislation emphasizes increasing the penalty for and/or criminalizing sexual harassment.

- **Algeria** revised its Penal Code in 2015 to strengthen penalties for violence and sexual harassment in the workplace.[23]
- **Lebanon** passed a law on Sexual Harassment and the Rehabilitation of Victims in 2020 that adopts criminal penalties for sexual harassment.[24] The law only focuses on punitive measures, paying no attention to preventive measures and labour law reforms.[25]
- **Morocco** adopted Law No. 103.13 on Combatting Violence against Women in 2018, which amends some articles of the Penal Code, including to criminalize sexual harassment in the public sphere.[26]
- **Saudi Arabia** passed a law in 2018 that criminalizes sexual harassment, with the definition of the act encompassing harassment inflicted by means of electronic communication.[27]

Some laws specify penalties that do not apply to all perpetrators in the workplace.

- The Labour Code of **Jordan** includes provisions on fines against sexual harassment offenders that protect workers if they are assaulted by the employer but not by other employees.[28]
- The Labour Code of **Libya** prohibits sexual harassment, which applies only to employees and not to employers; associated penalties are also not clear.[29]

Few laws stress measures to prevent sexual harassment and address its structural causes, even though prevention is the most effective and cost-efficient way to stop violence against women.[30]

- Law No. 103.13 of **Morocco** on Combatting Violence against Women defines preventive measures against sexual harassment and provides protection and support for survivors.[31]

Few laws offer civil remedies for victims of sexual harassment in the workplace.

- Law No. 205/2020 of **Lebanon** on Sexual Harassment and the Rehabilitation of Victims allows civil remedies,[32] but does not specify the legal framework through which survivors can seek redress.[33]

- In eight countries **(Kuwait, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Somalia,** the **Sudan,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Yemen)**, legislation does not specifically mention sexual harassment but penalties stipulated in criminal or labour laws provide some protection.
- Only three countries **(Egypt, Morocco** and the **United Arab Emirates)** have introduced legal provisions to criminalize cyberspace violence against women and girls.[34]
- The majority of countries have introduced laws to criminalize rape by a person other than a spouse, with varying legal definitions.[35]
  - Most countries regard rape as a crime based on a lack of freely given consent and require evidence of the use of physical force or penetration **(Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Somalia,** the **Sudan,** the **Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia** and **Yemen)**. Criminalizing rape based on the use of force is inconsistent with international standards, however.
  - Only five countries **(Iraq, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Qatar,** and the **United Arab Emirates)** do not require evidence of the use of physical force or penetration.
- Many countries have incorporated rape provisions in penal code sections dealing with family honour or morality offences, with trial verdicts at times emphasizing public morality and the preservation of family integrity instead of women's right to security and physical integrity.[36,37]

Following a more integrated and comprehensive legislative approach to sexual harassment involves addressing the different dimensions of the issue, including protection and prevention, in different areas of law, related to labour, occupational safety and health, as well as non-discrimination and crimes, among others. It can help close persistent legislative gaps and guide effective steps to end and protect against sexual harassment.

Meaningful action requires institutional capacity-building for law enforcement, a greater understanding of different forms of violence and the sensitive treatment of victims to increase access to justice.

Public awareness-raising campaigns are important to shift norms, attitudes and behaviours; inform women of their rights; and encourage victims of sexual harassment to seek redress. Prevention policies and trainings in the workplace are also important.

Gender-based violence must be approached as a human rights violation. The lack of consent and not the use of force should be the defining characteristic of the crime of rape.

Sources: ILO, 2020; OHCHR, 2023; see the CEDAW Committee's General recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19 (2017), CEDAW/C/GC/35.

Human trafficking has been the subject of new and reformed laws in various countries.

- Most countries have either adopted comprehensive laws with punitive, protective and preventive measures to combat trafficking or have penal measures to address this crime.
  - **Algeria, Libya,** the **State of Palestine, Somalia** and **Yemen** criminalize some forms of trafficking, such as human trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation.[38]
  - **Djibouti,**[39] **Iraq,**[40] **Jordan**[41] and **Tunisia**[42] have taken punitive measures against offenders and/or protective measures in the form of legal assistance and the provision of shelters, among others, to support victims.[43]
  - The **United Arab Emirates** approved amendments to its law on combating human trafficking crimes, which were introduced to protect victims from punishment for offences committed as a consequence of being trafficked.[44]
- Migrant domestic workers are not protected under labour laws in most countries in the region, making them more vulnerable to trafficking.[45] For more on labour migration, see the chapter on SDG 10.

The number of trafficking cases investigated and prosecuted and resulting in convictions is relatively small compared to the extent of trafficking. This underlines the need for greater enforcement of laws.

More consideration should be given to addressing the vulnerability of migrant workers to trafficking, including by:

- Strengthening laws and policies that enhance access to travel documents as well as processes regulating employment for migrants to reduce their dependency on their employer/sponsor.
- Amending labour laws to cover and better protect domestic workers.

Sources: ILO, 2017; Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, 2022; League of Arab States, UNODC and AMAN, 2014.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Mostly middle-income countries have taken steps to close legislative loopholes to stop the harmful practice of child marriage.[46]

- Most countries in the region have set 18 years as the legal age for marriage while allowing legal exceptions. Marriage at a younger age is often permitted at the discretion of judges or guardians, provided that a girl has reached puberty.[47] Enforcement and implementation vary widely.[48]
- Some countries, including **Jordan,**[49] **Lebanon**[50] and **Tunisia,**[51] have introduced changes to their penal codes so that aggressors can no longer escape punishment by marrying their victims.
- Prior to the ongoing conflict in the **Syrian Arab Republic,** child marriage was declining in the region at a faster rate than in other regions of the world. The eruption of additional conflicts in several Arab countries has caused this trend to reverse. In particular, child marriage has increased in **Yemen** and among Syrian refugees in **Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon** and Türkiye.[52]

Ending child marriage requires coherent legislation that recognizes 18 years as the minimum age of marriage under any marriage law (civil or religious). It should enact safeguards against loopholes that allow for parental or judicial consent and exoneration by marriage.

While all countries in the region have acceded to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, they have not fully harmonized national laws on child marriage with the Convention.

Sources: UNFPA and UNICEF, 2020; ESCWA and others, 2022.



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Some countries in which female genital mutilation is common have passed or amended legislation to criminalize it, toughen penalties against perpetrators and/or eliminate medicalization of the practice.

- The medicalization of female genital mutilation has been intensifying in recent years, especially in **Egypt** and the **Sudan.**[53]
- Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, **Egypt, Mauritania, Oman** and the **Sudan** have taken measures to criminalize female genital mutilation.
  - **Egypt** introduced amendments to the Penal Code criminalizing female genital mutilation in 2016 and deleted all references to medicalization.[54]
  - **Mauritania** passed the 2017 Law on Reproductive Health, which imposes a ban on female genital mutilation and defines penalties for perpetrators.[55]
  - The **Sudan** introduced legal provisions to criminalize female genital mutilation in 2020 and adopted a roadmap to enforce it in 2021.[56]
  - The executive regulations for the Child Law issued by **Oman** in 2019 consider female genital mutilation a traditional practice harmful to the health of children and introduce prison penalties for perpetrators.[57]
- Though female genital mutilation is not a common practice in **Tunisia,** the country amended its criminal code provisions in 2017 to prohibit it.[58]

Despite the criminalization of female genital mutilation in some countries, enforcement presents a significant challenge. Girls and young women continue to die from complications related to the practice.

Source: ESCWA and others, 2019a.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights in the region

Several factors have hindered gains in sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in the Arab region over the past decade. These include prevailing discriminatory social norms against women and girls, the cultural sensitivity of the topic, and inadequate resources and competing priorities.

The general approach to sexual and reproductive health is not rights-based, despite country efforts to comply with relevant global instruments. Legal frameworks largely do not support well-informed individual choices. Barriers are often present in laws and policies related to contraception, child marriage and female genital mutilation. For instance, unmarried women and adolescent girls may face obstacles to contraception and family planning related to marital status or requirements for third-party authorization, which can leave them with unmet needs for services. Generally, there is a reluctance to teach young people about sexuality due to cultural sensitivities, leading many to resort to inaccurate sources of information.

Access to and the quality of sexual and reproductive health care vary by country, social class, displacement or marital status, and geographic area (urban or rural). Sexual and reproductive health services are not fully integrated in primary health care. Challenging prevailing social norms and practices will be key to meeting the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls along with following a rights-based approach.

Tunisia has recently taken steps to strengthen sexual and reproductive autonomy and promote greater access to sexual and reproductive health services without discrimination through its National Plan on Sexual and Reproductive Health (2021-2030). The plan aims to strengthen autonomy and ensure the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all without discrimination throughout the life cycle. Adolescents are mentioned in particular in relation to access to comprehensive sexuality education. The plan also supports the engagement of men and boys on gender equality issues and the promotion of positive masculinities. It seeks to sensitize them on sexual and reproductive health issues, in particular to prevent gender-based violence. For more on sexual and reproductive health, see the chapter on SDG 3.

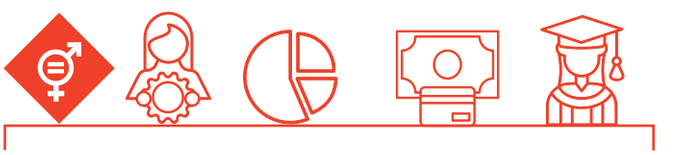
Sources: UNICEF and others, 2021; UNFPA and AUB, 2022; Tunisia's Plan National de Santé Sexuelle et Reproductive (2021-2030).

2. Women's economic participation

Despite increasing levels of education among Arab women and the commitment of most countries to increase the share of women in the labour force, the region has the world's lowest rate of women's economic participation. Driven by patriarchal norms and stereotypes, challenges to women in joining and staying in the labour force abound. They include harassment in the workplace, unequal distribution of care responsibilities, a lack of equal opportunity, and restrictions on labour and other rights that affect women's mobility.

Macroeconomic policies are often considered gender neutral even as they impact men and women differently.[59] The region has an urgent need for gender-responsive macroeconomic policies that help rectify gender inequalities and promote economic opportunities for women, ultimately fostering inclusive growth and development. This encompasses prioritizing decent work in the formal and informal sectors (for more on decent employment, see the chapter on SDG 8); adequate social protection throughout the life cycle (see the chapter on SDG 1); investment in social infrastructure to address care work deficits; transportation services that reach the working poor (see the chapter on SDG 11); the expansion of fiscal space through a tax system that redresses gender inequality and provides adequate public resources; and gender-sensitive access to finance that responds to women's specific needs.[60]

Trends in policies that Arab countries are using to support women's economic participation are highlighted below.



Some countries at all income levels have introduced care-related labour market and social protection laws that address discrimination against women in employment and facilitate their participation in the labour force. Relatively recent care-related reforms to promote gender equality in the workplace include:

- Maternity-related benefits and job protection reforms that help women to balance motherhood and professional life, such as measures to prohibit the dismissal of pregnant workers, support maternity leave entitlements, require the government to cover maternity leave benefits or provide childcare subsidies or paid nursing breaks.
  - **Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates** introduced legislation that prohibits the dismissal of pregnant workers.[61,62]
  - **Iraq** increased the duration of paid maternity leave to at least 14 weeks following international standards,[63,64] and the **United Arab Emirates** adjusted the labour law to increase the maternity leave entitlement from 45 to 60 days.
  - **Iraq** granted nursing mothers a one-hour nursing break per day that counts as a working hour.[65]
  - **Bahrain** now accounts for childcare-related absences in calculating pension benefits.[66]
  - **Jordan** has established subsidies for childcare, contributing to the cost of nurseries for working mothers through its maternity fund.[67]
- Legislation addressing paternity leave that underlines the role of men in childcare.[68]
  - **Jordan** and the **United Arab Emirates** introduced legislation on paid paternity leave for three and five days, respectively.[69]
  - **Saudi Arabia** amended existing legislation to increase paternity leave from one to three days.
  - **Morocco** increased paid paternity leave from 3 to 15 days for public sector employees.[70]
- Work-family balance measures to support women to stay in the workforce.
  - **Jordan** established a definition and regulation of flexible work covering men and women workers.[71]

The enforcement of laws supporting women in the workplace is inconsistent, and women often lack a practical recourse for violations.

Some issues arise around transferring the legal obligation to employers to pay for maternity leave, which is the case in most Arab countries. This may discourage employers from employing, retaining or promoting women of childbearing age, thus disadvantaging their employment prospects. Maternity schemes anchored in social security systems can have more positive outcomes for women.

Provisions on paternity leave, although inadequate in covering a limited number of days, represent an initial step towards the greater involvement of men in childcare responsibilities. In this sense, they can help fight gender stereotypes.

Across the region, the scope of care-related legislation is limited. It excludes many workers, including part-time, informal and migrant domestic workers.

Efforts to reform legislation pertaining to care are dispersed. They could benefit from a more holistic, coordinated approach.

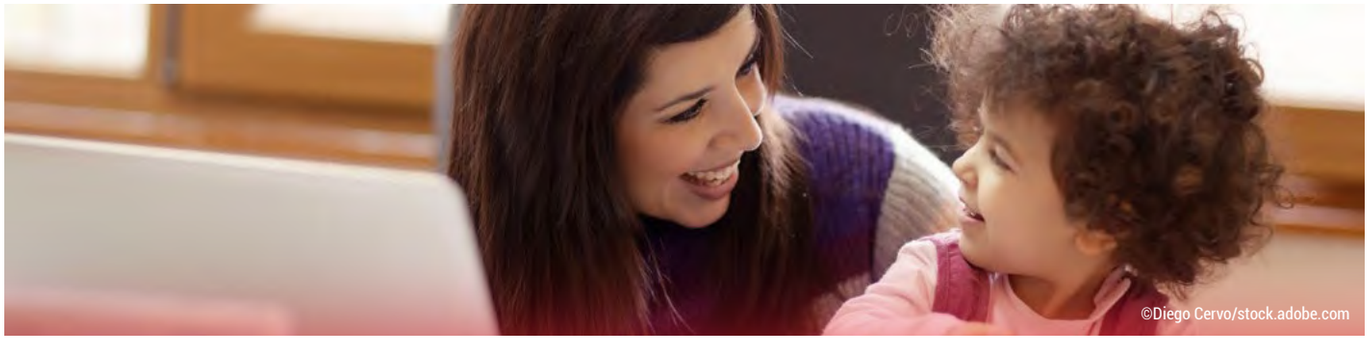
Sources: ESCWA and others, 2019a; ESCWA, n.d.

Several Arab countries have equalized the retirement age for women and men, yet some countries have kept the option for early retirement for women. In six countries (Iraq, Jordan, Qatar, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic and the United Arab Emirates), national legislation still stipulates a lower retirement age for women.[72,73]

The early exclusion of women from the workforce:

- Limits their opportunities for promotion and leadership positions.
- Reduces their pensions, considering a more limited number of years in employment. This effectively translates into large income inequalities over their lifetimes and consequences such as greater risks of poverty in old age.

Source: ESCWA and others, 2019a.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Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, only a few countries, mostly Gulf Cooperation Council countries, have amended discriminatory labour laws limiting the types of employment available to women. Restricted jobs are considered strenuous or hazardous or involve night work.

- **Bahrain** and the **United Arab Emirates** removed legal restrictions on the employment of women in arduous/dangerous jobs and their ability to work at night.[74,75] The 2023 amendments to the Labour Law of Jordan cancelled restrictions on women's work.[76]
- **Saudi Arabia** removed similar restrictions but left it to the discretion of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development to determine which jobs are considered dangerous or harmful to women as well as appropriate working hours, in line with the country's commitments under international conventions.[77]

Work restrictions that strictly apply to women go against women's right to choose their employment, as stipulated in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. International standards require labour laws to be gender neutral and safeguard occupational health and safety and the free choice of work for all, regardless of sex.

Source: ESCWA and others, 2019a.

Countries at different income levels have taken legal steps mandating equal pay for men and women for work of equal value.[78]

- Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, four Arab countries have introduced legal provisions mandating equal pay for work of equal value: **Bahrain** (2022), **Iraq** (2017), **Jordan** (2020) and the **United Arab Emirates** (2021).[79] Eight countries did so prior to 2015.[80]
- Some countries have legislation on equal pay that is narrow in scope, applying equal pay for the same type of work.[81]

The enforcement of equal pay legislation could be strengthened by using "pay transparency"[a] policy instruments. These aim to improve accessibility to pay information and address possible information asymmetries to help bridge the gender pay gap.

Source: ILO, 2022.

[a] Pay transparency tools include requiring employers to produce pay disclosure reports or equal pay audits, to engage with employee representatives on the implementation of pay transparency measures, and to use digital tools to enhance monitoring and reporting.

A handful of Arab countries have taken legislative action to bar discrimination in access to credit based on gender.

- Policies and procedures, including rules on access to credit, often institutionalize discriminatory practices and cultural norms, restricting women's access to finance.[82]
- Between 2020 and 2022, **Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates** have encouraged women's entrepreneurship by prohibiting gender-based discrimination in financial services and facilitating women's access to credit.[83,84]

Access to land and property ownership, generally acquired by Arab women through inheritance or marriage, impacts women's entrepreneurship and chances to obtain credit.

Gender-unequal inheritance laws, unfavourable marital property laws and the lack of protection for women against disinheritance undermine women's decision-making power and economic independence, and their ability to secure financing to start, maintain or scale up a business, or to invest in high-performing sectors.

Legislation that gives women equal property rights is key for their social and economic empowerment.

Sources: ESCWA, 2023a; ESCWA and others, 2019a.

A few countries have introduced legislative amendments to enhance the mobility of women.

- **Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Oman,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and the **United Arab Emirates** have addressed issues pertaining to male guardianship over women,[85] enacting laws and measures that affect the mobility of women and power dynamics within households.[86] Examples include removing restrictions on women applying for passports, travelling abroad, leaving the house or getting a job without a guardian's consent.
  - **Iraq, Jordan, Oman** and the **United Arab Emirates** have removed restrictions on women applying for passports without a guardian's consent.
  - The **United Arab Emirates** ended restrictions on women travelling abroad without a guardian's consent as well as on women getting a job without their husband's permission. It also erased the legal obligation for women to obey husbands.
  - The **Syrian Arab Republic** and the **United Arab Emirates** stopped restrictions on women leaving home without their husband's permission.
  - **Bahrain** and the **United Arab Emirates** formally allow women to head households.

- After introducing a number of legal amendments, removing restrictions on women travelling and applying for passports without the consent of a guardian, and ending their obligation to obey their husbands and not to leave home without permission, **Saudi Arabia** in 2022 again enacted legislation limiting women's right to travel and mandating that they obey their husbands.[87]

Besides impeding the empowerment of women within the family and marriage, guardianship considerations reduce women's freedom of movement and ability to compete in the labour market, and could dissuade employers from recruiting or promoting women workers.

Source: ESCWA and others, 2019a.



Legislative efforts by Saudi Arabia to support the participation of women in the labour force

Driven by its Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia introduced reforms to its labour law to provide a solid framework for promoting the economic empowerment of women. These include provisions explicitly prohibiting discrimination against women in remuneration, guaranteeing the right to equal pay for work of equal value, and emphasizing equality in the right to work. Dismissal for pregnancy or illness resulting from pregnancy or childbirth is prohibited, and women are guaranteed a 10-week paid maternity leave, albeit covered by the employer. Reforms to the social insurance system equalized the retirement age for women and men. Legislation on combating sexual harassment requires all entities to adopt measures to prevent harassment in workplaces and allows civil remedies.

The reforms represent a step in the right direction but remain incomplete in light of the persistence of the guardianship system. This hampers the effectiveness and even counters the impact of the changes being made.

Source: ESCWA, 2023b.

D. Policies to leave no one behind: intersectionality and gender equality

Women and girls across the Arab region face structural barriers that influence all aspects of their lives. Gender intersects with other factors, including race, ethnicity, class, age, disability and location, compounding inequality. Conflict and instability further worsen the situation. The interplay of inequalities puts some groups of women at a higher risk of being left behind, making it more challenging to promote gender equality and achieve the SDGs. It is important to consider the different layers of inequality that women face in diverse contexts. This can improve the focus and effectiveness of development efforts to reduce exclusion and ensure that gender equality measures have wide-reaching impacts.[88]

Many Arab governments have introduced policies or initiatives that target more vulnerable groups of women. Rarely, however, are these designed to respond to intersecting inequalities.

Table 5.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

 **Women from poorer rural areas** largely do not have access to social protection and quality health care, with a larger proportion working in agriculture compared to men. They have limited access to land and other agricultural assets, and lack income security as they tend to work in family businesses or as daily wage workers on large farms.[a] Limited access to land represents one of the biggest challenges for women in areas where most economic activity depends on it.[b]	In 2019, **Morocco** adopted Law No. 62.17 on the administrative supervision of communities living on collective land and the management of their property, granting women equal access to this type of land.[c] This was facilitated by a grass-roots women's movement that influenced the national debate on the issue and changed community power dynamics.[d]
 **Women and girls with disabilities** are less likely to have access to education, including TVET, as well as employment and health care. This affects their life prospects. Further, their reproductive needs are often overlooked, and non-mainstream health services, such as rehabilitation therapy and the provision of assistive devices, are not consistently provided and covered. Challenges vary within countries and communities. In emergency settings, adolescent girls with disabilities are at a heightened risk of sexual abuse and exploitation.[e]	Law No. 20 of 2017 on the Rights of Persons with Disability in **Jordan** stipulates that the Ministry of Health, the Food and Drug Administration and other relevant authorities must guarantee physical and content accessibility to ensure that women with disabilities fully benefit from reproductive health programmes and services. It also introduces, among others, a quota system that requires institutions, depending on their size, to reserve a certain percentage of job vacancies for persons with disabilities. Article 4.f. underlines equality in rights and duties between women and men with disabilities.[f]
 **Women in the informal economy** are often not covered by labour laws and work in poor conditions with low pay. They are usually vulnerable to abuse and do not benefit from social protection schemes, including pensions, health coverage and paid leave. Without social benefits, women are prone to poverty in old age.[g]	With women representing 36 per cent of micro-entrepreneurs,[h,i] **Morocco** passed Law No. 114.13 of 2015 on the Status of Auto-entrepreneurs to encourage the formalization of micro-entrepreneurial businesses. Among other provisions, it provides for social and medical coverage.[j]
 **Migrant women workers** are mostly employed in industry, agriculture or as domestic workers.[k] They are often not protected by labour laws, facing barriers in accessing protective and other services, and are unaware of their rights, making them vulnerable to trafficking.[l] Abused female migrant domestic workers who flee their employers[m] and other women migrant workers in irregular situations face particularly high risks of trafficking.	Domestic workers are covered under Article 3 of the Labour Law in **Iraq**. Protection is provided through provisions barring discrimination and forced labour.[n] The open-door migration policy followed by **Morocco**, particularly the 2017 mass regularization of more than 50,000 irregular migrants, including all irregular women migrants, is a notable step towards protecting women migrants' rights and halting the trafficking of women and girls.[o]

Table 5.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

	Refugee women and girls may be socially isolated, with legal limitations on their ability to work and no available information or assistance to help them join the labour market.[p] When they do, they work in the informal sector as daily wage earners.[q] Refugee and internally displaced women and girls who lack civil documentation face a higher risk of trafficking and exploitation.[r]	In **Egypt,** refugees are entitled to work under the Labour Law. The Egypt Response Plans[s] recognized the special situation of refugee women by maintaining a focus, among others, on improving their sustainable livelihoods and self-reliance through skills development and self or wage employment.[t]

[a] OECD, 2020.
[b] OECD, ILO and CAWTAR, 2020.
[c] See Morocco, Voluntary National Review 2020.
[d] OECD, ILO and CAWTAR, 2020.
[e] UNICEF and others, 2021.
[f] Jordanian Law No. (20) of 2017 on the Rights of Persons with Disability.
[g] See UN Women on "Women in Informal Economy", accessed on 5 April 2023.
[h] See the Auto-entrepreneur website, accessed on 31 July 2023.
[i] OECD, 2020.
[j] Moroccan Law No.114.13 of 19 February 2015 on the Status of Auto-entrepreneurs.
[k] ESCWA, 2020.
[l] ESCWA and others, 2019a.
[m] UNICEF and others, 2021.
[n] ESCWA and others, 2018 (Profile on Iraq).
[o] OHCHR, 2018.
[p] See the ILO on "Gender Equality in the Arab States", accessed on 5 April 2023.
[q] OECD, 2020.
[r] UNICEF and others, 2021.
[s] OECD, 2020.
[t] UNHCR, 2020.


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Nationality laws, infringements on human rights and increased risks of vulnerability

Arab nationality laws often reflect and perpetuate discriminatory gender norms. Reforms have stalled over more than a decade, with the majority of countries either denying women the right to confer nationality to their children and spouses or limiting this right. This results in significant human rights violations for women and their families. It violates international laws ratified by countries and has far-reaching consequences for all aspects of family life.

Without citizenship, children and foreign spouses may be subject to a range of restrictions in their employment and education opportunities as well as in their ability to open bank accounts and own or inherit property. This increases their vulnerability, potentially resulting in intergenerational poverty. The risk of statelessness escalates. Stateless women and girls are more likely to be trafficked, while stateless girls are more threatened by child, early and forced marriage.

The intersection of gender discrimination in nationality laws and informal child marriage, a regional challenge on the rise in the wake of massive displacement, increases the chance that children born of such unions will lack the documentation needed to secure citizenship. This risk is also high for children born to low-skilled migrant women workers, who may face daunting legal and practical challenges in registering births and conferring their nationality.

To date, only seven Arab countries grant women the right to pass their nationality to their children (**Algeria,** the **Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia** and **Yemen**).The Constitution in **Iraq** prescribes equality in passing nationality but the Nationality Law only upholds this right for women when children are born inside the country. The Interim Constitution in **Somalia** stipulates equality in granting nationality but the Citizenship Law was not updated to reflect this. The Interim Constitution in the **Sudan** also guarantees equality in granting nationality but this was not reflected in the Nationality Law. **Algeria** guarantees equal rights for women to pass their nationality to their foreign husbands.

Sources: ESCWA and others, 2018; ESCWA and others, 2022; UNHCR, 2023; UNICEF and others, 2021; ESCWA and others, 2021.

E. The financing landscape

Adequate and well-targeted allocations in national budgets to eliminate gender discrimination and promote equality are fundamental for progress in achieving SDG 5.[89] Nonetheless, available information shows that such allocations are generally inadequate in Arab countries.

Existing budgetary allocations tend to cluster mainly around ending violence against women:[90]

- Government entities in six Arab countries (**Bahrain, Iraq, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia** and **Tunisia**) have made budgetary pledges to implement existing legislation on combatting violence against women. These are not binding, however.
- Only the **United Arab Emirates** makes binding budgetary commitments to ending violence against women, allocating funds to relevant plans and programmes.
- There are no budgetary pledges to enforce legislation on ending violence against women in other countries.

Only **Iraq** and the **United Arab Emirates** have developed a national strategy or plan of action on sexual and reproductive health with sufficient budgetary, human and administrative resources allocated for implementation. Eleven other countries[91] have a national strategy or plan of action but have not allocated resources for implementation.[92]

Gender-responsive budgeting helps to prioritize gender equality in national policies. It examines public budget allocations, spending and taxation using a gender perspective, and consequently supports budgetary reallocations to better promote gender equality and the advancement of women.[93] Some aspects that prevent women from entering the job market and that could

be addressed through fiscal policy include: inadequate access to quality education (see the chapter on SDG 4), insufficient provisions for maternity and parental care leave, the lack of mobility and gaps in equal pay for equal work.[94]

Gender-responsive budgeting initiatives vary considerably between countries, and are generally fragmented.[95,96] They involve governments more than other actors,[97] and have mostly focused on enhancing access to education and health and increasing female labour force participation. There is room for more effective use of fiscal policies for women empowerment, such as to address discriminatory tax systems. Barriers to gender-responsive budgeting include a lack of transparency in budgetary processes, budget deficits and limited fiscal space, and inadequate disaggregated data and statistical capacities.[98] No Arab country has yet developed a comprehensive framework for gender-responsive budgeting but most have started applying some gender-budgeting tools, as shown in the table 5.2.[99]

Table 5.2
Status of gender-responsive budgeting tools in selected Arab countries

Gender-responsive budgeting tools	Algeria	Egypt	Iraq	Lebanon	Morocco	State of Palestine	Tunisia
Gender budgeting framework[a]			x				x
Gender provisions in public finance and budget laws		x					
Gender budgeting statement			x		x		x
Gender impact assessments	x						
Budget circular and statements include instructions related to gender budgeting							
Performance indicators related to gender equality goals					x	x	
Fiscal data disaggregated by gender		x			x		
Budget classification with a gender perspective		x					
Ex-post gender impact assessments of budget expenditures			x				
Audit of the budget covers gender aspects							

Source: METAC, 2019, p. 5.
Note: The table is based on answers provided to a country questionnaire developed by the Fiscal Affairs Department of the International Monetary Fund and distributed prior to a workshop on gender-responsive budgeting in Amman, 12-14 February 2019.
[a] "Iraq and Tunisia's answers [...] may be overstated [...] likely due to different interpretations of [the] gender budgeting framework across countries".

Country-specific approaches that take into consideration how public spending is managed are best suited to advance the use of gender-responsive budgeting. These approaches should be developed with a long-term perspective while accounting for existing domestic constraints. Capacity-building opportunities should be provided for all sectoral ministries responsible for the design and implementation of development policies and programmes and the mainstreaming of gender.[100]

Gender-budgeting in Morocco

Work on gender-budgeting in Morocco started in 2002 and has since advanced gradually. In 2006, the Ministry of Finance and Privatization (now Ministry of Economy and Finance) issued its first Gender Report with assessments of four ministries and information on existing gender gaps and future performance goals. The Gender Report has evolved over time to cover 31 public entities responsible for 80 per cent of the national budget.

Morocco has linked its gender budget work to its national development strategy. The Plan for Equality for 2012-2016 included 143 measures that support gender equality in education, health and the labour market. Amendments to legislation were introduced to remove discriminatory provisions and promote gender equality.

In 2014, an Organic Finance Law was approved requiring the consideration of gender equality in outlining performance objectives, results and indicators in all sector budgets. It mandates the inclusion of the Gender Report in the yearly Finance Bill. Efforts to collect sex-disaggregated data have sought to improve understanding of the development needs of women and men.

Source: IMF, 2016.



F. Regional dimensions

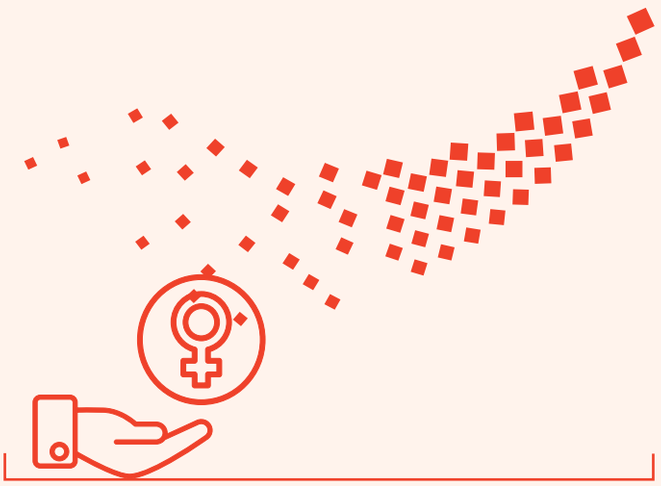
- **Promoting legislative cooperation at the regional level:** Established in 2014, the Coalition of Women Parliamentarians from Arab Countries to Combat Violence Against Women is a network that brings together women parliamentarians from 13 Arab countries.[101] They share experiences and good practices on ending violence and discrimination against women and girls, and join forces to advocate legislative changes.

  Through the collaboration with national parliaments and other governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in five Arab countries in 2017, progress was made in three countries on removing legal provisions that allowed rapists to avoid prosecution by marrying their victims.[102] The Coalition also developed the first regional framework to eliminate violence against women. The Regional Declaration to Combat Violence against Women and Girls was endorsed by the League of Arab States in December 2022.[103] Regional frameworks and their monitoring mechanisms help incorporate international standards into national legislation.[104]

  Devising and endorsing a regional roadmap for addressing common shortcomings in legal systems on gender equality could help advance the elimination of gender-based violence. Such a roadmap should bolster coherent implementation of laws on violence against women as well as the mainstreaming of gender in all laws, policies and strategies to help ensure consistency and connect theory and practice.[105]

- **Strengthening regional cooperation on comparable data collection on violence against women:** Data are key in informing legislation, policies and programmes to effectively address violence against women. Currently, data are not comparable at the regional level. Data gaps in countries are substantial.[106] Greater cooperation to support the production of comparable data following globally agreed methodologies and ethical standards and to further develop data collection systems and tools would be beneficial, including through South-South cooperation.

- **Providing a platform for long-term constructive engagement and partnership with prominent religious institutions in the region to inform changes in personal status laws and help activate the realization of State human rights obligations:** This is an important entry point for legislative reform, given that personal status laws are based on religion and religious interpretations, and considering existing power alliances and interests between institutionalized religious structures and political structures. It could facilitate sustained interactions among religious authorities, decision-makers, and development and human rights actors, notably national women's movements, following an egalitarian religious discourse emphasizing progressive religious interpretations. This process could help support advances towards equality and justice for women by closing loopholes in legislation and ensuring proper enforcement of laws and policies to end violence against women and promote economic empowerment.



Endnotes

1. The regional average does not include the Comoros and Mauritania.
2. UNICEF and others, 2021.
3. Countries where the practice is prevalent include Djibouti, Egypt, the Kurdistan region of Iraq, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen (UNICEF and others, 2021).
4. The figure for Somalia is for 2020; for Djibouti, it is for 2019; and for Iraq, it is for 2018 (ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, accessed on 9 January 2024).
5. The regional average includes countries for which data are available (ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, accessed on 9 January 2024).
6. See the ILOSTAT database (accessed on 9 January 2024).
7. ESCWA, 2022.
8. ESCWA and others, 2019a.
9. UNICEF and others, 2021.
10. United Nations, 2017.
11. ESCWA and others, 2019a.
12. Ibid.
13. UN Women's Global Database on Violence against Women, National Profile for Algeria, accessed on 17 January 2023.
14. ESCWA and others, 2019a.
15. Law No. 204 Amending Law No. 293/2014 of 7/5/2014 on the Protection of Women and Other Family Members from Domestic Violence, issued on 30 December 2020, Official Gazette, Number 1 of 07/01/2021.
16. ESCWA and others, 2022 (Profile on the United Arab Emirates).
17. ESCWA and others, 2019a.
18. Countries with such legislation include Bahrain, Kuwait, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia.
19. ESCWA and others, 2022.
20. See the Gender Justice and the Law Portal, "detailed information" section, accessed on 10 May 2023. This section of the portal does not contain information on Algeria, the Comoros, Djibouti, Libya and Mauritania.
21. See the NORMLEX Information System on International Labour Standards, Observation (CEACR) – adopted 2012, published 102nd ILC session (2013).
22. ESCWA and others, 2018 (Profiles on Djibouti and Libya); ESCWA and others, 2022.
23. See Algeria, Voluntary National Review 2019.
24. See the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law website, "Reforms"section, accessed on 27 December 2022.
25. ESCWA and others, 2022 (Profile on Lebanon).
26. ESCWA and others, 2022 (Profile on Morocco).
27. ESCWA and others, 2022 (Profile on Saudi Arabia).
28. ESCWA and others, 2022 (Profile on Jordan).
29. ESCWA and others, 2018 (Profile on Libya).
30. UN Women, n.d.
31. ESCWA and others, 2022 (Profile on Morocco).
32. See the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law website, "Reforms" section, accessed on 27 December 2022.
33. ESCWA and others, 2022 (Profile on Lebanon).
34. See the Gender Justice and the Law Portal, "detailed information" section, accessed on 13 June 2023.
35. Ibid.
36. ESCWA and others, 2019a.
37. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women stipulates that "sexual assault, including rape, [be] characterized as a crime against the right to personal security and physical, sexual and psychological integrity". See the CEDAW Committee's General recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19 (2017), CEDAW/C/GC/35, p. 12.
38. ESCWA and others, 2018 (Profiles on Algeria and Libya); ESCWA and others, 2022.
39. ESCWA and others, 2018 (Profile on Djibouti).
40. ESCWA and IOM, 2017.
41. See UN Women's Global Database on Violence against Women, National Profile for Jordan, accessed on 17 January 2023.
42. ESCWA and IOM, 2017.
43. Other countries that have adopted comprehensive anti-trafficking laws that provide punitive, protective and preventive measures are: Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic and United Arab Emirates.
44. ESCWA and IOM, 2017.
45. UNICEF and others, 2021.
46. The harmful practice of child marriage disproportionately affects women and girls, with its prevalence increasing in times of conflict and displacement.
47. ESCWA and others, 2019a.

48. UNICEF, 2017.
49. See Jordan, First Voluntary National Review 2017.
50. See Lebanon, Voluntary National Review 2018.
51. See Tunisia, Voluntary National Review 2019.
52. UNICEF, 2021.
53. See UNFPA's website page on "Female Genital Mutilation".
54. See Egypt, Third Voluntary National Review 2021; UNFPA, 2018.
55. See Mauritania, Voluntary National Review 2019; UNFPA and UNICEF, 2017.
56. UNICEF, 2020.
57. ESCWA and others, 2022 (Profile on Oman).
58. ESCWA and others, 2022 (Profile on Tunisia).
59. UN Women, 2015.
60. UN Women, 2017.
61. See the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law website, "Reforms" section, accessed on 27 December 2022.
62. The labour law prohibits employers from firing women on the grounds of pregnancy or maternity leave in 18 Arab countries (ESCWA, 2023b).
63. Five Arab countries (Djibouti, Iraq, Libya, Morocco and Somalia) guarantee maternity leave according to international standards (ESCWA and others, 2018 (Profiles on Djibouti and Libya)); ESCWA and others, 2022.
64. Governments in only four Arab countries (Algeria, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia) cover maternity leave benefits. In Egypt, the Government covers 75 per cent of maternity leave benefits for private sector employees; the employer covers the remaining 25 per cent (ESCWA, 2023b).
65. ESCWA, n.d.
66. See the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law website, "Reforms" section, accessed on 27 December 2022.
67. See Jordan, First Voluntary National Review 2017.
68. This helps fight stereotypes on the role of men and women in childcare provision and in paid work (ESCWA and others, 2019a).
69. See the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law website, "Reforms" section, accessed on 27 December 2022.
70. ESCWA, n.d.
71. Ibid.
72. See the Gender Justice and the Law Portal, "detailed information" section, accessed on 13 June 2023.
73. See the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law website,"Reforms" section, accessed on 27 December 2022.
74. Ibid.
75. ESCWA and others, 2018 (Profile on Bahrain).
76. Official Gazette, Law No. (10) for the year 2023 amending the Labour Law.
77. ESCWA and others, 2022 (Profile on Saudi Arabia).
78. Unequal economic opportunities for women manifest in discrimination in pay based on gender. This is rooted in traditional roles that society assigns to women and men. ILO standards require equal pay for work of equal value regardless of the type of work involved. This is to guarantee greater equality by accounting for historically undervalued jobs primarily undertaken by women (ESCWA and others, 2019a).
79. See the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law website, "Reforms" section, accessed on 27 December 2022.
80. Algeria (1991), the Comoros (2014), Djibouti (2007), Libya (2011), Morocco (2005), Saudi Arabia (2012), Somalia (1974) and the Syrian Arab Republic (2010).
81. They include: Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, the Sudan and Tunisia. See the Gender Justice and the Law Portal, "detailed information" section, accessed on 13 June 2023.
82. ESCWA and others, 2019a.
83. See the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law website, "Reforms" section, accessed on 27 December 2022.
84. Two other countries in the region have legislation that prohibit gender-based discrimination in access to credit: Djibouti (1996) and Morocco (2005).
85. The male guardianship system grants men the authority to decide on behalf of women under their guardianship on matters regarding work and travel, limiting their employment options.
86. See the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law website, "Reforms" section, accessed on 27 December 2022.
87. Ibid.
88. ESCWA, 2018.
89. IMF, 2016.
90. See the Gender Justice and the Law Portal, "detailed information" section, accessed on 3 May 2023.
91. They are Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan and Tunisia.
92. See the Gender Justice and the Law Portal, "detailed information" section, accessed on 3 May 2023.
93. See the gender-responsive budgeting definition on the ESCWA website.
94. METAC, 2019.
95. ESCWA, UNDP and UNICEF, 2022.
96. Countries that have taken steps towards gender-responsive budgeting are Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.
97. UN Women, 2016.

98. ESCWA, UNDP and UNICEF, 2022.
99. METAC, 2019.
100. Ibid.
101. The countries are Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan and Tunisia.
102. The Westminster Foundation for Democracy programme, Enhancing women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), accessed on 14 May 2023.
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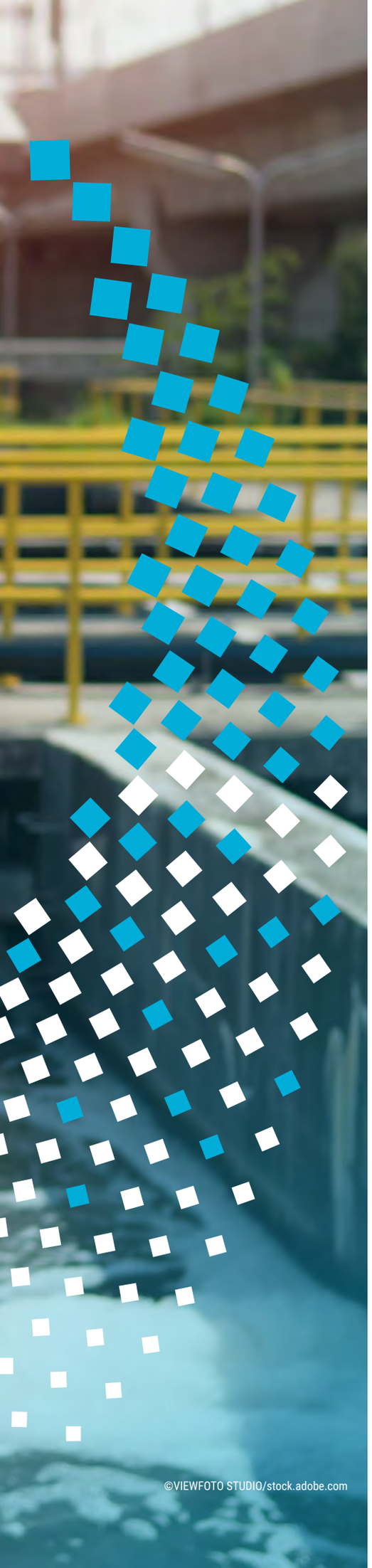


6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

SDG 6

Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

A. Introduction

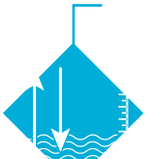
Water scarcity poses formidable challenges to achieving water security and sustainable development in the Arab region, with far-reaching implications for food and energy security, economic progress, livelihoods and human health. Given the gravity of the situation, the region's progress so far on SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) remains insufficient. Access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services is uneven both among and within countries. Furthermore, water-use efficiency has regressed, and freshwater withdrawals have soared to highly unsustainable levels. More efforts are needed to implement integrated water resource management (IWRM), including through transboundary water cooperation. The region's pursuit of SDG 6 is also challenged by climate change and a lack of adequate financing. Notably, official development assistance directed to sustainable water management has declined, underscoring the urgent need for renewed commitment and investment in WASH-related initiatives.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).



The **proportion of the population with access to safely managed drinking water services** rose from 73 per cent in 2015 to 75 per cent in 2022. The **proportion of the population using safely managed sanitation services** increased from 53 per cent to 60 per cent over the same period. Nevertheless, these modest rates of progress are insufficient to ensure universal access to safely managed WASH services by 2030. Large disparities persist among and within countries, particularly between rural and urban areas.



Water-use efficiency, measured as the ratio of value added to the volume of water use, declined from $10.65 to $9.65 per cubic metre from 2015 to 2020.



Freshwater withdrawals increased from 101 per cent to 120 per cent of available resources from 2015 to 2020. Water stress is higher than in any other region, and six times higher than the global average of 18 per cent.



The average **IWRM implementation score,** assessed on a scale from 0 to 100, increased from 45 in 2017 to 50 in 2020. It remained within the medium-low range, slightly below the global average score of 54.



Only 30 per cent of **transboundary basins** in the region had an operational arrangement for water cooperation in 2020.



The amount of **official development assistance received for water and sanitation** declined by 34 per cent from 2015 to 2021.

The region faces significant shortfalls in data to track progress on SDG 6. Bridging data gaps is crucial for informing policymaking, implementation, and follow-up and review.

For an up-to-date view of SDG 6 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

The Arab region was the most water-scarce region in the world in 2020:

- 19 States were water scarce, with less than 1,000 cubic metres of renewable water resources per capita per year.
- 13 States experienced absolute water scarcity with less than 500 cubic metres of renewable water resources per capita per year.
- 90 per cent of the Arab population lived in countries experiencing water scarcity.
- 50.8 million people lacked access to basic drinking water services.

Sources: FAO, 2023; WHO and UNICEF, 2023.

On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 6

- Localize policy approaches to ensure access to safe water and sanitation by tailoring services to the needs of those in remote areas, refugees, displaced communities and slum dwellers. This includes encouraging the adoption of low-cost, sustainable technologies suitable for local contexts, such as rainwater harvesting and sanitation options that do not require extensive infrastructure.
- Strengthen IWRM by creating effective cross-sectoral coordination frameworks involving all groups of water users (agriculture, industry, energy, tourism, etc.) and enhancing transboundary cooperation arrangements.
- Build partnerships with universities and research centres to bolster science-based analyses and approaches that make water projects measurable, monitorable and attractive to long-term private investments.
- Leverage public-private partnerships to attract private sector financing for WASH infrastructure development and technology transfer.
- Invest in capacity-building programmes to design water projects that demonstrate a solid climate rationale and can attract grants and concessional financing, especially in least developed and conflict-affected countries.
- Adopt and localize desalination technologies when more efficient alternatives are not available, while prioritizing renewable energy sources and mitigating potential environmental impacts, including brine discharge, air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.
- Promote water-use efficiency policies, such as precision irrigation, water-efficient cropping systems and enhanced water metering, while adopting an intersectoral approach to decouple economic growth from water use.
- Regulate water overconsumption and transition from blanket water subsidies to targeted subsidies for those in need.
- Promote managed aquifer recharging to alleviate water scarcity and improve water security. For instance, this could entail using surplus surface water, desalinated water, treated wastewater or harvested rainwater.



B. The policy landscape for SDG 6

The policy landscape in the Arab region does not adequately respond to the challenges posed by water scarcity and climate change. Many policies are outdated and ineffective, and there is a lack of coordination among sectors and countries. Many States make insufficient investments in WASH infrastructure and management. Pressing priorities to improve the policy landscape include mainstreaming IWRM by reforming institutional structures to achieve coordinated and cohesive national water policies and actionable legislation; developing local capacities; strengthening WASH financing; and establishing water as a core component of climate change adaptation and natural disaster risk reduction.

Progress on SDG 6 is closely linked to sustainable agricultural production (SDG 2), energy access (SDG 7), climate change adaptation (SDG 13), and peace, security and displacement (SDG 16). Coherent policies to achieve SDG 6 must incorporate the water-energy-food-ecosystem nexus and seek integrated solutions that align priorities across all SDGs.

Policy approaches to achieving SDG 6 vary among the Arab States, reflecting their unique national contexts and available resources. Several common trends emerge across countries, however, regardless of geographic location or income level.

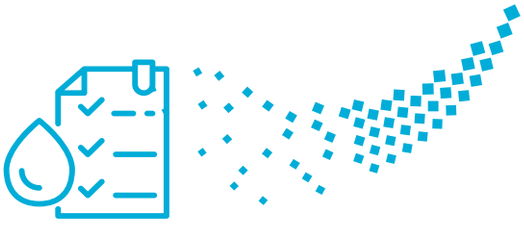
◆ **Most Arab States have acknowledged water and sanitation as human rights at the regional and global levels, but only some have explicitly recognized these rights in their legal frameworks.** As at April 2023, 18 States[1] had ratified the Arab Charter on Human Rights, which includes the provision of safe drinking water and proper sanitation systems among the measures States should take to ensure rights to an adequate standard of living and a healthy environment. Twenty Arab States[2] voted in favour of the United Nations General Assembly resolution 64/292 on the human right to water and sanitation in 2010. Yet only four countries – **Egypt, Morocco, Somalia** and **Tunisia** – have explicitly recognized the rights to water, sanitation or both in their constitutions. At least five other countries – **Algeria,** the **Comoros, Lebanon, Mauritania** and the **State of Palestine** – have explicitly recognized these rights elsewhere in their legislations.

Legal recognition is not sufficient for the effective enjoyment of the rights to water and sanitation. Regulations, funding and concrete actions are also required.

A mere connection to the water network is also not sufficient to fulfil the right to water. The water supply must be safe, affordable and regular enough to meet essential needs, such as for drinking, personal hygiene and food preparation.

◆ **Access to safe drinking water has been integrated into the policies of most Arab countries. Yet measures tailored to the specific needs of vulnerable populations remain less common.** Among 19 countries surveyed,[3] all had adopted policies or plans to ensure access to safely managed drinking water, although some are now outdated and require updating to factor in water scarcity and climate change risks. Most countries (18 out of 20)[4] have established national drinking water quality standards, which water utilities, government agencies and other stakeholders use to monitor and manage the quality of drinking water. Several countries[5] (12 out of 18) have incorporated water safety plans or equivalent risk management approaches into their policies or regulations. For example, the Updated National Water Sector Strategy (2020) of **Lebanon** includes a water safety plan manual, and the Electricity and Water Authority in **Bahrain** has a contingency and disaster plan.

Policies and standards often overlook the ability of local laboratories to conduct water quality tests and analyse results, with insufficient attention given to bolstering local technical capacities and facilitating access to essential equipment and technologies.



Despite numerous policies, plans and standards, 113 million people – or a quarter of the region's population, mostly in least developed or conflict-affected countries – lacked access to safely managed drinking water services in 2022. Limited progress since 2015 stems from various factors, including governance issues, capacity limitations, technology and funding constraints, occupation, conflict and inadequate attention to vulnerable groups, particularly in rural areas. While many countries report having policies with measures to enhance the provision of safely managed water services to vulnerable populations (see section D), these instruments frequently apply broadly to all citizens and do not sufficiently address the unique challenges of inhabitants of rural and remote areas, persons living in poverty, refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs), among others. Exceptions include the Poverty Alleviation Strategy of **Iraq,** the National Resilience Plan (2014–2016) and the Response Plan for the Syrian Crisis (2016–2018) of **Jordan,** and the National Strategy for the Development of Rural and Mountainous Areas of **Morocco**.

- The Drinking Water Safety Strategic Framework (2017) adopted by the **Sudan** aims to ensure that everyone has sustainable access to safe drinking water, helping to uphold the human right to water and a range of other human rights. The framework has four strategic objectives: to protect water sources from pollution and ensure they are sustainably managed; to design and build water supply systems that are resilient to climate change and other challenges; to strengthen management processes to ensure water supply systems are properly operated and maintained; and to strengthen monitoring and surveillance systems so that drinking water is consistently safe. The framework was developed through a consultative process involving the Government, stakeholders and development partners, and is aligned with international standards and best practices.
- The **Jordanian** Standard No. 286 (2015), published by the Jordan Standards and Metrology Organization, specifies requirements for the quality of drinking water. It covers a wide range of parameters, including microbiological, physical and chemical, and specifies sampling and testing methods to guarantee compliance. The standard is aligned with international standards, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) Guidelines for Drinking-water Quality, and is used by water utilities, government agencies and other stakeholders to monitor and manage the quality of drinking water. Notably, the standard requires water utilities to provide consumers with information about the quality of their drinking water.



Most countries have adopted policies on safely managed sanitation services but have not done enough to ensure equitable access in rural and urban areas. Among the 16 surveyed countries,[6] all had national policies covering both urban and rural sanitation. While a majority[7] (15 out of 17) have wastewater treatment standards, fewer countries[8] (11 out of 16) have standards for faecal sludge management. Only 3 out of 15 countries – **Egypt, Oman** and **Tunisia** – have adopted sanitation safety plans for local risk assessment and management, significantly less than the 12 countries with safety plans for drinking water services.

As is the case in other regions, the status of safely managed sanitation is more precarious than that of drinking water. Many challenges are similar although sanitation typically receives less policy focus compared to water. In some least developed and middle-income countries, treated wastewater fails to meet national quality standards due to institutional weaknesses, a

scarcity of skilled personnel, high costs, and deficiencies in both collection networks and treatment plants.

- The Sanitation Code (2012) of **Tunisia** is a stand-out example of a comprehensive and advanced sanitation code. It covers the planning, design, construction, operation and maintenance of sanitation systems, along with the financing of sanitation services and the monitoring and enforcement of sanitation regulations. It also delineates the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders. Since its adoption, **Tunisia** has made significant strides in sanitation access, with the proportion of the population with access to safely managed sanitation rising from 69.5 per cent in 2012 to 81 per cent in 2022. Rural and urban disparities have narrowed, closing the access gap from 43.5 percentage points in 2012 to 26 percentage points in 2022.

◆ **Most countries have adopted policies to ensure the affordability of WASH services. In parallel, to address overconsumption and enhance the financial sustainability of utilities, some countries are pursuing reforms to restructure tariffs and improve cost recovery.** Contrary to conventional wisdom, most people connected to piped networks in the region are billed for services. As of mid-2015, at least 15 countries[9] used volumetric tariff rates for drinking water. In addition, two countries – **Lebanon** and the **Sudan** – applied flat tariffs. For sanitation, 13 countries[10] had volumetric tariff rates, 3 (**Lebanon,** the **State of Palestine** and the **Sudan**) had flat tariffs and 2 (**Qatar** and **Saudi Arabia**) offered free services. Since then, Saudi Arabia has introduced a tariff for wastewater treatment and Qatar has started charging a fee for non-Qatari residents and establishments.

Most Arab countries[11] (16 out of 17) have introduced policies to guarantee the affordability of WASH services. For example, in **Tunisia,** the drinking water tariff structure is designed around cost escalation segments, providing a lower tariff for volumes below the minimum threshold required for human consumption. Most countries subsidize WASH services, with tariffs typically not covering operations and basic maintenance costs. Among 15 countries,[12] only 5 – the **Comoros, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia** and **Yemen** – reported recovering more than 50 per cent of the costs associated with supplying drinking water in urban areas, with lower levels of cost recovery in rural areas and for sanitation services. In recent years, some countries have adjusted pricing mechanisms to create economic incentives for the rationalization of water consumption. For example, most Gulf Cooperation Council countries have reduced subsidies and progressively aligned WASH tariffs with the principle of cost recovery.

- In 2015, **Saudi Arabia** implemented a revised water tariff structure, a first step towards gradually removing subsidies and meeting the goal of Saudi Vision 2030 of achieving full cost recovery. Under the new tariff structure, the price for monthly volumes under 15 cubic metres remained unchanged while tariffs for higher volumes increased significantly. For instance, the price for 50 cubic metres of water rose 16 times, from $1.35 to $21.79, while for 100 cubic metres, it climbed 29 times, from $3.35 to $96.46. The tariff reform also introduced wastewater and metre fees for the first time, leading to a further increase in the combined monthly bill for WASH services. The new tariff was designed to enhance cost recovery to 30 per cent of the estimated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Under-pricing water hinders efficiency in use, promotes overconsumption, threatens the financial sustainability of water utilities and strains State budgets. To tackle these challenges, countries should regulate water consumption via proper demand side management, and further the transition from blanket subsidies to smart subsidies that target low-income households.

Blanket subsidies often result in disproportionate benefits for wealthier households due to their higher consumption of water and use of sanitation services. Reducing such subsides has the potential to yield substantial savings within State budgets, which can be reallocated to targeted subsidies that support disadvantaged populations.


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marginal cost of water, up from an estimated pre-reform level of 7 per cent. Due to significant public backlash against the new system, the Government decided to suspend further tariff hikes required to meet 100 per cent cost recovery.

◆ **Freshwater resources remain a key component of national efforts to achieve water security, with policies focusing on developing and managing supplies and protecting resources.** An increasing number of countries are prioritizing resource conservation and preservation. For example, the constitutions of **Algeria** (2016) and **Tunisia** (2022) have codified the safeguarding of water resources for future generations. Several countries, including **Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman,** the **Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia,** the **United Arab Emirates** and **Yemen,** have regulations to curtail extraction, such as quotas, volumetric pricing, drilling licenses and protection zones. For example, **Bahrain** ceased groundwater withdrawal in 2016, designating it as an emergency reserve. Some countries have embraced advanced technologies, such as remote sensing, for enhanced water monitoring and management. For instance, **Jordan** employs remote sensing to track well development, estimate water use and detect illegal abstraction, while **Bahrain** uses the Internet of things to automate irrigation systems. Some countries have taken steps towards decentralization and local governance, as is the case for aquifer contracts in **Morocco**, local agricultural development groups in **Tunisia**, and local water corporations and autonomous utilities in **Yemen**.

◆ **Non-conventional water resources, particularly desalinated water and treated wastewater, play a pivotal role in the water policies and plans of Gulf Cooperation Council countries and are gaining significance in other countries.** An increasing number of countries are incorporating desalination into their water strategies. Since the 1970s, Gulf Cooperation Council countries have placed a strong emphasis on large-scale projects, advanced technologies and regulatory frameworks to ensure water quality and safety. More recently, some middle-income and least developed countries have also adopted water desalination policy frameworks, although typically at a different scale and level of investment compared to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. As of 2020, a total of 133 water desalination plants were operational or under construction in **Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco** and **Tunisia.**[13]

The region has witnessed a significant surge in the use of treated wastewater. The number of related projects quadrupled from 97 in 2000 to 409 in 2020.[14] Most countries[15] (14 out of 18) have adopted policies or plans targeting the safe use of treated wastewater. Most countries[16] (15 out of 20) have also adopted standards for the safe use of treated wastewater. At least seven countries – **Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia,** the **State of Palestine** and **Tunisia** – and the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai (**United Arab Emirates**) have established stringent microbial limits for reclaimed water used in food crop irrigation, surpassing 1989 WHO guidelines. Some countries, including **Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait,** the **State of Palestine,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Tunisia**, have prohibited the use of treated wastewater for irrigating some types of vegetables.



Policies promoting green energy solutions may inadvertently worsen groundwater stress. Regulations and monitoring of pumping technologies and solar energy use in irrigation can help avoid groundwater over-abstraction. Strict enforcement of such regulations is crucial, along with measures to prevent the drilling of illegal wells.

Managed aquifer recharge is a promising approach to alleviating water scarcity and improving water security. This could be done by using surplus surface water, desalinated water, treated wastewater or harvested rainwater.

Water desalination entails large energy requirements and can be associated with adverse environmental impacts. Policies should prioritize energy efficiency and mitigate brine discharge, air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

Desalination should be coupled with efforts to localize technology and mitigate environmental externalities. Addressing the feasibility of these technologies is also crucial, along with securing enablers for them to operate.

Improperly treated wastewater can pollute water sources, contaminate soils and pose health hazards for both workers and consumers. Policies should address these risks and prioritize water quality enhancement.

Rainwater harvesting is identified as a promising adaptation technology in the policies and plans of several countries, including **Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Somalia,** the **State of Palestine, Tunisia** and **Yemen.**

Maximizing the potential of non-conventional water resources urgently requires policies to localize technologies and the production of needed materials, such as desalination membranes. In some countries, policies are also needed to bolster local capacities to construct and operate desalination, wastewater treatment and rainwater harvesting systems. This process should include creating job opportunities, especially for youth, and leveraging renewable energy sources. Policy choices should consider climate conditions, including the hot and arid climate prevalent in the region, particularly when evaluating aerobic and anaerobic treatment options for wastewater. Concerted efforts are required to raise awareness among farmers and the general public on the safety of treated wastewater use, and to address cultural objections and distrust that have inhibited reclaimed water use.

For more on renewable energy policies see the chapter on SDG 7.

- The Water Substitution and Reuse Policy (2016) of **Jordan** seeks to direct the water sector towards more efficiency by promoting the use of treated wastewater in irrigation and other economic activities, thus freeing fresh water for municipal uses. The policy calls for expanding wastewater collection and treatment, updating quality standards, promoting decentralized treatment systems for smaller locations, and targeting awareness and educational programmes to farmers.
- The Water Conservation Strategy (2010) of the **United Arab Emirates** calls for the efficient management and better use of desalinated water and treated wastewater, including by applying economic optimization principles to the design of future desalination plants, further developing aquifer storage and recovery by using surplus desalinated water, coordinating measures to increase the use of treated wastewater and conducting awareness-raising campaigns to overcome public concerns. In addition, the UAE Water Security Strategy 2036 (2017) calls for expanding the use of treated wastewater by 95 per cent by 2050.

◆ **Water-use efficiency and conservation measures are increasingly included in water policies and plans across the region, with a notable emphasis on the agricultural sector.** Recognizing the critical role of agriculture, which accounts for over 80 per cent of freshwater withdrawals in the region,[17] and guided by a water-energy-food-ecosystem nexus perspective, most countries have embraced policies to enhance water-use efficiency in this sector. These policies include the promotion of precision irrigation (implemented in


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Water-use efficiency policies alone are not sufficient to decrease water use in agriculture. Farmers may use saved water to irrigate additional land or extend crop cycles. An intersectoral approach is needed to decouple economic growth from water use while integrating improved productivity into a holistic vision for national food systems.

Consistent well metering often faces technical deficiencies, tampering and vandalism. Policies should enhance enforcement capacities and increase buy-in from stakeholders.

most countries)[18], the adoption of water-efficient cropping systems (prevalent in several countries)[19] and the enhancement of water metering (evident in some countries)[20]. Some countries have also sought to limit the volume of water used in agriculture. For example, the Water Reallocation Policy adopted by **Jordan** caps irrigation water volumes and redistributes water to municipal water use and other sectors, while the National Transformation Programme of **Saudi Arabia** seeks to reduce the percentage of water used in agriculture relative to total available water resources.

Some countries have provided financial incentives to encourage farmers to adopt water-efficient measures. For instance, the National Programme for Irrigation Water Saving of **Morocco** has subsidized the switch to localized irrigation systems, while in the **United Arab Emirates**, the emirate of Abu Dhabi has extended financial support to farmers who restrict water-intensive fodder production.

Many countries have implemented policies and programmes to promote water conservation, ranging from awareness campaigns on responsible water use (such as *Tarsheed* programme in **Qatar** and *Qatrah* programme in **Saudi Arabia**) to penalties for improper water use or wastage (exemplified by the Conservation Law No. 20/2015 of **Qatar,** which prohibits the use of potable water for washing cars or cleaning yards) and the criminalization of water theft (as in the National Water Strategy of **Jordan**). Initiatives to reduce losses in distribution networks, including through detecting leaks, optimizing pressure and replacing pipes, are prevalent in some countries, such as **Bahrain, Djibouti** and **Jordan**.

For more on water use policies in the agricultural sector, see the chapter on SDG 2.

- **Bahrain** has made significant strides in reducing its water stress level from 249 per cent of renewable freshwater resources in 2000 to 134 per cent in 2020. This improvement can be attributed to several key factors, including increased use of desalinated water and treated wastewater resources, the adoption of more efficient irrigation technologies, the implementation of smart metering and a shift towards less water-intensive sectors. While the water stress level in 2020 remained above the regional average of 120 per cent and was significantly higher than the global average of 18 per cent, the country stands out for achieving the most rapid reduction in water stress in the region in the last two decades. It is one of only five Arab countries to have successfully lowered its water stress levels since 2000.

◆ **Some progress has been made in the adoption of policies to promote IWRM. Further measures are needed to build capacity, bolster institutions and increase investment.** IWRM improved in most Arab countries between 2017 and 2020. **Oman** stands out for more than doubling IWRM implementation in this period, demonstrating that substantial and rapid progress can be achieved.[21] In most countries, IWRM policies, laws or plans are in place at the national level but more efforts are needed to transfer capacity and knowledge to local levels.[22] Some countries have created cross-sectoral coordination frameworks, such as the National Agency for Integrated Water Resources Management in **Algeria** and the High Council for Water and Climate in **Morocco**.



IWRM implementation in the region does not sufficiently address the participation of vulnerable groups, monitoring and evaluation, or transboundary cooperative arrangements.

To reach SDG target 6.5, on IWRM, by 2030, the region needs to double the implementation rate. Enhanced financial resource mobilization requires particular attention given very limited progress to date.[23]

- The National Environmental Strategy and Action Plan for **Iraq** (2013–2017) calls for the negotiation of agreements governing riparian rights, the exchange of operational and hydraulic information and the implementation of joint hydraulic projects with neighbouring countries.

◆ **While all Arab countries mention climate change in their water policies or strategies, more specific and concrete adaptation measures are needed.** Water adaptation measures have been prioritized in the nationally determined contributions of 20 Arab countries and further detailed in the national adaptation plans of 3 countries (**Kuwait,** the **State of Palestine** and the **Sudan**). Additionally, 12 out of 16 Arab countries[24] have integrated climate change preparedness for WASH into their national planning, covering mitigation, adaptation and the resilience of drinking water systems. In their water and climate policies and strategies, however, most countries only partially address water scarcity and climate risks to water. **Jordan,** the **State of Palestine** and **Tunisia** are notable exceptions, having developed policy instruments that comprehensively address these critical challenges.

Countries are increasingly adopting a water-energy-food-ecosystem nexus approach to their water policies, sometimes as part of strategies to address climate change. Some, such as **Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco** and the **Gulf Cooperation Council countries,** are integrating renewable energy into water production and wastewater treatment to reduce costs and greenhouse gas emissions. For example, the *As-Samra* (**Jordan**) and *Gabal El Asfar* (**Egypt**) wastewater treatment plants use cogeneration systems powered by anaerobic sludge digestors. Most countries prioritize water-saving practices in agriculture to address water scarcity and adapt to the impacts of climate change, while some have also adopted policies for disaster risk reduction in water-related events. Conversely, many countries lack functional early warning systems for addressing water scarcity and water-related climate change risks.

To enhance their resilience to climate change, Arab countries should adopt science-based approaches to better comprehend the impacts on water availability and adopt corrective measures accordingly. This would include incorporating climate change vulnerability and risk assessments into national water policies, along with related adaptation planning exercises. Science-based assessments can provide evidence and justifications for integrating water and sanitation into climate-related plans and policies.

For more on adaptation measures and disaster risk reduction, see the chapter on SDG 13.

- The National Water Strategy (2023–2040) of **Jordan** underscores the water-energy-food-ecosystem nexus with well-defined targets and objectives. It advocates the integration of renewable energy in the water sector and enhanced synergy between water and agriculture activities, with a focus on optimizing the productivity of irrigation water.
- The National Water Policy for **Palestine** intends to develop flexible strategies to address climate change impacts on water resources, limit the water sector's carbon footprint and reduce the water footprint through the most efficient use.



Water and disaster risk reduction policies in the region have not sufficiently addressed early warning systems related to water. There is an urgent need for such systems for groundwater and surface water levels, as well as for water quality, including saline intrusion.



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C. Policy trends by subregion

The overarching trends aforementioned are particularly evident in Arab middle-income countries. Subregional trends are more pronounced in the least developed, Gulf Cooperation Council and conflict-affected countries.

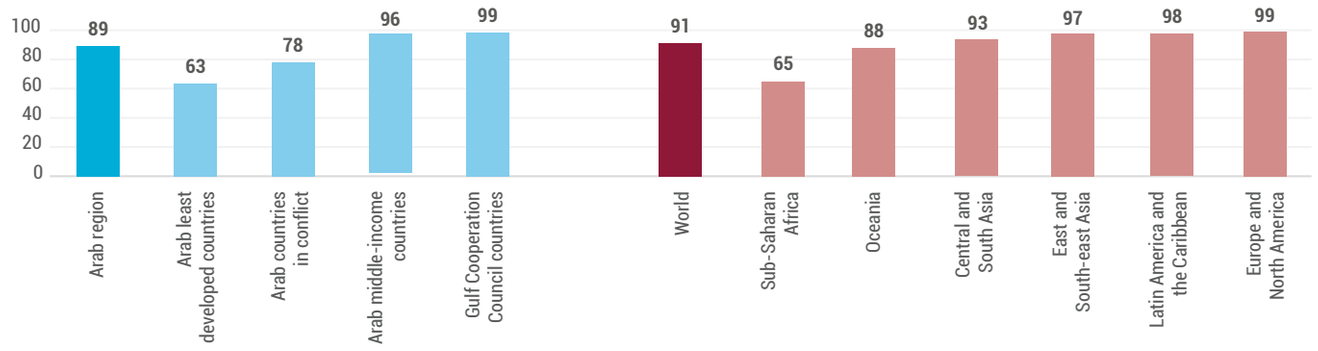
1. Arab least developed countries

The Arab least developed countries grapple with a number of additional challenges in water and sanitation. Their rates of access to drinking water and sanitation services are the lowest in the region and among the lowest globally (figures 6.1 and 6.2),[25] especially in rural areas. In 2020, 25 per cent of the rural population resorted to open defecation in the least developed countries, compared to less than 0.5 per cent in middle-income countries and none in Gulf Cooperation Council countries.[26]

Significant progress has been achieved in recent years, however; the proportion of the population practising open defecation was 35 per cent in 2015.

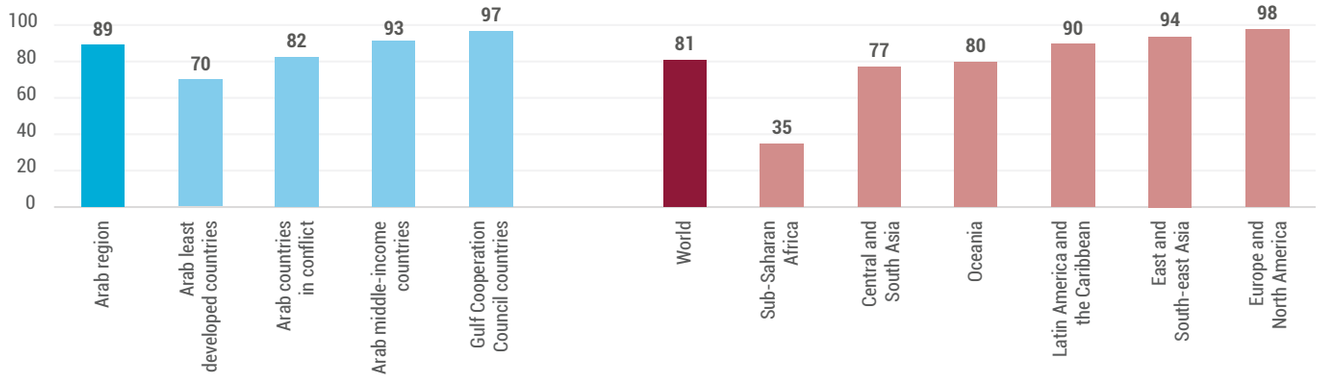
Least developed countries confront the highest vulnerability to climate change in the region, compounding their water-related concerns. They also have the lowest rate of IWRM implementation, although **Mauritania** is an exception. This confluence of challenges underscores the urgent need for targeted and sustainable interventions to address pressing water and sanitation issues comprehensively.

Figure 6.1
Proportion of the population using basic drinking water services, 2022 (Percentage)



Source: ESCWA, 2023b.

Figure 6.2
Proportion of the population using basic sanitation services, 2022 (Percentage)



Source: ESCWA, 2023b.

◆ **Arab least developed countries are making significant strides to eradicate open defecation,** prioritizing behaviour modification initiatives, communal toilet construction and targeted assistance for vulnerable populations. Five out of six countries – **Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia,** the **Sudan** and **Yemen** – have policies or plans to tackle open defecation. The **Comoros** stands out for its remarkably low incidence of the practice.[27]

- The WASH Sector Strategic Plan (2019–2023) of **Somalia** prioritizes a number of goals for improving sanitation, including ending open defecation. It seeks to increase the number of villages free of open defecation from a baseline of 144 in 2018 to 4,068 in 2023. Moreover, it establishes a target to raise the percentage of people living in environments free from open defecation to 70 per cent by 2023.
- The National Roadmap to End Open Defecation in the **Sudan** outlines a comprehensive approach including sanitation marketing, tailored toilet designs, community certification, innovative financing and enhanced coordination mechanisms.

◆ **Arab least developed countries are increasingly enacting policies that promote the integration of traditional knowledge and practices as well as modern approaches for sustainable water management in livestock production.** The livestock sector is very important to the economies of most least developed countries, providing food, income and employment for millions of people. The sector is also a major user of water and highly vulnerable to climate change. As a result, water policies for sustainable livestock production focus on water access and conservation, climate change adaptation and sustainable grazing practices.

- The National Adaptation Plan of the **Sudan** outlines various adaptation measures related to water and rangelands, including enhanced water harvesting techniques, the rehabilitation of *hafirs* and dams, support for irrigated fodder crops and encouragement of the use of smaller livestock breeds adapted to drought conditions.
- The National Strategy for Sustainable Access to Water and Sanitation of **Mauritania** intends to improve access to water for livestock by carrying out an inventory of existing pastoral water points and creating 600 new ones by 2030.

◆ **Regulations and standards for the sanitation chain remain limited.** Among five surveyed least developed countries, three (the **Comoros**, the **Sudan** and **Yemen**) have policy instruments on wastewater treatment. Notably, **Yemen** is the only one among them with policies or plans for the safe use of treated wastewater. Only **Somalia** among these countries has enacted regulations, standards or guidelines addressing faecal sludge treatment.[28]

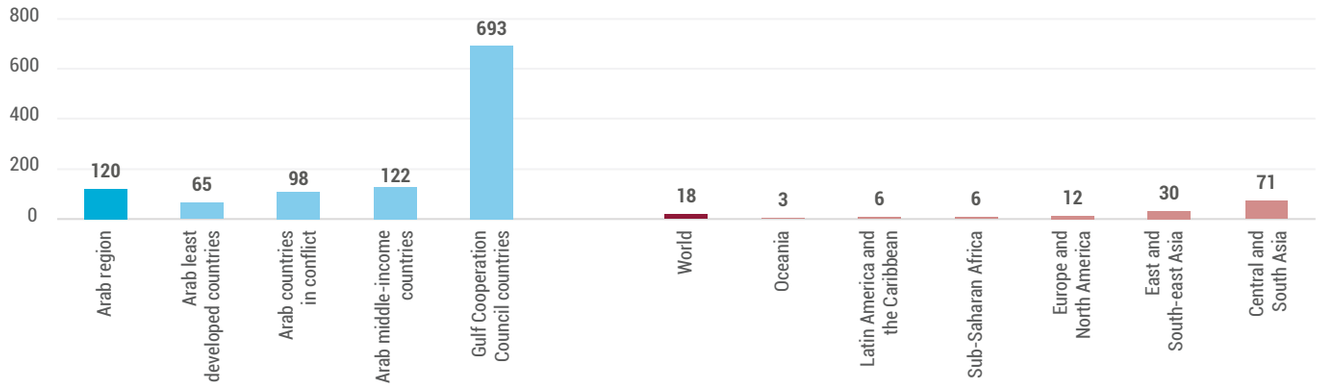
◆ **Improved access to finance is needed.** Policies, strategies and plans do not sufficiently integrate funding considerations. The six least developed countries received only 6.5 per cent of all climate finance for the water sector channelled to the Arab region from 2010 to 2021.[29] Capacity-building and other forms of support could help develop bankable projects to facilitate access to finance. More grant finance is needed as many countries are heavily indebted and cannot afford more loans. Capital-intensive projects, such as the development of non-conventional water resources, remain unaffordable for most. For **Yemen** to address its current water deficit through desalination – which is not the only solution available and may not be sustainable in the long term – it would require 50 large desalination plants with an estimated total operating cost equivalent to 10 per cent of GDP.[30] Enhancing local capacities to access additional finance for nature-based local solutions may be financially more viable.

- **Djibouti** has secured funding for desalination and wastewater plants from a variety of sources, comprising the State budget, development partners and private investment, including through public-private partnerships. This has allowed the Government to invest heavily in the water sector and increase supplies. For example, the *Doraleh* desalination plant is operated by a private company under a public-private agreement. In 2021, the Government secured a €79 million loan from the European Investment Bank to finance the expansion of the plant and the construction of three new wastewater desalination plants. One challenge with raising funds for desalination projects is their high energy requirement, which can be expensive. To address this concern, Djibouti is developing renewable energy sources to power its plants.

2. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

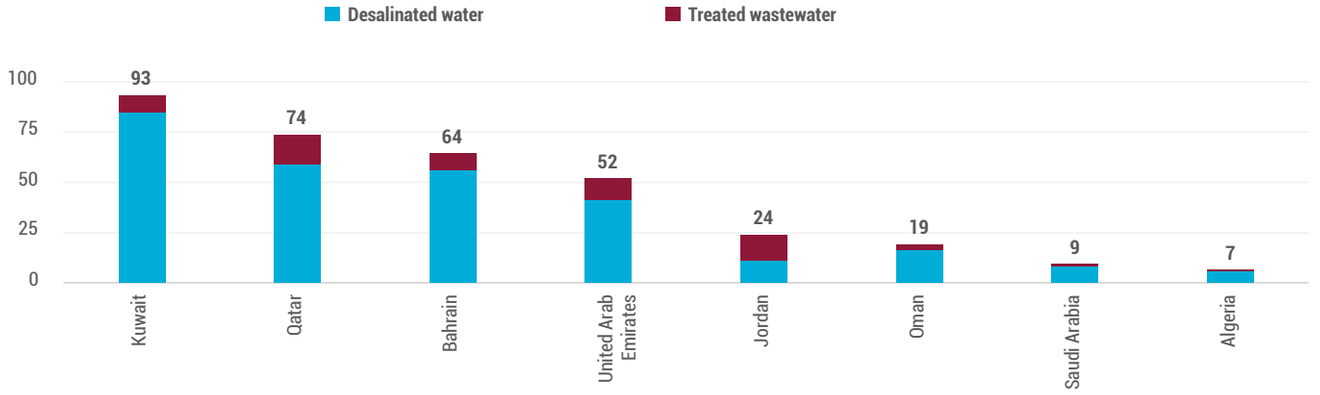
Gulf Cooperation Council countries boast the broadest coverage of safely managed water and sanitation services in the region.[31] Yet they grapple with the world's highest levels of water stress and groundwater abstraction. Significant challenges encompass the energy-intensive nature of desalination plants, disparities between wastewater treatment and reuse, and limited value derived from imported technologies. A substantial portion of water used in Gulf Cooperation Council countries comes from non-conventional sources.

Figure 6.3
Freshwater withdrawal as a proportion of available freshwater resources, 2020 (Percentage)



Source: ESCWA, 2023b.

Figure 6.4
Desalinated water and treated wastewater as a proportion of total water use, 2020 (Percentage)



Sources: FAO, 2023; Kuwait, Central Statistical Bureau, 2021.

◆ **Developing local technologies and manufacturing capacities for water desalination and wastewater treatment.** Gulf Cooperation Council countries are investing heavily in this area to reduce reliance on imported water and wastewater treatment technologies, and to create jobs and economic opportunities.

- In **Saudi Arabia,** the National Transformation Programme budgeted 300 million Saudi riyals for the localization and transfer of water technology between 2016 and 2021, and 1.2 billion Saudi riyals to localize needed renewable energy technologies to support the local power and water desalination sectors. One initiative is to build a production centre for manufacturing and light industries to fulfil plans for establishing water plants.
- In the **United Arab Emirates,** the UAE Water Security Strategy 2036 includes initiatives to promote local technologies and manufacturing capacities for water desalination and wastewater treatment. It calls for establishing a research and development centre for water desalination and wastewater treatment technologies, for example. The Government has already set the strategy in motion by creating the Masdar Institute of Science and Technology, which is dedicated to sustainable technologies, including water desalination and wastewater treatment. The government-run Emirates Water and Electricity Company has also initiated various programmes to promote local technologies and manufacturing capabilities.

◆ **Diversifying energy sources for water production,** including through the use of renewable energy sources. Gulf Cooperation Council countries are investing in renewable energy and improving the efficiency of water desalination plants to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and improve water security. They are developing new water desalination technologies that are more energy-efficient and cost-effective, which will help to make water desalination more sustainable and affordable.

◆ **Minimizing water supply costs and increasing cost recovery without sacrificing service quality.** Gulf Cooperation Council countries are implementing tiered water pricing, reducing water losses from distribution networks, improving public awareness of water conservation measures, and investing in water recycling and reuse technologies.

- In **Saudi Arabia,** a revised water tariff structure was introduced in 2015 as a first step towards meeting the goal of full cost recovery stipulated in the Saudi Vision 2030 (see section B for more information). Additionally, the National Transformation Programme has sought to decrease water loss from 25 to 15 per cent by 2020, including by reducing leakage through monitoring the water pipeline system. It also plans to cut the average time to fulfil a water service connection from 68 to 30 business days, and to boost digital content to improve customer service.

◆ **Increasing the economic use of treated wastewater.** Gulf Cooperation Council countries have developed a number of regulations to promote the use of treated wastewater for different purposes, including irrigation, industrial use and groundwater recharge. These regulations include setting standards for the quality of treated wastewater that can be used for different purposes, and developing permitting and inspection procedures. Through public awareness campaigns, school programmes and other initiatives, these countries are educating the public about the safety and reliability of treated wastewater, and the economic and environmental benefits of using it.

- In **Kuwait,** Cabinet Resolution No. 12 of 2018 on the Use of Treated Wastewater in Agricultural and Industrial Sectors mandates that all new agricultural and industrial projects use treated wastewater for at least 50 per cent of their water needs. This regulation has driven greater demand for treated wastewater and encouraged businesses to invest in water recycling and reuse technologies. As a result, there has been a remarkable increase in the use of treated wastewater in recent years. In 2010, only 10 per cent of treated wastewater was put to use; by 2020, this figure had surpassed 50 per cent.

◆ **Enhancing water-use efficiency and conservation** by managing demand and establishing a water-efficient, rational agricultural sector compatible with available water resources. Gulf Cooperation Council countries are implementing water conservation measures in agriculture and industry, reducing water consumption in households, and managing water demand through pricing and regulatory measures to enhance water-use efficiency and conservation.

- In **Saudi Arabia,** the National Transformation Programme sought to reduce the municipal water consumption rate per capita from 256 to 200 litres per day by 2020, decrease the volume of renewable water consumption for agricultural purposes from 17 to 10 billion cubic metres, and increase the percentage of agricultural wells with metering gauges installed to 30 per cent.

3. Arab countries in conflict

The tensions surrounding access to water resources can be a contributing factor to conflict. Water supplies can also fall victim to conflict, either intentionally or as collateral damage. The politicization and weaponization of water resources remain major challenges. Further, water scarcity and its direct impacts on drinking water availability, sanitation, health and ecosystems can be pull or push factors for migration, often causing additional stresses on areas where water is available.

WASH services often operate below capacity in Arab conflict-affected countries due to degraded and unmaintained infrastructure, frequent power outages and inadequate complementary infrastructure. Conflict and continued unrest have led to the unregulated use of available water resources and the contamination of water sources, heightening the risk of disease outbreaks and waterborne illnesses. Conflict also intensifies displacement, human mobility and the risks associated with daily movements to collect water, including gender-based violence.



The impact of occupation and war on the water sector in the occupied Palestinian territory

The **State of Palestine** has grappled with water insecurity for decades as a result of occupation by Israel and its restrictive and destructive measures. Since 1967, Israel has controlled all water resources in the occupied territory, stifling Palestinian access to ground and surface water. Israeli policies and measures impede new water infrastructure projects and the rehabilitation of existing infrastructure. In addition, Israel has destroyed water-related facilities and deprived Palestinians of their share of Jordan River water. At the same time, Israel has developed its own water infrastructure for its settlements. As a result, Palestinians suffer from water shortages and only 6.8 per cent of the cultivated land in the West Bank is irrigated. The daily share of water per capita for Palestinians (89 litres) is below the minimum recommended by WHO (100 litres) and nearly one third of the average share consumed in Israel and the settlements (242 litres). Israeli exploitation of water resources in the occupied Palestinian territory and denial of adequate access to safe water and sanitation to civilians are violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.

In Gaza, the only aquifer has been depleted by overextraction and contamination by sewage and seawater infiltration, leaving 97 per cent of its water unfit for human consumption. Even before the war erupted in October 2023, the combination of the 16-year blockade and recurrent military escalations had devastated water infrastructure. The war and siege imposed by Israel have dramatically restricted the water supply, with water consumption per capita plunging from 82.7 litres per day before the war to 1 to 3 litres in November 2023. This is a fraction of the absolute minimum of 15 litres per person per day designated by WHO for a humanitarian emergency. The population has been forced to use unsafe water and sanitation facilities, exacerbating public health risks. Water is now being collected via rudimentary methods to meet the most basic needs.

Occupation and war continue to hinder development in Palestine**,** including efforts to achieve universal access to safe drinking water (SDG target 6.1) and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity (SDG target 6.4). Recovery and development cannot progress without addressing the root causes of the conflict and restoring the access of Palestinians to their natural resources.

Sources: ESCWA, 2023c; MAS, 2013; United Nations, 2022, para. 35; ITRC and UNOPS, 2018; B'Tselem, 2011; Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023.

- **Water and sanitation access needs to be secured by repairing and building infrastructure and preparing for risks,** including through capacity-building and community participation. Bridging the gap between humanitarian assistance and development aligns with the humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach. Moreover, collaboration between humanitarian and development actors, alongside WASH service providers, is essential for formulating emergency preparedness plans tailored to acute crises.

- **There is a need to address water quality concerns and protect human health,** such as by managing water sources and treating wastewater to prevent the spread of waterborne diseases. Strategies in Arab conflict-affected countries comprise monitoring and surveillance, water treatment, and public awareness and education.



- **Implementing solutions that address the interlinkages and interaction of water and fragility is vital.** Conflict-affected countries are shifting towards more integrated approaches, focusing on resilience and sustainability, conflict-sensitive water programming and community-based measures.

- **Existing policies and practices do not sufficiently acknowledge the potential of integrated human mobility solutions in tackling water-related challenges,** nor do they recognize IWRM as pivotal in safeguarding the human rights of displaced persons, refugees and migrants.

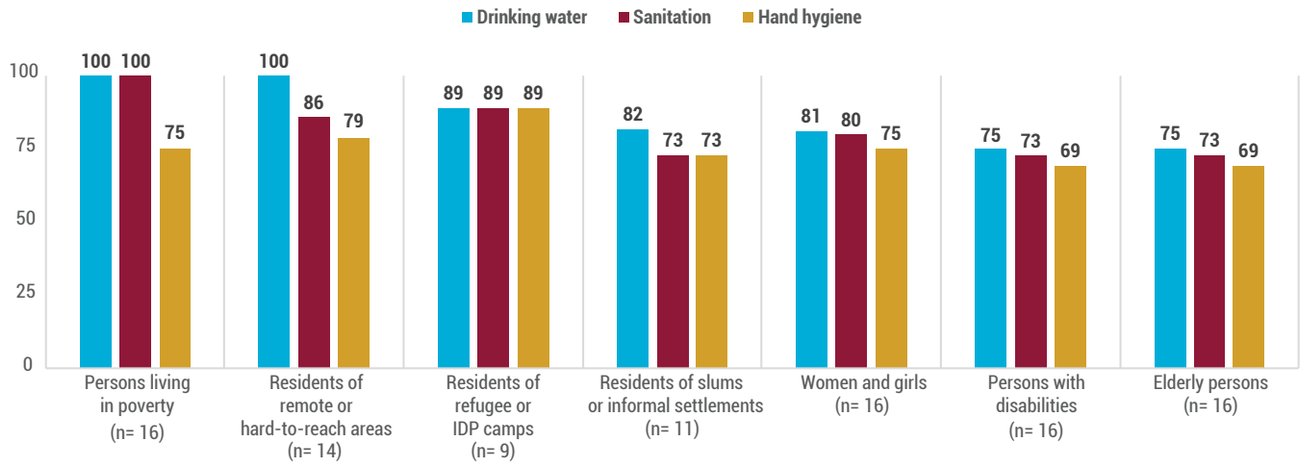
- **Conflict exacerbates existing gender inequalities in water and sanitation, making women's inclusion in the sector even more vital.** This applies to the adoption of gender-responsive policies as well as the participation of women in decision-making and management. Prioritizing women's leadership and expertise can address gaps in local capacity created by conflict-induced displacement and casualties. Women's participation is crucial for building equitable water solutions, especially in conflict zones where women and children bear the burden of water collection.

D. Policies to leave no one behind

Uneven access to clean water and sanitation is frequently compounded by intersecting inequalities. Moreover, populations living in vulnerable situations rarely participate in water-related policymaking and governance. Groups at risk of being left behind include inhabitants of rural areas, persons living in poverty, women and girls, persons with disabilities, children, elderly persons, informal settlement dwellers, refugees, IDPs and migrant workers.

Most countries report having measures in national WASH policies and plans to improve and extend services to specific population groups (figure 6.5). According to the Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS) 2021/2022 survey, all reporting Arab countries acknowledged having policy measures addressing access to drinking water services for persons living in poverty and in remote areas. Over three quarters declared that they had introduced measures to enhance drinking water services for refugees and IDPs, residents of slums and informal settlements, women and girls, persons with disabilities and elderly individuals. Measures to improve the access of vulnerable groups to sanitation and hand hygiene are generally less prevalent. Since several countries consider universal measures applying to all people as contributing to improving and extending services to vulnerable population groups, the global survey may overestimate the prevalence of policy measures to address the specific circumstances and needs of vulnerable groups.

Figure 6.5
Arab countries reporting measures in national WASH policies and plans to improve and extend services to specific populations, by service, 2021 (Percentage)



Source: ESCWA calculations based on WHO, 2022a.
Note: The number of reporting countries (n) varies by population groups.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This section provides examples of policies that address the specific circumstances and needs of vulnerable groups in the Arab region. All States, regardless of whether they have specific policies for vulnerable groups, fall under international human rights law and have a responsibility to work towards achieving universal access to water and sanitation for all, without discrimination, while prioritizing those most in need.

Table 6.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

 **Inhabitants of rural and remote areas** face significant disparities in access to WASH services compared to their urban counterparts. They grapple with much lower levels of access to safe drinking water and sanitation services as well as to basic handwashing facilities within premises. They also have a higher prevalence of open defecation.	In **Morocco,** the National Strategy for the Development of Rural and Mountainous Areas and the Programme for the Reduction of Territorial and Social Disparities seek to reduce territorial gaps in access to basic services, including drinking water, particularly in rural and mountainous areas. The programme aims to extend the drinking water network over 668 kilometres, install 244 individual connections, dig 9,511 water points and develop 60 drinking water supply networks.[a] In **Saudi Arabia,** the National Transformation Programme allocated 200 million Saudi riyals for water supply social insurance programmes for desert villages between 2016 and 2021.
 **Persons living in poverty** are more likely to have insufficient water and sanitation facilities and often need to pay more for water than residents in wealthier areas.	In **Iraq,** the Poverty Alleviation Strategy aims to establish reverse irrigation stations, distribute water sterilization pills and deliver water trucks to groups below the poverty line, while also raising awareness of the importance of using water that meets minimum standards for human consumption.[b] In **Tunisia,** the National Programme for the Sanitation of Working-Class Neighbourhoods has connected 1,146 low-income neighbourhoods to sanitation networks since 1989, benefiting around 1.4 million people, most from governorates with the greatest needs.[c]
 **Women and girls** bear the brunt of inadequate and gender-unresponsive WASH services. These result in heightened maternal morbidity and mortality rates, increased school dropout rates among girls, reduced food security and diminished agricultural livelihoods. Women and girls are also exposed to an elevated risk of sexual abuse and harassment, particularly those who are displaced or live in refugee settlements and places without access to private facilities.	In **Somalia,** the WASH Sector Strategic Plan (2019–2023) set a national target of 90 per cent of adolescent girls in upper primary and secondary schools having access to menstrual hygiene kits in 2023.[d] In the **Sudan,** the National Water Policy (2016) advocates for gender equality in access to water resources as well as the inclusion of women in decision-making processes and the management of water service providers. Nonetheless, significant gaps remain in implementing the policy and ensuring that women's needs are met.
 **Refugees and IDPs** often lack access to safe water and proper sanitation facilities, which increases their vulnerability to illness and disease.	In **Jordan,** the National Resilience Plan (2014–2016) sought to mitigate the impact of the influx of Syrian refugees on host communities by improving the delivery of WASH services and promoting community participation and awareness-raising among local Jordanian populations and Syrian refugee community groups. The Jordan Response Plan for the Syrian Crisis (2016–2018) dedicated significant resources to expanding wastewater collection and treatment in host communities.[e]

Table 6.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

	Migrants often rely on less durable infrastructure, are exposed to frequent disruptions to water and sanitation services, and are among the groups most vulnerable to extreme weather events. Low-skilled migrant workers face discrepancies in access to WASH services due to subpar remuneration, poor work conditions, weak labour inspection systems and a lack of social security.	In **Qatar,** legislation states that to protect workers from heat stress, employers must provide free and suitably cool drinking water to all workers throughout their working hours.[f]

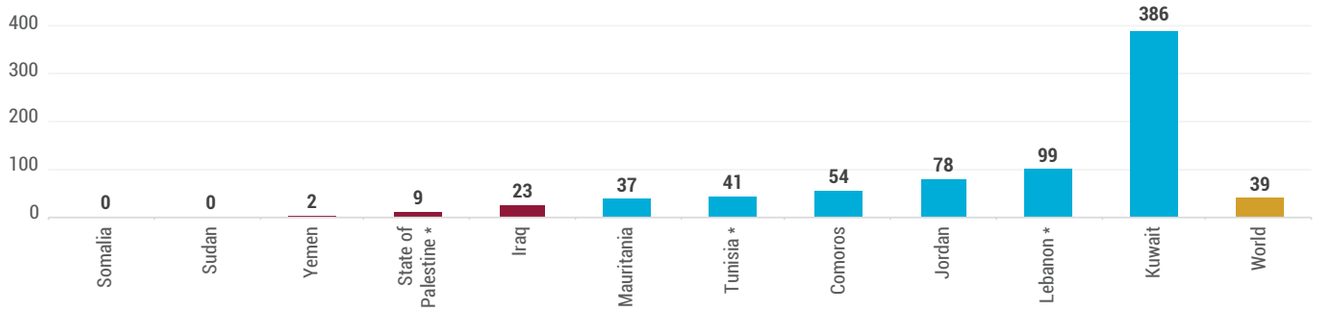
[a] Morocco, 2023.
[b] WHO, 2022a.
[c] Tunisia, 2021.
[d] Somalia, 2019.
[e] Jordan, 2014; UNESCO, 2017.
[f] Qatar, 2020.

E. The financing landscape

Financing is one of the main accelerators of progress towards SDG 6 and the goals of the Water Action Decade in the Arab region.[32] Countries need to increase financing efforts, leverage climate finance, improve coordination across ministries and institutions, and explore innovative financing solutions. Creating an enabling environment is essential for attracting additional funding, as policies and regulations can encourage new funding sources and foster partnerships with the private sector.

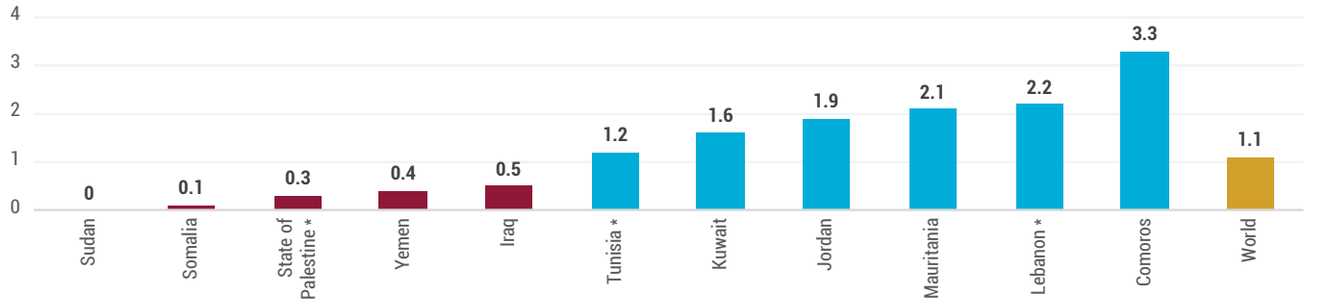
WASH expenditure varies significantly across the region. In conflict-affected countries, less is spent on WASH per capita than in countries not affected by conflict. Non-conflict least developed and middle-income countries, such as the **Comoros, Jordan, Lebanon** and **Mauritania,** spend a greater proportion of GDP on WASH compared to the world average or high-income **Kuwait** (figures 6.6 and 6.7).

Figure 6.6
WASH expenditure per capita, 2021 (Dollars)



Source: WHO, 2023b.
Note: An asterisk (*) denotes data from 2020.

Figure 6.7
WASH expenditure as a percentage of GDP, 2021 (Percentage)



Source: WHO, 2023b.
Note: An asterisk (*) denotes data from 2020.

Climate finance for the water sector is insufficient despite considerable water-related financing needs. Countries have indicated a total financing requirement of $127.5 billion for climate adaptation in the water sector but received only $6.9 billion in water-related international public climate finance from 2010 to 2021.[33] The water sector accounted for only 14 per cent of climate finance flows to the region from 2010 to 2020, despite being a priority area for adaptation. The sector lagged significantly behind energy, which received 35 per cent of inflows over the same period.[34] Countries require assistance in accessing climate finance, including to navigate arduous processes to obtain it.

Accessing climate finance for WASH projects requires a compelling demonstration of a clear climate rationale. These projects must articulate how they generate climate benefits beyond their standard operations.

There are opportunities to increase funding to the water sector via innovative financing tools, such as blue and other sustainability-linked bonds, climate and SDG debt swaps, and the use of IMF special drawing rights. High subsidization and low-cost recovery may suggest the potential for policy improvements to better target populations in need of subsidies.

In countries facing conflict, instability often leads to short-term spending and discourages long-term investments in water and sanitation. For example, while **Libya** is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, adaptation does not receive sufficient investment from the Government or development partners.[35] New ways to finance the WASH sector are needed in conflict settings, where the State may be weak and unable to accept funds or operate services. This could include running pilot projects to support water infrastructure and systems at the subnational or community level.

- **Egypt** has employed subsidies to address challenges in the wastewater sector, where regional water and sanitation companies struggle to generate enough revenue from tariffs to cover costs. To bridge this financial gap, the Government has introduced a system of capital grants tied to the performance of rural sanitation providers, measured by various indicators. Payments are disbursed once these providers reach specific performance benchmarks, ensuring a steady cash flow that enables incremental improvements.
- **Egypt** issued the Arab region's first sovereign green bond in 2020, financing budgetary expenditures in the WASH and transport sectors. Nearly 54 per cent of the proceeds were allocated to 14 WASH projects, including the *El Dabaa* desalination plant, 9 wastewater treatments plants and 4 sludge treatment facilities, benefiting 16.9 million people. The bond aligned with government priorities to integrate sustainability considerations into public budget financing plans, diversify the investor base and encourage private sector engagement in sustainable financing. Prior to issuing the bond, the Government established a Green Financing Framework, which ensured a transparent and accountable approach to sustainable financing through green bonds and *sukuks*.
- In **Jordan,** the expansion of the *As-Samra* wastewater treatment plant was achieved through a partnership involving the Government of Jordan, the private sector and the Government of the United States. Operational since 2015, this project has extended sewer networks and significantly increased the use of treated wastewater for irrigation. It contributed to an additional water supply of 4 million to 6 million cubic metres per year as of 2020.[36]

F. Regional dimensions

The Arab Strategy for Water Security in the Arab Region (2010–2030), approved by the Arab Ministerial Water Council in 2011, provides a regional policy framework on water. At the subregional level, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have adopted the **Gulf Cooperation Council Unified Water Strategy (2016–2035)** and its associated operational plan. Some States have water strategies involving Arab and non-Arab neighbouring countries, including the **Water Strategy in the Western Mediterranean** and the **Water Vision of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.**

The **Arab Ministerial Water Council** is an intergovernmental organization affiliated with the League of Arab States that facilitates cooperation in areas related to water. A **Joint Ministerial Council of Ministers of Water and Ministers of Agriculture,** which addresses water and food security challenges, adopted the Cairo Declaration, emphasizing sectoral collaboration and the development of a new generation of policies and innovative investments in agriculture and water. The declaration also calls for enhancing policy coherence through reviews of sectoral policies on cross-cutting issues, including water allocation, non-conventional water resources, trade and social protection.

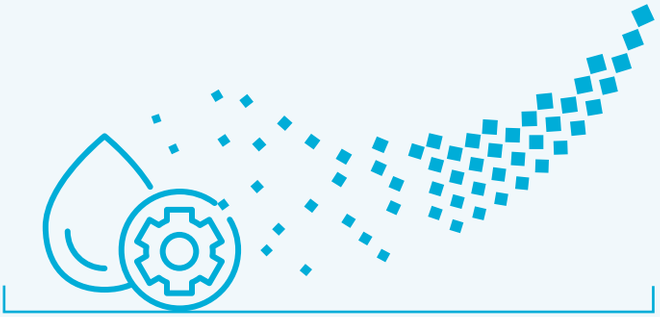
Cooperation on water-related issues at the subregional level includes the **Maghreb Initiative for Non-conventional Waters.** This initiative seeks to establish a permanent technical committee on non-conventional water within the Arab Maghreb Union, a subregional centre of excellence on non-conventional water resources, and a collaborative platform to promote knowledge-sharing and the exchange of good practices.[37]

Transboundary water cooperation is a critical requirement for water security in the region as two thirds of freshwater resources are shared by neighbouring countries. Such cooperation remains limited, however. Only 30 per cent of cross-border surface water basins and aquifers had an operational arrangement for water cooperation in 2020.[38] Despite these challenges, notable examples of positive regional water cooperation arrangements include the North-Western Sahara Aquifer System, involving **Algeria, Libya** and **Tunisia,** and the *Al-Saq/Al-Disi* aquifer cooperation agreement between **Jordan** and **Saudi Arabia.**

Obstacles to the establishment of comprehensive cooperation frameworks in the region include a lack of knowledge and data exchange[39] as well as financial constraints. Transfers of experiences and knowledge from cooperation arrangements could accelerate progress at a regional scale and reduce potential threats to collaboration. Moreover, funding for basin-level, aquifer-level and transboundary water projects could open opportunities to enhance water cooperation.[40]

Human mobility, including migration and refugee flows, is another WASH-related issue that can benefit from regional cooperation. Protracted conflict has led millions of people to cross borders in search of security and livelihoods, compounding pressures on water resources and services in host countries and communities. One example was the arrival of Syrian refugees in **Jordan** and **Lebanon** after 2011.

Rainfall variability, higher evapotranspiration rates, ecosystem degradation and extreme weather events associated with climate change adversely affect freshwater availability, agriculture and food security, contributing to the decision to migrate. Issues associated with environmental degradation, water stress and food security are expected to prompt increased internal and cross-border population movements, including migration and refugee flows. Environmental changes often exacerbate the pre-existing vulnerabilities of migrants, including people in displaced communities, who typically rely on natural resources for livelihood activities and have limited access to basic services such as water and sanitation to sustain well-being, health and dignity. For example, in **Djibouti,** water scarcity and strained services have constricted access to safe water for nearly 100,000 drought-affected people along migration routes, including sedentary rural populations, refugees and asylum seekers.[41]



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1. Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen (League of Arab States, 2023).
2. All Arab countries that were Member States of the United Nations with the exception of Mauritania, which was absent.
3. Bahrain, the Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen (WHO, 2022a; Saudi Arabia, 2018; The United Arab Emirates, 2021a).
4. Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen (WHO, 2022a; Algeria, 2014; Qatar, 2018; Saudi Arabian Standards Organization, 2000; The United Arab Emirates, 2021a).
5. Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates (WHO, 2022a; The United Arab Emirates, 2021a).
6. Bahrain, the Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen (WHO, 2022a).
7. Bahrain, the Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen (WHO, 2022a; WHO, 2018).
8. Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia (WHO, 2022a).
9. Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and Yemen (ESCWA, 2016).
10. Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and Yemen (ESCWA, 2016).
11. Bahrain, the Comoros, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen (WHO, 2022a; Saudi Arabia, 2018).
12. Bahrain, the Comoros, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen.
13. Calculations by ESCWA, based on Voluntary National Review reports.
14. Mateo-Sagasta and others, 2023. Figures exclude the Comoros, Djibouti and Somalia.
15. Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, the State of Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen (WHO, 2022a; Qatar, 2018; The United Arab Emirates, 2021b).
16. Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen (WHO, 2022a; Algeria, 2007; Nassif, Tawfik and Abi Saab, 2022; Dare and others, 2017).
17. ESCWA, 2021a.
18. Including Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.
19. Including Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic and the United Arab Emirates.
20. Including Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Arab Republic
21. ESCWA, 2023b.
22. ESCWA and UNEP-DHI Centre on Water and Environment, 2021.
23. ESCWA, 2022a.
24. Bahrain, the Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia (WHO, 2022a).
25. ESCWA, 2023b. Basic drinking water and sanitation services (SDG indicator 1.4.1) are used here as a proxy for safely managed drinking water and sanitation services (SDG indicators 6.1.1 and 6.2.1) due to insufficient data availability for the least developed countries and other subregions.
26. ESCWA, 2023b.
27. In 2018, a mere 0.6 per cent of population in the Comoros practiced open defecation, with the same rate observed in rural areas.
28. Based on data from WHO (2022a) for five least developed countries (the Comoros, Mauritania, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen). Information on Djibouti was not available.
29. ESCWA, 2023a.
30. UNDP, 2022.
31. Water policies in Gulf Cooperation Council countries are guided by the Gulf Cooperation Council Unified Water Strategy (2016–2035) and its operational plan.
32. ESCWA, 2022a.
33. ESCWA, 2023a.
34. ESCWA, 2023d.
35. United Nations, 2021a.
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37. FAO, 2021.
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7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY

SDG 7

Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

A. Introduction

The Arab region has made significant progress in universalizing access to energy services. Yet limited renewable energy penetration and high primary energy intensity continue to challenge its transition to sustainable energy. Disparities in energy access among and within countries, particularly between rural and urban areas, pose additional obstacles to the goal of leaving no one behind. The lack of reliable, affordable and clean energy in some countries further underscores the urgency of accelerating efforts to meet SDG 7 targets by 2030.

Shocks emanating from the war in Ukraine have imposed new strains on the region's energy systems, impacting the most vulnerable. Continued economic downturns, conflict, instability and supply chain disruptions have hindered progress in some countries. While the region remains overwhelmingly reliant on fossil fuels, recent advancements in policy frameworks and utility-scale renewable generation projects, including several world-leading facilities scheduled to become operational in the near future, demonstrate the potential for a transformative shift towards sustainability.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, (accessed in December 2023).

The **proportion of the population with electricity access** increased from 89 per cent in 2015 to 91 per cent in 2021. Significant disparities remain between the least developed countries (64 per cent) and middle-income and Gulf Cooperation Council countries (both at 100 per cent), as well as between rural areas (83 per cent) and urban areas (98 per cent).

The **proportion of the population relying on unclean fuels and technologies for cooking, heating and lighting** decreased from 14 per cent in 2015 to 12 per cent in 2021. Yet an alarming 49 per cent of the population continues to depend on unclean fuels and technologies in the least developed countries, compared to 0 per cent in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and 1 per cent in the middle-income countries.



Renewable energy accounted for only 5.1 per cent of the Arab region's total final energy consumption in 2020. This was the lowest share of any region globally and only around a quarter of the world average of 19.1 per cent.

Installed renewable electricity-generating capacity per capita increased by 55 per cent between 2015 and 2021, yet is still less than one fifth of the global average. A recent surge in renewable energy investments, however, suggests the potential for significant capacity growth in the near future.

Energy intensity decreased by just 1 per cent between 2015 and 2020, which is insufficient to reach the goal of doubling the rate of improvement in energy efficiency by 2030. It compares unfavourably to the 7 per cent reduction observed on average globally during the same period.

International financial flows to Arab countries to support clean energy R&D and renewable energy production, including in hybrid systems, declined from a peak of $2.7 billion in 2017 to just $363 million in 2021. This staggering 87 per cent reduction outpaced the global average decrease of 60 per cent during the same period.

For an up-to-date view of SDG 7 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.



In the Arab region, the urgent need to address water scarcity (SDG 6), promote sustainable agricultural practices (SDG 2) and combat climate change (SDG 13) makes it imperative for policies to address the **water-energy-food-environment nexus.** For example, as countries turn increasingly to energy-intensive desalinated water and treated wastewater to enhance water availability, it is crucial to integrate renewable energy and energy efficiency into water policies.

Strong interlinkages also exist between SDG 7 and poverty eradication (SDG 1), good health (SDG 3), quality education (SDG 4), economic growth (SDG 8), industrialization (SDG 9), and responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), including the call to phase out harmful fossil-fuel subsidies.

On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 7

- Increase investment in clean energy access, including off-grid solutions, particularly in rural areas, least developed and conflict-affected countries.
- Enhance the security of the electricity supply by expanding installed generation capacity, strengthening transmission networks and improving service reliability.
- Accelerate clean cooking access in the least developed countries by scaling up behaviour change strategies, offering context-specific options (considering fuel availability, affordability and cultural preferences), and investing in the local production and distribution of clean cooking solutions.
- Transition from fossil-fuel subsidies to targeted assistance to those most in need, while providing technical assistance and capacity-building to ensure that energy-poor households have access to electricity and clean cooking technologies. Moreover, enhance subsidy governance through innovative tools such as smart cards and micropayment schemes.



- Advance the gradual rationalization of energy prices towards cost recovery to increase demand responsiveness, incentivize energy-saving behaviour and attract private investment in energy efficiency. This process should be coupled with targeted social safety nets to protect vulnerable populations.
- Translate national renewable energy and energy efficiency targets into binding legislation and regulations, while strengthening and empowering public institutions for robust implementation and oversight.
- Expand the focus of renewable energy targets beyond power generation by setting national targets for renewable integration in heating, cooling and transportation, and developing dedicated policies to promote renewable technologies in these sectors, including financial incentives, infrastructure development and regulatory reforms.
- Promote a circular economy for renewable energy waste by establishing standards for end-of-life management, implementing mandatory take-back and recycling schemes for solar panels and wind turbines, promoting transparent reporting and investing in R&D for innovative recycling technologies and material recovery.
- Develop and implement comprehensive national clean hydrogen strategies with clear regulations, incentives and infrastructure investments to unlock the potential of clean hydrogen for diversification, decarbonization and economic growth.
- Optimize green hydrogen in water-scarce regions by incentivizing renewable energy-powered desalination and establishing dedicated frameworks for integrated water-hydrogen development, benefitting both clean energy and water security.
- Foster private sector investment in clean energy by de-risking projects, including by providing financial assurances (such as loan guarantees, credit enhancements or insurance), streamlining regulations, harnessing digital tools to shorten permitting processes, and offering technical assistance through feasibility studies and resource assessments.
- Mobilize additional finance through innovative and traditional mechanisms, including blended finance, green bonds, dedicated credit lines and national public funds.
- Boost clean energy project pipelines by building public and private capacities to develop, transact and finance projects.
- Achieve electrical interconnection with neighbouring countries to enhance energy security, optimize resource utilization and promote regional cooperation.

B. The policy landscape for SDG 7

Policy approaches to achieving SDG 7 vary in scope and ambition among the Arab countries, reflecting their unique national contexts and available resources. Several common trends are evident across countries, however, regardless of their geographic location or income level.

◆ **Energy policymaking in the region has focused on ensuring energy access, which has largely been met with fossil fuels.** Countries have sought to enhance the security of their electricity supplies by expanding installed generation capacity and improving service reliability. For instance, in **Egypt,** the Integrated Sustainable Energy Strategy 2035 has provided a roadmap for substantial growth in power generation, transforming a daily deficit of 6,000 megawatts in 2015 into a surplus of 19,000 megawatts by 2021. In **Saudi Arabia,** the National Transformation Programme 2020 set ambitious targets to reduce the annual number of power grid outages lasting more than 5 minutes from 6.36 to 3 by 2021, while increasing the electricity generation capacity reserve margin from 10 per cent to 12 per cent of expected peak demand.

Most States have implemented policies and programmes to advance rural electrification using a combination of technologies, including grid extensions, mini-grids and stand-alone systems. Notable examples include the **Gulf Cooperation Council countries,** which achieved universal electricity access by 2000, and **Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco** and **Tunisia,** which made impressive strides between 2015 and 2021, reaching either full or almost complete rural electrification. These advancements have improved living conditions and fostered rural development. **Morocco** stands out for exhibiting the greatest

improvement in rural electrification in the region in the last two decades, driven by the successful implementation of its Global Rural Electrification Programme.

While Gulf Cooperation Council and middle-income countries have achieved universal or near-universal access to modern energy, the least developed countries and some conflict-affected countries continue to face significant electricity access deficits, ranging from 17 per cent of the rural population in the **Comoros** to as much as 51 per cent in **Somalia** and 52 per cent in **Mauritania.**

Electrification has the potential to reduce gender inequality by freeing up women's time from household chores, increasing the likelihood that they will work outside the home, making it easier for them to travel to work and providing new employment opportunities in electricity-powered businesses.

Despite electricity access reaching 91 per cent of the Arab population in 2021, on par with the world average, a significant portion faces energy security challenges due to issues of reliability and affordability. Service disruptions are still prevalent in several countries, particularly those affected by conflict or hosting large refugee populations. The lack of reliable access to electricity imposes high social and economic costs in several countries, affecting both those with deficits in electricity access and those with universal electricity access, such as **Iraq** and **Lebanon.** In the latter group of countries, grid-supplied electricity falls short of providing uninterrupted 24-hour coverage, compelling citizens and businesses to resort to costly, noisy and polluting private fuel-based generators. The unreliability of electricity provision disproportionately impacts persons living in poverty, effectively excluding them from electricity services due to high costs associated with private generators.

Access to electricity grids does not guarantee power supplies. The capacity to operate and manage energy infrastructure is crucial to deliver reliable energy services to citizens and businesses.



- In **Egypt,** the Integrated Sustainable Energy Strategy 2035 was launched in 2015 to address widespread electricity shortages that were forcing electricity utilities to conduct rolling blackouts across the country. The strategy aims to boost electricity generation by using a combination of energy sources, prioritizing renewables but including fossil fuels and nuclear energy. Through large investments in 26 new power stations, the daily power generation capacity of Egypt more than doubled, surging from 23,000 megawatts in 2015 to 51,000 megawatts in 2021, allowing the country to become a regional power exporter. Concurrent efforts have strengthened the transmission network through the addition, replacement and renovation of overhead lines and transformer stations. Furthermore, Egypt is engaged in electrical interconnection projects with Cyprus, Greece, **Saudi Arabia** and the **Sudan,** positioning the country to potentially serve as a regional energy hub.
- In **Morocco,** the Global Rural Electrification Programme, launched in the mid-1990s, has yielded remarkable results, increasing the proportion of the rural population with access to electricity from 22 per cent in 1996 to over 99.9 per cent in 2021. The programme leveraged diverse electrification strategies, prioritizing decentralized renewable solutions, notably solar photovoltaic systems, in conjunction with public-private partnerships established under long-term concession contracts. In its latest tranche (2019 to 2023), the programme aimed to extend its coverage to 1,270 additional villages, benefitting 30,900 households, thereby projecting a rural electrification rate of 99.93 per cent. Despite the delayed entry of Morocco into rural electrification, with only 44 per cent of its rural population having electricity access in 2000, compared to 96 to 97 per cent in **Algeria, Egypt** and **Jordan** and 87 per cent in **Tunisia,** the country swiftly caught up, achieving universal rural coverage even ahead of some countries that had an earlier advantage.



◆ **Historically, countries subsidized energy prices to ensure universal affordability and promote growth. However, some are phasing out these subsidies due to their growing fiscal burden.** The surge in energy consumption across the region in recent decades has made these subsidies unsustainable, particularly amid rising debt and fiscal constraints. Balancing the need for affordable energy access, particularly for low-income and vulnerable populations, with the requirement for sustainable energy policies, poses a significant challenge for the region.

Keeping regulated energy prices below market cost for many decades has distorted market signals for energy users, leading to inefficient and wasteful consumption habits.

Several States, including **Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco,** the **Sudan** and **Tunisia** as well as the **Gulf Cooperation Council countries,** have embarked on fossil-fuel subsidy reforms over the past decade. These reforms have often involved replacing subsidies with enhanced social safety nets and increased budget expenditures on education and health care. For instance, **Morocco** discontinued some major fuel subsidies in 2013 while simultaneously expanding a national conditional cash transfer programme and a health insurance scheme.

Subsidy reductions, while beneficial for fiscal relief and promoting energy efficiency, can disproportionately affect energy access for disadvantaged communities, particularly people living in poverty. These cuts often lead to higher energy expenses for the lowest-income groups, indicating the need for pricing policies that consider inequality to ensure basic energy needs are met for all. Achieving sustainable energy equity in the region calls for targeted subsidies, technical assistance and capacity-building to ensure that energy-poor households, particularly in rural areas, have access to electricity and clean cooking technologies.

Energy pricing policies should be aligned with wider socioeconomic objectives to enable just and sustainable energy transitions that leave no one behind.

Potentially negative consequences of energy price reforms on vulnerable groups should be mitigated through complementary policies.

Affordability remains an issue in many countries, particularly those with some of the highest energy costs in the world, such as the **Comoros** and **Somalia.** Due to inadequate infrastructure and regulatory frameworks, supplies are highly fragmented and therefore inefficient.

For more on social protection programmes, see the chapter on SDG 1, and for more on fossil-fuel subsidies, see the chapter on SDG 12.

- **Morocco** initiated a substantial subsidy reform in 2013, reducing fuel subsidy spending from 5.3 per cent of GDP in 2011 to 1.1 per cent in early 2015. Subsidies for gasoline, diesel and fuel oil were completely eliminated. The reform resulted in annual fiscal savings of about $3 billion relative to 2011. Subsidy removal has increased domestic energy prices: between 2011 and early 2015, gasoline and diesel prices rose by 25 per cent and 35 per cent, respectively. To mitigate the impact of rising energy bills on low-income households, Morocco expanded existing social safety nets, such as the *Tayssir* conditional cash transfer programme and the RAMED health insurance scheme. While the removal of subsidies on fuel oil used in electricity generation implied higher electricity prices, the lowest consumption bracket, with a monthly use of less than 100 kilowatt-hours, remained exempt from tariff increases. These pro-poor reforms eliminated regressive subsidies, with a minimal direct impact on the poorest 20 per cent of the population. Morocco has also pursued ambitious renewable energy targets, emphasizing coherence in its energy policy.



All States have set targets or enacted policies to promote renewable energy, with a strong focus on the power sector. In most countries, these targets are aligned with mitigation commitments in nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement on climate change. Notably, the number of countries with official renewable energy targets rose from 4 in 2010 to 12 in 2015 and 22 in 2023. Most national targets remain legally non-binding, however. Moreover, only 8 out of the 17 Arab States surveyed by the World Bank's Energy Sector Management Assistance Program[1] **(Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Oman,** the **State of Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Somalia** and the **United Arab Emirates)** have developed action plans or strategies to achieve renewable energy targets.

The power sector is the predominant focus of renewable energy targets and policies. Notably, all 22 countries have set specific targets for the use of renewables in electricity generation. The **Comoros** and **Djibouti** have the most ambitious renewable power targets in the region, with both aiming for 100 per cent renewable electricity generation by 2030. They are followed by **Mauritania, Morocco** and **Saudi Arabia,** which seek a share of 50 to 52 per cent. Several countries have enacted policies to encourage renewable power generation. For instance, all 17 surveyed countries allow private sector ownership of renewable energy generation, 12 countries[2] offer long-term power purchasing agreements[3] to renewable electricity producers (typically via feed-in tariffs or auctions), and 9 countries[4] provide prioritized access to the grid for renewable energy. However, only a few countries, including **Algeria** and the **Syrian Arab Republic,** offer direct fiscal incentives – such as tax incentives or capital subsidies – for renewable electricity.

Despite exceeding expectations globally in the past decade, renewable energy faces several obstacles, such as challenges within supply chains for critical materials, the limited availability of suitable land, inadequate grid infrastructure investment, slow permitting processes and profitability concerns.[a]

Another emerging challenge pertains to the waste generated by renewable energy systems, specifically decommissioned wind turbine blades and solar panels that have reached the end of their operational life.

[a] McKinsey, 2023.

The integration of renewables in end uses has received less policy attention compared to renewable power. Only a few countries (6 of 17) have targets for integrating renewables into heating and cooling systems **(Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Tunisia** and **Yemen).** Even fewer (5 of 17) have developed policies to foster the utilization of renewable technologies for heating and cooling purposes **(Algeria, Lebanon,** the **State of Palestine, Tunisia** and **Yemen).**[5] In the transportation sector, only a few countries (4 of 17) set renewable energy deployment targets **(Lebanon, Oman, Qatar** and the **United Arab Emirates).** A larger number of countries (8 of 17) have introduced policies to promote renewable-powered transportation modes, such as electric vehicles **(Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman,** the **State of Palestine, Qatar** and the **United Arab Emirates).**

Despite progress in the adoption of renewable energy targets in the power sector, renewable energy use remains low in most countries. In 2021, renewables accounted for only 5.1 per cent of the region's total final energy consumption, of which 4.6 per cent was due to non-modern renewables (primarily solid biofuels) and only 0.5 per cent to modern renewables (mostly solar and wind). Notably, renewables accounted for only 0.1 per cent of total final energy consumption in Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

Arab countries, especially those with existing steel, electrical and mechanical industries, should define national plans for renewable energy equipment manufacturing, including local concentrated solar power and wind components. They should also conduct feasibility studies based on local manufacturing capacities and skills sets, seeking to create employment opportunities, particularly for young people.

As of 2022, countries had collectively reached only 9 per cent of their targeted renewable electricity capacity for 2035.[6] This represents the lowest achievement rate globally, with other regions in 2021 having achieved between 30 and 87 per cent of targeted renewable capacity set for 2030.[7] Considerable efforts are needed to bridge the remaining 91 per cent gap in the region by 2035.

For more on policy approaches to climate action, see the chapter on SDG 13.



Some countries are beginning to translate targets into binding legislation, build bankable projects, and secure dedicated funding to meet renewable energy targets and accelerate the transition to clean energy.

- **Saudi Arabia** has made significant strides in integrating renewable energy into its energy policy framework, aligning with its broader objectives of reducing fossil fuel dependence and diversifying the energy mix. The country set its renewable power target under the National Renewable Energy Program (2017) and created a regulatory framework for renewable energy projects through the Renewable Energy Projects Development Regulations (2018). Additionally, Saudi Arabia updated its Grid Code in 2020 to incorporate new regulations for handling renewable energy variability, ensuring grid reliability with high renewable energy penetration. As of 2021, the country also offers long-term power purchasing agreements for renewable energy projects, providing developers with secure prices for their electricity over extended periods, typically 20 to 25 years. While the renewable energy share of electricity in Saudi Arabia remained at 0.1 per cent between 2018 and 2021, recent policy changes are expected to have a significant impact on advancing renewable energy development in the country.
- The Solar Promotion Programme of **Tunisia,** launched in 2005, provides a 20 per cent capital cost subsidy for residential solar water heaters and low-interest loans facilitated through commercial banks. Utilizing electricity bills for repayments, with the State-owned utility as a debt collector and guarantor, this innovative approach bolstered the solar water heater market. By 2010, installed capacity surged fivefold, reaching 119,000 systems. Not only has the programme enhanced energy independence, but it has also curbed fossil-fuel subsidies, resulting in substantial long-term savings for the Government. Moreover, the programme has fostered job creation and environmental benefits by mitigating oil consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. Key to its success are training programmes, accreditation schemes and the involvement of the Tunisian National Agency for Energy Conservation in programme design and implementation. This experience underscores the potential for leveraging public resources, including utilities, to support renewable energy investments and steer demand away from conventional energy sources.[8]



◆ **The region has made progress in adopting energy efficiency policy frameworks, yet lacks specific policies targeting critical energy-consuming sectors – such as buildings and transportation.** As of 2021, 16 of 17 countries had adopted energy efficiency action plans or legal frameworks, a significant increase from 5 in 2010 and 11 in 2015.[9] Additionally, these 16 countries have also established national energy efficiency targets. More needs to be done, however, to develop and implement energy efficiency policies tailored to key energy-consuming sectors, such as buildings and transportation. Some countries (9 of 17) have mandatory energy efficiency ratings for buildings and/or labelling systems.[10] Only five have established heating and/or cooling strategies to guide building performance aspirations.[11] **Jordan** and the **State of Palestine** are the only two countries out of 17 to have national standards or regulations for near-zero energy buildings.

Price is a key factor influencing energy demand. In particular, artificially low energy prices can hinder the effectiveness of energy efficiency policies.

Moreover, price signals have a crucial role in attracting private investments in energy efficiency. To expedite their energy efficiency efforts, countries need to advance in the gradual rationalization of energy prices.

In the transportation sector, only five countries **(Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar** and the **United Arab Emirates)** report having a mandate or incentive programme to support shifts to electric vehicles for personal use. Moreover, three countries **(Egypt, Morocco** and the **State of Palestine)** report providing public transit subsidies for consumers, one country **(Morocco)** has supported a car-sharing programme, and one country **(United Arab Emirates)** has a programme to support bicycle or other non-motorized schemes. This sluggish progress has resulted in significant liabilities, including large stocks of energy-inefficient vehicles. The lack of public transport infrastructure contributes to the rising reliance on motor vehicles in many countries, driving up regional fuel consumption and disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups, including the poor and women. These groups often struggle to afford purchasing and maintaining a car, which limits their mobility and restricts their ability to access education, health care, employment and other opportunities. In countries where public vehicle fleets do exist, low energy efficiency levels divert public resources towards fuel costs rather than investments in better transport infrastructure.

When it comes to setting minimum energy performance standards, equipment types that receive the highest

priority in the region are heating and cooling systems, lighting equipment and refrigerators. Notably, 12 of 17 countries have established standards for heating and cooling systems, 10 for lighting equipment and 9 for refrigerators. In contrast, only 4 of 17 countries have such standards for industrial electric equipment and two for light vehicles. Alarmingly, only about half of countries with minimum energy performance standards have established penalties for non-compliance. The limited reach of energy performance standards, the rare imposition of penalties and insufficient enforcement of regulations across the region have heightened energy intensity in regional economic growth.

◆ **Countries are increasingly delving into clean hydrogen and its derivatives as alternative energy carriers but with a notable absence of regulations and incentives to drive these initiatives.** Clean energy solutions have potential to leverage the region's abundant natural gas resources, aided by carbon capture and storage, as well as its vast renewable energy potential for green hydrogen production. Clean hydrogen presents an opportunity to diversify export earnings, cut energy-related emissions, and enhance environmental and economic resilience. While several countries, including **Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates,** have clean hydrogen projects in various stages of development (box), comprehensive legal and regulatory frameworks for low-carbon hydrogen production are still lacking. The **United Arab Emirates** took a step forward with the adoption of a national hydrogen strategy in 2023.

High water requirements can hinder green hydrogen production in regions already facing water scarcity. Desalination offers a potential solution, but its energy demand and cost require careful evaluation within local contexts.

Countries equipped with robust seawater desalination industries possess the expertise to offset water usage concerns when expanding for green hydrogen production. By scaling up desalination with a focus on green hydrogen, they could create a win-win situation, both contributing to clean energy goals and enhancing water security for their communities.

- The National Hydrogen Strategy 2050 of the **United Arab Emirates** aims to scale up clean hydrogen production to 1.4 million tons per year by 2031 and 15 million tons per year by 2050. This ambitious, multipronged approach focuses on building a robust regulatory framework, fostering a strong supply chain, creating a dedicated national R&D centre for hydrogen technologies, and promoting collaboration to create a regional hydrogen market. The strategy is a crucial tool to meet the country's 2050 net-zero commitment and the objectives of the Paris Agreement, especially by tackling emissions reductions in hard-to-abate sectors, such as transport, chemicals, fertilizers and metals.[12]

Examples of clean hydrogen projects in selected countries

Egypt signed at least 16 memoranda of understanding in 2022 to develop green hydrogen and green ammonia production in collaboration with regional and international partners. The Ministry of Planning and Economic Development estimates that total investment in hydrogen infrastructure in the country may reach $500 billion in 2030 and create 7 million direct and indirect jobs by 2050.

Mauritania entered into a memorandum of understanding with partners from Germany, **Egypt** and the **United Arab Emirates** to develop a $34 billion, 10-gigawatt green hydrogen project. Scheduled for completion by 2028, this initiative has the potential to produce up to 8 million tons of green hydrogen and derivatives annually. It is set to begin its first phase, positioning Mauritania as a key player in the global clean energy transition.

The National Strategy for an Orderly Transition to Net Zero of **Oman** relies heavily on clean hydrogen and carbon capture and storage technologies to achieve decarbonization by 2050. To materialize this vision, the Government took a pivotal step in 2022 by establishing Hydrogen Oman (HYDROM), a State-owned enterprise tasked with spearheading and overseeing the implementation of hydrogen projects. The first six projects, worth $20 billion and boasting a planned capacity of 15 gigawatts, were awarded in March 2023. Project agreements span 47 years, ensuring stability and long-term commitment. The development and construction phase is slated for seven years, followed by 40 years of operation.

Saudi Arabia is developing an $8.4 billion green hydrogen facility in Neom, targeting an annual production of 219,000 tons of hydrogen and 1.2 million tons of ammonia. With construction well underway, the facility is anticipated to be the first to produce green hydrogen at scale upon completion in 2026.

Sources: Hamdy, 2022; Egypt, State Information Service, 2022; Morsy, 2022; Alkousaa and Heine, 2023; Oman, 2022 (for more on the strategy, see the chapter on SDG 13); IEA, 2023; Neom Green Hydrogen Company.

C. Policy trends by subregion

While the pursuit of SDG 7 shows overarching trends, subregional nuances reveal varying realities. In middle-income countries, these general patterns manifest clearly. Among the least developed and Gulf Cooperation Council countries, distinct subregional dynamics emerge. Conflict-affected countries require context-specific strategies. Recognizing these variations is vital for crafting effective and equitable solutions for achieving access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.

1. Arab least developed countries

Only 64 per cent of the population in Arab least developed countries had access to electricity in 2021, with important differences between rural (52 per cent) and urban areas (85 per cent). All countries in this group, except **Yemen,** derive a large share of total final energy consumption from renewables. Their average share of renewable energy in total final energy consumption is three times higher than the global average. This is almost exclusively due to traditional renewables, primarily solid biofuels. A high proportion of their population relies largely on polluting fuels and technologies for cooking, heating and lighting.

◆ **Rural electrification and off-grid access policies are key priorities for most least developed countries, given their sizable electricity access deficits.** Mini-grids and solar home systems have gained recognition as practical solutions for extending electricity access in targeted geographical areas, particularly in rural and remote communities. However, the lack of comprehensive regulations and incentives has posed challenges in attracting investment in some countries.

- Although **Mauritania** has identified access to energy as a key development priority in various strategic documents, from its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (various editions) to the Accelerated Growth and Shared Prosperity Strategy, it did not have a national electrification plan as of 2021.[13] The Production and Transmission Master Plan (2011) was the only technical document setting priorities for the power sector, focusing mostly on interconnecting and expanding the current network while identifying opportunities for increasing local production and transmission, including through off-grid solutions in remote areas.[14] Little progress has been achieved in the last few decades. The proportion of the rural population with access to electricity fell from 3 per cent in 2000 to 0.8 per cent in 2012 (the latest year with available data in the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor). This is among the lowest rates in the world, highlighting the critical need for a comprehensive strategy.
- As of 2021, **Somalia,** the **Sudan** and **Yemen** had each developed national electrification plans but comprehensiveness varied. Only the plans of **Somalia** and the **Sudan** include specific electrification access targets, incorporate off-grid solutions and encourage private sector financing. In contrast to **Mauritania,** the **Sudan** has made significant progress in rural electrification in the last two decades. The proportion of the rural population with access to electricity increased from 4.4 per cent in 2000 to 24 per cent in 2012 and 49 per cent in 2021.

◆ **Replacing wood and charcoal stoves with clean fuels and advanced technologies for cooking, heating and lighting is considered a policy priority in most least developed countries.** These countries are increasingly adopting policies or targets for clean cooking. The **Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia** and the **Sudan** have included measures to scale up access to clean cooking solutions in their nationally determined contributions. The proportion of the population primarily reliant on clean fuels and technologies in the least developed countries has more than doubled over the past two decades, rising from 23 per cent in 2001 to 37 per cent in 2011 and reaching 51 per cent in 2021. Nevertheless, the subregional average still lags significantly behind the averages for the region (88 per cent) and the world (71 per cent). Substantial progress is essential to bridge this gap.[15]

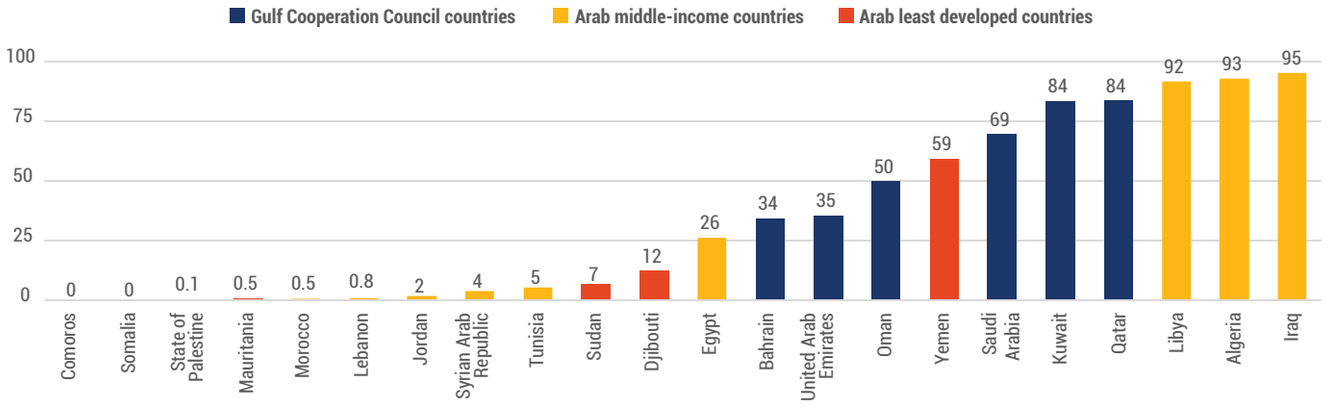
- The national plan of the **Sudan** to scale up access to clean cooking solutions includes a targeted awareness-raising strategy to drive adoption, with tailored messages for both men and women, including on health. The plan does not set a goal of reaching universal access to clean cooking, however, nor does it set efficiency standards or adopt labelling schemes for clean cooking solutions. Importantly, the Government tracks household-level data on cooking solutions and provides duty and tax incentives for suppliers. The country's updated nationally determined contribution sets a goal of replacing traditional inefficient wood stoves with improved cookstoves for 20 per cent of the rural population. This transition, coupled with associated biomass savings, is expected to result in a reduction of 2.6 million tons of carbon dioxide-equivalent emissions by 2030.[16]

2. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

Gulf Cooperation Council countries boast significant hydrocarbon production and processing operations, with large portions of GDP and exports tied to the hydrocarbon industry (figure 7.1). In addition, their economies and societies are highly energy intensive. While these countries derive minimal shares of total energy consumption from renewables (figure 7.2), they are home to some of the lowest-cost utility-scale solar photovoltaic systems on Earth. Although installed renewable energy-generating capacity per capita increased 15-fold between 2015 and 2021, it was still only a quarter of the global average. Gulf Cooperation Council countries achieved universal access to electricity prior to 2000.

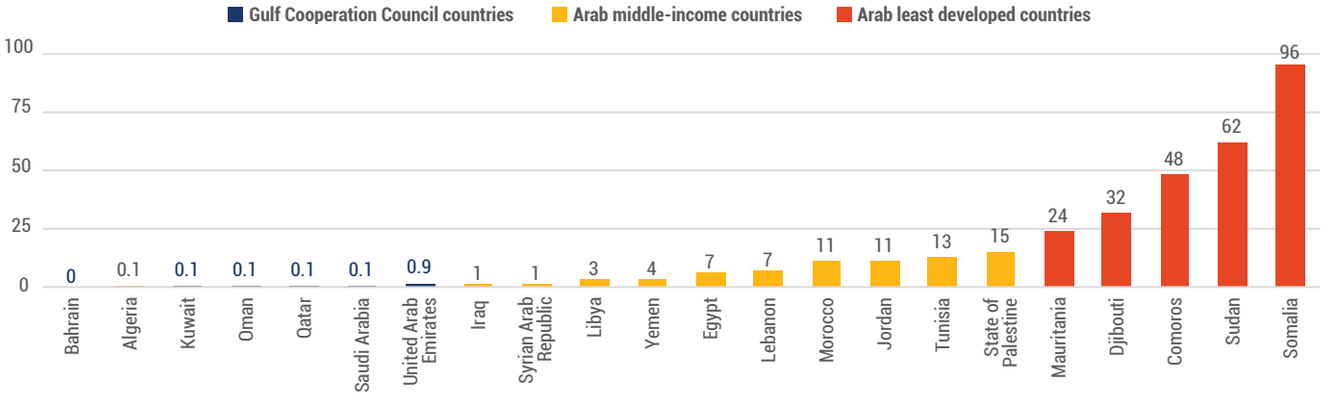


Figure 7.1
Share of hydrocarbons in total export revenues, 2019 to 2021 (Percentage)



Source: UNCTAD, 2023.

Figure 7.2
Share of renewable energy in total final energy consumption, 2020 (Percentage)



Source: ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

◆ **Gulf Cooperation Council countries are increasingly prioritizing the localization of their renewable energy sectors** by supporting national companies, incentivizing the private sector to manufacture renewable energy components and provide services locally, and encouraging both the public and private sectors to rely on local providers.

- In **Saudi Arabia,** to support Saudi Vision 2030's goal of indigenizing renewable energy sectors, the National Transformation Programme 2020 sought to increase the percentage of local content in the total expenditure of the public and private sectors to 50 per cent by 2021, and to raise the percentage of private sector jobs localization to 24 per cent by the same year.

◆ **Gulf Cooperation Council countries are seeking to optimize the use of available hydrocarbon resources.** While they have set renewable energy targets, there is also a concerted effort to expand fossil fuel production and bolster downstream industries.

- In **Bahrain,** the National Development Strategy (2015–2018) emphasizes the assessment and further development of hydrocarbon assets to maximize economic benefits over their lifespan. This entails employing enhanced recovery techniques for existing reserves and conducting exploratory drilling to identify new sources of supply.
- In **Saudi Arabia,** the National Transformation Programme 2020 sought to create 12,000 jobs in the hydrocarbon and minerals sectors in less-developed regions, as well as to attract 28 billion Saudi riyals in private sector investment in these sectors and regions.

◆ **Most Gulf Cooperation Council countries are promoting or striving to promote a carbon circular economy, including through carbon capture and storage.** Several countries, including **Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates,** have incorporated carbon capture and storage measures in their nationally determined contributions.

- Despite having large-scale carbon capture and storage facilities in operation, **Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates** have not enacted the broad range of policy measures to advance carbon capture and storage deployment typically seen outside the Arab region. Instead, the two countries have opted for a strategy focused on State ownership of carbon capture and storage facilities, at least in the early deployment stages, rather than creating policy frameworks to encourage private sector investment.[17]



3. Arab countries in conflict

Arab countries in conflict[18] face unique challenges in formulating and implementing energy policies. The instability and insecurity caused by conflicts disrupt essential energy infrastructure, supply chains and investment opportunities. This often pushes policymakers to prioritize immediate humanitarian needs over long-term energy planning and development objectives. Addressing these challenges necessitates context-specific strategies that tackle security concerns, prioritize basic energy needs for vulnerable populations, manage reliance on external energy sources and aid, and build capacity for effective energy policy implementation within fragile governance structures.

The war that erupted in Gaza, in **Palestine,** in October 2023, exemplifies how pre-existing energy vulnerabilities become even more acute in conflict zones. Chronic power cuts, affordability issues and fuel shortages plagued Gaza even before the war. These were intensified by reliance on electricity imports from Israel and infrastructure damage from recurring military escalations. Residents turned to generators and renewable energy solutions, such as solar water heaters and photovoltaic systems, to cope with unreliable grid electricity. The war brought devastating blows, however, through limits on the types and quantities of fuel allowed into Gaza through Israeli-controlled crossings, targeted destruction of solar panels and the stoppage of Israeli supply, severely undermining even the most basic services.[19]

Recovery efforts in contexts of war and occupation must tackle the root causes of conflict and consider the water-energy-food-environment nexus for sustainable progress. This involves simultaneously improving energy and water access, ensuring food security, supporting livelihoods, enhancing health and achieving environmental outcomes.



D. Policies to leave no one behind

Vulnerable groups face an elevated risk of being left behind and must be considered in the Arab region's and countries' efforts to achieve SDG 7. Yet energy policies, plans and strategies typically overlook these groups and fail to consider gender dynamics. Table 7.1 details obstacles for vulnerable groups as well as examples of policies to address their needs.

Table 7.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

 **Inhabitants of rural and remote areas** face significant disparities in access to energy services compared to their urban counterparts. They have lower access to electricity as well as clean fuels and technologies for cooking, heating and lighting. Energy poverty limits their opportunities to improve their livelihoods, leave poverty and access quality education, health care and other public services.	**Algeria** has made a sustained effort to electrify remote areas in the south of the country. For example, the Isolated Networks of the South Programme provided additional electrical energy production capacity of 566 megawatts from 2010 to 2018. In **Morocco,** the Global Rural Electrification Programme has helped achieve nearly universal rural electricity access, with 99.9 per cent of the rural population having access to electricity in 2021 (see section B for more details).
 **People living in poverty** are more likely to lack access to electricity and clean fuels and technologies for cooking, heating and lighting. In addition, they often must devote a significantly higher share of their incomes to access energy compared to wealthier individuals.	In **Mauritania,** the Government has established a financing mechanism for low-income households and other vulnerable groups (such as female-headed households, informally settled people and displaced persons) regardless of the technology supply (grid, mini-grid or off-grid). In the **Sudan,** a social or lifeline tariff mechanism supports grid-connected low-volume consumers.
 **Women and girls** face considerable challenges due to energy poverty, which undercuts their well-being and economic prospects. Limited electricity access exacerbates time poverty[a] and places a heavier burden of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities on women. Women are disproportionately vulnerable to premature mortality due to indoor air pollution resulting from the use of unclean cooking fuels. Furthermore, their representation in key public sector roles responsible for energy policies and programmes remains insufficient. Moreover, their participation in the energy sector workforce in the region is less than 15 per cent, significantly below the global average of 22 per cent.[b]	In the **Sudan,** the national plan to scale up access to clean cooking solutions takes the gender-based impact of cooking practices into account. It also includes a targeted awareness-raising strategy to drive adoption, with tailored messages for both men and women, including on health.

[a] Time poverty is broadly understood as the lack of time needed for individuals to meet their basic requirements for rest and leisure, owing to an excess of paid work and unpaid care and domestic work (Vickery, 1977; UN Women, 2020).

[b] World Bank, 2022.

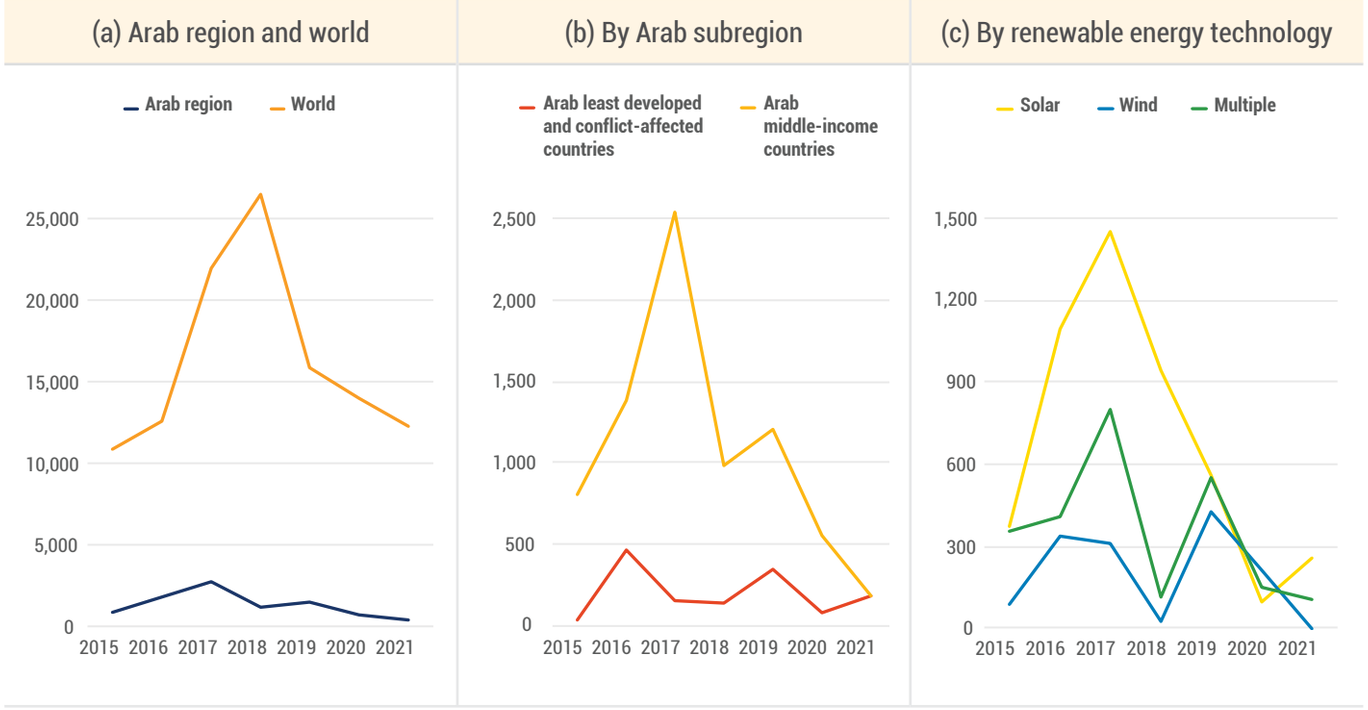
E. The financing landscape

International financial flows to Arab countries for clean energy R&D and renewable energy production, including in hybrid systems, have plummeted. Foreign governments, multilateral agencies and other development finance institutions provided a peak of $2.7 billion in 2017, but this dropped to $363 million by 2021 (figure7.3(a)), a decline of 87 per cent.[20]

Furthermore, the global share of clean energy funding directed to Arab countries has shrunk significantly. In 2017, these flows accounted for 10 per cent of the global total. By 2021, the share had fallen to just 4 per cent.

There has been a significant change in the subregional distribution of international financial flows in support of clean energy. The share going to middle-income countries fell from 97 per cent in 2015 to 50 per cent in 2021, while the share going to the least developed and conflict-affected countries increased from 3 to 50 per cent in the same period. The increase in the share for the latter was not due to a significant rise in flows to these countries, however, but to the sharp drop in flows to middle-income countries (figure7.3(b)). In terms of renewable energy type, solar remained the leading technology in every year from 2015 to 2021, except in 2020, when wind took the leading position (figure7.3(c)).

Figure 7.3
International financial flows to low- and middle-income countries in support of clean energy R&D and renewable energy production, including in hybrid systems (Millions of dollars)



Source: ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

Across the Arab region, a variety of financing mechanisms are driving the uptake of clean energy solutions. Several instruments prioritize de-risking strategies to overcome investment barriers and mitigate perceived risks. Guarantee mechanisms to address political and currency risks are particularly crucial for least developed and fragile countries.

- **National public funds** dedicated to supporting the energy transition include the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Fund in **Jordan,** the Fund to Support Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency in the **Syrian Arab Republic** and the Energy Transition Fund in **Tunisia.**
- **Credit lines and revolving funds** with banks facilitate energy efficiency initiatives in industrial, residential and municipal sectors in some countries, including **Algeria, Jordan, Morocco** and **Tunisia.** One notable example is the Municipal Energy Efficiency Programme in **Jordan,** administered by the Cities and Villages Development Bank. It promotes investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency infrastructure, including rooftop solar photovoltaic systems, street lighting refurbishments and energy efficiency enhancements in public buildings.[21]
- **Green bonds** to finance clean energy initiatives have been issued in **Morocco, Qatar** and the **United Arab Emirates,** as well as by regional and multilateral financial institutions with projects in the region. For example, the Islamic Development Bank committed $110 million from its first sustainable *sukuk* (a *sharia*-compliant sustainable bond) to a photovoltaic solar power plant in the **United Arab Emirates.**[22]
- **Blended finance** can make projects more attractive to private investors by mitigating risks and providing initial funding. For example, the Northern State Photovoltaic Fund of the **Sudan** leveraged $4.3 million from the Global Environment Facility and $2.5 million to $3 million in government funds to attract a further $17.9 million in investment from 11 commercial banks. This enabled a subsidy scheme that made solar-powered irrigation accessible to farmers. Building on this success, a National Photovoltaic Fund has been developed, extending benefits to farmers across the country.[23]
- **Customs and tax incentives and facilities** can be used to promote clean renewable energy projects, as in the **Syrian Arab Republic,** where Investment Law No. 18 of 2021 extended full exemption from financial, customs and non-customs duties and a substantial 50 per cent reduction in income tax for a decade, and stipulated the provision of essential land for project establishment. Incentives and facilities have also been provided to encourage clean energy use, such as for the acquisition of emissions-free electric cars in **Oman** or the use of renewables in heating and cooling systems in **Lebanon, Morocco** and **Tunisia.**

The Energy Transition Fund fuels energy transition in Tunisia

Established in 2014 to replace the National Energy Conservation Fund, the Energy Transition Fund of **Tunisia** subsidizes clean energy initiatives that are cost-effective for the State but not profitable enough for consumers. The fund leverages tax levies (primarily on car registrations, air conditioners and incandescent lamps) and mobilizes co-investment and lending from banks and investment funds. Between 2005 and 2016, it collected €100 million and deployed €70 million for projects focused on energy substitution (50 per cent), renewable energy (41 per cent) and energy efficiency (9 per cent). The fund's impact is undeniable: it has mobilized €450 million in private investments, saved 2.7 million tons of oil equivalent and avoided 6.3 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions.

The fund operates through a diverse toolkit, offering subsidies, loans and equity investments targeting specific needs. Loan partnerships with banks bridge financing gaps, while equity investments support promising individuals with limited equity. Notably, a consumer-repayment mechanism allows loan repayments through electricity bills, encouraging uptake of solar solutions.

This pioneering model highlights the power of strategic partnerships and targeted interventions in accelerating clean energy transitions. As Tunisia charts its path towards a sustainable future, the Energy Transition Fund can serve as a model for other nations seeking similar transformations.

Source: ESCWA, 2021.

F. Regional dimensions

The **Pan-Arab Sustainable Energy Strategy,** approved by the Arab Ministerial Council of Electricity in 2016 as an extension to the Pan-Arab Renewable Energy Strategy 2010–2030, sets a basis for regional cooperation to drive the deployment of renewable energy, the enhancement of energy efficiency, the improvement of energy access and the reduction of energy-related carbon dioxide emissions. It provides specific targets with clear indicators.

To support the region's sustainable energy ambitions, the Regional Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency, the League of Arab States and the International Renewable Energy Agency launched the **Pan-Arab Clean Energy Initiative,** a key component of a roadmap of actions to implement the strategy. The initiative aims to promote the integration of greater shares of renewables in regional power systems, including by improving national energy planning practices so that countries better account for the variability of wind and solar power.

Given the water-energy-food-environment nexus, renewable energy and energy efficiency are mainstreamed in regional sectoral strategies for climate action and water. In particular, the **Arab Framework Action Plan on Climate Change (2010–2030)** calls for focusing on the use of renewable energy in water desalination and water treatment as a promising solution to close the region's water gap. The **Arab Strategy for Water Security in the Arab Region (2010–2030)** proposes using available alternative clean energy sources, such as wind and solar energy, and developing related scientific research to use such energy in water desalination and treatment.

Transboundary energy cooperation is a critical requirement for energy security in some countries. At least 10 countries have included measures in their nationally determined contributions related to regional cooperation in energy, of which eight **(Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Qatar** and **Tunisia)** are for intra-Arab cooperation and two **(Djibouti** and **Mauritania)** are for cooperation with non-Arab neighbouring countries. For example, in 2011, **Djibouti** finalized an electricity interconnection project with Ethiopia, through which it receives 65 per cent of its electricity consumption. The country seeks to further develop this connection, provided it receives international financial support.

Enhanced regional electricity grid connectivity also has the potential to enable greater integration of renewables in the region by connecting demand centres with remote sources of low-cost renewable energy while increasing system flexibility.[24]





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Endnotes

1. The 17 Arab countries surveyed by the Energy Sector Management Assistance Programme were Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen (ESMAP, 2022). Throughout this section, "17 countries" refers specifically to these countries.
2. Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates (ESMAP, 2022).
3. Long-term power purchasing agreements mitigate risks for developers, rendering investments in renewable energy projects more attractive.
4. Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates (ESMAP, 2022).
5. ESMAP, 2022.
6. IRENA, 2022.
7. Ibid.
8. ESCWA, 2017.
9. The 16 countries with national energy efficiency action plans or legal frameworks in 2021 were Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Mauritania did not have a national action plan or legal framework in place. Information was not available for the Comoros, Djibouti, Iraq, Libya and the Syrian Arab Republic (ESMAP, 2022).
10. Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates (ESMAP, 2022).
11. Algeria, Lebanon, the State of Palestine, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (ESMAP, 2022).
12. The United Arab Emirates, Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure, 2023.
13. ESMAP, 2022.
14. Sustainable Energy Fund for Africa and African Development Bank, 2019.
15. ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.
16. The Sudan, 2021.
17. Global CCS Institute, 2018.
18. This country subgroup includes Iraq, Libya, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.
19. ESCWA, 2023a.
20. ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.
21. ESCWA, 2021.
22. ESCWA, 2023b.
23. DESA, 2023.
24. ESCWA, 2023c.

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8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

SDG 8

Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

A. Introduction

The Arab region is not on track to achieve SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). It is losing ground or stagnating on several key indicators. Countries have struggled to overcome long-standing challenges to igniting economic growth, increasing labour productivity and creating decent work opportunities. Structural weaknesses include the rentier nature of most economies, a lack of diversification, weak integration into international value chains and outdated market regulations. As a result of these challenges, the Arab region has long had the highest unemployment rates in the world, stunting progress on SDG 8. Patterns of low growth benefiting relatively narrow portions of the population and high unemployment rates have severely impacted the achievement of other goals, constraining efforts to end poverty (SDG 1) and reduce inequality (SDG 10), and limiting investment in key sectors.

Countries have enacted policies to diversify their economies and improve economic performance and competitiveness. Yet they have made little progress in realizing transformative shifts towards innovative, productive economies that create decent work opportunities for all.

A succession of global crises over the past four years has battered the region's chronically challenged economies. The region was ill-prepared to weather the sharp economic slowdown and inflationary pressures emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and instability in global energy, food and raw materials markets. Impacts have not been uniform, however.

- Gulf Cooperation Council countries have largely benefited from energy price hikes, which generated significant windfalls and high rates of growth. Government interventions have kept inflation significantly below world and regional averages.
- The rest of the region has suffered serious economic fallout. Many countries have not yet recovered in terms of real GDP per capita. Most countries have experienced some combination of debt crisis, currency depreciation, reduction of price supports, widening trade imbalances and political instability or conflict. These factors have significantly weighed on economic recovery and increased the cost of living.
- At the same time, net ODA inflows into the region fell by 5 per cent between 2020 and 2022. Least developed and conflict-affected countries experienced the sharpest declines, and saw their combined net ODA inflows fall by 18.4 per cent during this period.

Source: IMF, 2023; OECD Stat, "Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions [DAC2a]," accessed on 18 April 2024.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).

Available SDG 8 data illustrate deep challenges in spurring growth and creating decent work opportunities in the Arab region.

Since 2015, real GDP per capita has fallen at the regional level. Between slow rates of annual growth, major setbacks during the COVID-19 pandemic, and rising inflation, real GDP per capita fell by 3.7 between 2015 and 2022. At the global level, real GDP per capita grew by more than 10 per cent during this same period.

Real labour productivity growth stagnated between 2015 and 2023 as slow increases were erased by steep declines during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a gain of just 1 per cent during this period at the regional level. In contrast, worldwide real labour productivity grew by 11.8 per cent during this period.

The region has the highest **unemployment rate** in the world, at 10.7 per cent in 2023 compared to 5.8 per cent globally. This has been a long-standing issue; regional unemployment has rarely fallen below 10 per cent since 2000. The situation is even more dire for women. At 19.9 per cent, the region's **female unemployment** rate in 2022 was more than triple the global average of 5.8 per cent. **Youth unemployment** was 26.3 per cent, far exceeding the global average of 14 per cent. For young women, the rate was even higher at 41.6 per cent. At the same time, **informal employment** represents more than 62 per cent of all jobs in the region.

Further highlighting the lack of opportunities for young people, the rate of **youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET)** was 30.7 per cent in 2022. The rate has been over 30 per cent since at least 2005, exceeding the global rate of 24.5 per cent. Important gender divides are evident as 42.9 per cent of young Arab women fall into this category.

Data availability for SDG 8 is relatively good at the regional level.Macroeconomic indicators clearly point to the need to do more to achieve inclusive and sustainable growth and decent work for all. A fuller understanding of the extent to which growth and employment trends impact those most at risk of being left behind, however, requires data disaggregated by critical factors such as sex, age, sector, occupation, disability and migratory status.

For an up-to-date view of SDG 8 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.



On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 8

- Increase public and private investment in research and development (R&D) and mobilize regional and global transfers of knowledge and technology to improve innovation and competitiveness.
- Support the development of high-value sectors through strategic investment in industries that maximize job creation, boost local value chains and offer high export potential. Well-crafted incentive programmes, including special economic zones, can accelerate investment and promote international trade.



- Decrease barriers to trade and investment to create a more enabling business environment, including by streamlining bureaucratic procedures, using technology to accelerate processes and expanding e-government service portals.
- Enact education reforms to build skills in problem solving, critical thinking and use of new technologies to ensure that graduating students are equipped to pursue decent work opportunities, including in emerging sectors of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.
- Accelerate diversification and reduce dependency on extractive sectors by investing in the green and knowledge economies and prioritizing export-oriented activities to support competitiveness and decent job creation.
- Uphold the right to unionization, facilitate tripartite dialogue, and protect the rights of migrant and domestic workers in line with the conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO). Sustainable public procurement practices can serve as mechanisms to compel private companies to adhere to labour laws and promote gender equality.
- Facilitate women's participation in the labour force by developing and enforcing measures to dismantle discriminatory social norms, penalizing gender discrimination and criminalizing sexual harassment in the workplace, and strengthening social insurance coverage for maternity and childcare benefits.
- Stimulate economic activity in rural and remote areas, including through strategic infrastructure development, incentives for foreign and domestic investment, and increased social support to informal and agricultural workers.

B. The policy landscape for SDG 8

National strategies for growth must work in tandem with other policies to enable the socioeconomic transformation of the Arab region. To be effective, such policies must include: measures to create an enabling environment for the private sector and to implement regulatory frameworks that ensure sustainability, transparency and the public interest (SDG 16); reforms to orient education systems towards creativity, innovation and critical thinking (SDG 4); programmes to remove barriers to women's participation in the labour market (SDG 5); and investments to enhance digital infrastructure, connectivity and the use of technology (SDGs 9 and 17).

Achieving SDG 8 has a direct impact on ending poverty (SDG 1), reducing inequalities (SDG 10), and improving livelihoods and well-being (SDGs 2 and 3). To realize sustainable economic growth with a reduced environmental footprint, efforts to achieve SDG 8 must also account for effects on SDGs 12, 13, 14 and 15.

Despite diverse circumstances across countries, several common trends are evident in efforts to achieve inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all.

◆ **Most countries have attempted to diversify their economies, albeit with mixed success.** Strategies have included incentives for foreign direct investment, investments in R&D, infrastructure and skills development to support entrepreneurship and innovation, and regulatory reforms geared towards an enabling environment for the private sector. Such efforts have so far largely failed to produce desired results: cross-border outflows surpass inflows by as much as 50 per cent, R&D spending remains less than one third of the global average and domestic private investment is sluggish.[1] In the face of risks and weaknesses in the business environment, the region has struggled to stimulate long-term private sector investments to positively transform its economic trajectory. Subregional priorities for economic diversification vary.

- **Gulf Cooperation Council countries intend to reduce their heavy reliance on hydrocarbons through investments in high-innovation sectors,** including finance, technology and renewable energy. Although non-oil sectors are growing, however, hydrocarbons continue to account for more than 40 per cent of GDP in **Kuwait, Oman, Qatar** and **Saudi Arabia,** and more than 70 per cent of government revenues in all Gulf Cooperation Council countries except the **United Arab Emirates.** Hydrocarbons indirectly support much of the non-oil economic activity in these countries.[2]

- **In the middle-income countries, diversification policies to develop a more balanced economy are promoting manufacturing, services, tourism and knowledge-based industries,** and reduced reliance on extractive industries and low-skill activities.
- **In the least developed countries, diversification policies aim to reduce dependence on primary sectors** such as agriculture, fisheries and extractive activities.
- **In countries in conflict, diversification policies are oriented towards developing, rebuilding and stabilizing economies, focusing on infrastructure, reconstruction, agriculture and energy.** They include efforts to attract international aid and investment, rebuild critical infrastructure, strengthen institutional capacity, and facilitate post-conflict recovery and development.

Many countries offer generous fiscal and tax incentives to attract foreign direct investment and multinational corporations. But the benefits have fallen short of potential. The region still falls short in attracting capital to high-value sectors. Foreign direct investment is largely insufficient, with an average of 69 per cent of inflows repatriated as passive income outside the region. Such investments disproportionately go towards capital-intensive sectors that create relatively few jobs, most notably in extractive industries.[3]

- **The most common tools to encourage foreign direct investment include free zones and tax holidays.** These have been employed extensively in the **United Arab Emirates,** which offers 50-year tax breaks through more than 40 free zones. **Saudi Arabia** is now opening special economic zones and its Special Integrated Logistics Zone. Middle-income countries commonly offer exemptions to foreign firms making eligible investments. Public procurement also serves as a tool to encourage investment. In **Saudi Arabia,** a recent policy shift states that the Government will only contract with foreign firms with a regional headquarters within the Kingdom as of January 2024.[4]
- **Many incentives are not cost-effective as they result in foregone revenues and produce market distortions.** The costs can be substantial. In **Morocco,** tax exemptions led to more than $3.5 billion in foregone public revenues.[5] Further, such incentives are only one factor considered by businesses in making international investment decisions. Despite offering more generous incentives than countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Arab region receives lower levels of foreign direct investment.
- **Overall, foreign direct investment inflows have declined sharply since 2008, and capital outflows outpace inflows by 50 per cent.** Further, tax exemptions can drive a competitive "race to the bottom" that leads countries to continuously lower taxes and enact other conditions in a bid to attract foreign money. This cuts government revenues, limits the ability to encourage investments in line with national objectives and weakens the business environment. Poor enforcement capacity, corporate tax abuse and profit-shifting by multinational corporations already cost the region an estimated $8.6 billion annually. Incentives undercut corporate tax revenue potentials by 60 per cent on average.[6]

Many countries have policies to enhance productivity and competitiveness, unlock the potential of the private sector and create further opportunities for green industries and digital technologies. These efforts in most cases have yet to realize their full desired effects in the face of slow growth and other challenges.

- **Innovation and digital transformation strategies have sought to channel investments towards start-ups, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), upskilling programmes and productive infrastructure, often targeting strategic sectors of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.** For example, the **United Arab Emirates** National Innovation Strategy promotes R&D in advanced technology, with particular support for business in health care, renewable energy and transportation. In **Jordan,** the Innovative Start-ups and SMEs Fund provides early-stage equity finance for innovating businesses. It also hosts outreach programmes to promote entrepreneurship in underserved regions and sectors, and for groups at risk of being left behind, such as women and young people.

Governments have attempted to capitalize on transitions to greener economies through investments in ecotourism, efficient and renewable energy (see the chapter on SDG 7), integrated waste management (see the chapter on SDG 12) and sustainable agriculture (see the chapter on SDG 2). Training programmes have built the capacities of green entrepreneurs and businesses.

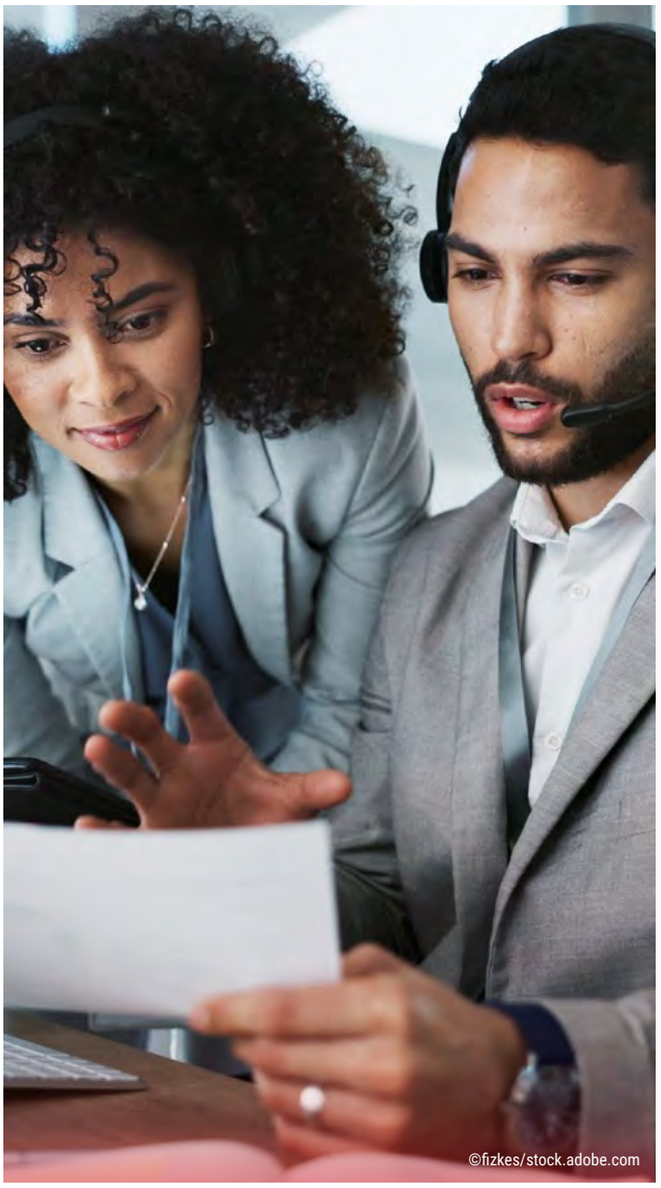
- **Several countries have policies to promote sustainable tourism.** In **Jordan** and **Oman,** regulations encourage environmentally sustainable tourism. **Egypt, Morocco** and **Tunisia** are fostering ecotourism in protected areas, accompanied by broader campaigns to promote sustainable practices across the tourism sector.
- **Many countries hope to capitalize on significant solar and wind power potentials to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, advance towards emissions targets and develop profitable renewable energy industries.** The Solar Plan of **Tunisia** includes investment in solar power plants, support to R&D and incentives for businesses to use renewable energy. Major projects, such as the

Abu Dhabi Power Corporation's Al-Dhafra solar plant in the **United Arab Emirates** and the AMAN project in **Mauritania**, promise to transform the region's energy mix, reduce carbon emissions, and expand access to clean and affordable electricity.

- **Sustainable agriculture and organic farming have been supported** by initiatives such as the Green **Morocco** Plan. It works to increase agricultural productivity through irrigation improvements, the introduction of new crop varieties and support to smallholder farmers. In **Mauritania,** new projects to improve land management and foster inclusive and sustainable commercial agriculture entail community-driven management and irrigation investments.

◆ **Across the region, there is growing interest in addressing labour market deficiencies and promoting decent work through national employment policies[7] and the promotion of technical and vocational education and training (TVET). Such measures have had unclear results in the face of persistently high levels of unemployment and vulnerable employment.** TVET reforms confront limitations in funding and quality (see the chapter on SDG 4) even as many active labour market policies do not sufficiently target populations most in need of support.[8] There has been a disproportionate focus on skilled workers to the detriment of lower-skilled job seekers (see the chapter on SDG 1).[9] Further, sluggish economic growth has failed to produce enough decent employment opportunities to absorb new labour force entrants.

- **As of 2023, 12 countries (Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan and the United Arab Emirates) had national employment policies in place, while an additional five (Djibouti, Egypt, Lebanon, Oman and Tunisia) were developing such policies.** Although quality varies in terms of the use of measurable targets and indicators and inclusion of concrete activities, common elements include promoting economic growth and incentivizing private sector job creation, improving labour market institutions and programmes, protecting workers' rights and facilitating social dialogue. Specific actions often include expanding access to credit, offering tax incentives for job creation, reorienting investments in the education sector and investing in job-creating industries. **Kuwait, Libya, Qatar,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Yemen** have yet to issue national employment policies.[10] Countries have also pursued educational reforms, continuous learning programmes and the promotion of TVET pathways to upskill their populations and better align capacities with labour market needs (see the chapter on SDG 4).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◆ **Although strategies to increase the participation of women and young people in the labour force have proliferated, they have not necessarily been matched by effective policies to create decent jobs or address social, cultural or logistical barriers, such as limits on mobility or childcare challenges for women.**

Piecemeal policies with weak planning, coordination and monitoring mechanisms have largely failed to shift underlying social and cultural barriers to women's economic participation. Similarly, efforts to facilitate youth learning-to-earning transitions have sputtered in the face of low job creation, weak implementation and coordination mechanisms, and insufficient data for designing and implementing targeted policies and programmes.

- **At nearly 20 per cent as of 2022, the region's female unemployment rate is the highest in the world, and more than triple the global average.** Only 20 per cent of women participate in the labour force, trailing far behind the global average of 53 per cent. A variety of factors contribute to this trend, including restricted access to financial services, lower salaries, discrimination, limited mobility and harassment in public places. Gender-blind policies that serve as de facto barriers to women's economic participation include weak provisions for maternity leave or affordable childcare. Countries have sought to correct the situation through a variety of measures. **Egypt** has introduced additional flexibility in working hours for public sector employees and established labour codes requiring large businesses to provide on-site childcare facilities. The National Council for Women's Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030 has further called for a comprehensive multistakeholder approach to the different circumstances women face at various stages in their lives so that these can be considered in policy responses. In **Saudi Arabia,** the 2023 approval of the National Policy to Promote Equality of Opportunities and Treatment in Employment provided a clear definition of gender discrimination and the means for prevention. The policy sets goals to promote equal treatment in employment and occupation, and created initiatives to encourage women to enter and remain in the labour market.
- **In addition to high female unemployment, the region has persistently had the world's highest youth unemployment rate. It stood at 26.3 per cent in 2022,** as young people of all education levels and in all parts of the region struggled to find employment opportunities. Contributing factors include low rates of job creation and mismatches between graduates' skills and the needs of employers. High youth unemployment has fuelled a brain drain, as talented young people with few prospects at home seek opportunities abroad. Policies to address these issues have included training or entrepreneurship support to young people, such as in **Morocco.** Countries have provided subsidized work contracts or similar mechanisms to encourage employers to hire target populations, such as graduates or first-time job seekers, as in **Algeria.** In many countries, adjustments to the education curriculum and efforts to boost TVET have been implemented to address youth unemployment (see the chapter on SDG 4).



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The region faces a significant brain drain as qualified graduates seek better opportunities abroad. Poor socioeconomic conditions, political instability, conflict and limits on free expression, compounded by institutional weaknesses and corruption, drive the migration of educated professionals from low- and middle-income countries to higher-income countries in the region and beyond. Scientists, engineers, ICT professionals and other qualified graduates move abroad to find job opportunities, higher wages and better living conditions.

Brain drain imposes significant costs on origin countries in terms of resources spent on educating emigrants and the loss of talent in the national workforce. While a full analysis has not yet been conducted, several examples point to the scale of the challenge. For example, 600 engineers leave **Morocco** annually, equivalent to the yearly graduating classes of four engineering schools. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the emigration of medical staff exacerbated weaknesses in medical systems. In **Lebanon**, the World Health Organization estimated in 2021 that nearly 40 per cent of medical doctors and 15 per cent of registered nurses had left the country. The **Egyptian** public health sector saw some 11,500 doctors leave to seek opportunities abroad between 2019 and 2022.

Sources: El Ouassif, 2021; WHO, 2021; Mahfouz, 2023.

- **Countries in the region vary in the extent to which they have ratified and applied core international labour rights conventions. Those on abolishing forced labour and protecting children are the most widely adopted.** Despite widespread acceptance of certain conventions, however, labour rights remain weakly enforced, with violations observed in both convention signatories and non-signatories.

The ILO has designated 11 conventions as "fundamental" due to their relationship with essential human rights. These include conventions on free association and recognizing the right to collective bargaining, eliminating forced labour, abolishing child labour, prohibiting discrimination, and implementing safe and healthy working environments. Table 8.1 outlines the ratification status of these instruments.[11]

Table 8.1
Adoption of selected ILO conventions by Arab countries

ILO convention	Number of ratifying countries in the Arab region
Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948	13
Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949	16
Forced Labour Convention, 1930	21
Forced Labour Convention, 2014 Protocol	5
Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957	21
Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951	16
Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958	20
Minimum Age Convention, 1973	20
Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999	21
Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981	4
Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006	4

Source: Authors.

- **While all countries have adopted conventions on the elimination of forced labour and child labour, there is considerably less consensus in other policy areas.** None of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, other than **Kuwait,** have adopted the convention on the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining. Eight Arab countries have yet to ratify the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention. Conventions related to occupational safety and health have the lowest uptake in the region, with only four countries **(Algeria, Bahrain, Somalia** and the **Syrian Arab Republic)** ratifying the 1981 Convention and four **(Iraq, Morocco, Somalia** and **Tunisia)** adopting the 2006 Convention.
- **Despite ratifying labour conventions, many countries still have work to do in protecting labour rights and achieving decent work.** Even in countries that have adopted the Equal Remuneration Convention, gender pay inequalities continue. The right to collective bargaining and unionization is regularly violated, including in countries ratifying associated conventions.[12] Instances of slavery and forced labour continue to be observed despite the unanimous ratification of forced labour conventions. An estimated 1.2 million children in the region (3 per cent of the total) are in child labour, with 50 per cent in hazardous working conditions.[13]
- **Ongoing weaknesses in achieving quality working conditions for all can be tied to a variety of factors, including high levels of informality, weak labour inspection capacity and inadequate mechanisms to access justice.** These compound deeper issues of conflict, displacement and economic fragility. Further, weak rule of law, corruption and violations of the rights to free speech and assembly have shaped institutional environments that are hardly conducive to protecting workers' rights (see the chapter on SDG 16).

Tripartism is making headway in the region, signifying an increased willingness to engage employers and workers in labour policy. To date, 13 Arab countries have signed the ILO Tripartite Consultation Convention of 1976, including five (the **Comoros, Mauritania, Somalia,** the **Sudan** and **Tunisia**) in the past decade. All countries have social dialogue institutions and bodies, and all Arab League Member States have adopted the Arab Action Agenda for Employment, which prioritizes social dialogue and encourages the creation of social and economic councils.[a]

[a] See the ILO, Tripartisan and Social Dialogue in the Arab States.

C. Policy trends by subregion

1. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

Since Gulf Cooperation Council countries remain highly dependent on oil revenues, economies and government spending are vulnerable to volatility in global energy markets. These countries have pursued economic diversification strategies for decades, with some success. The non-oil sector steadily grew to 64 per cent of the subregion's GDP in 2022[14] although some of this growth still ultimately depends on the oil sector. Employment remains a challenge. Even as countries pursue labour force "nationalization" strategies, most employed nationals work in the public sector, while the private sector largely relies on a sizeable migrant worker population.[15] Ensuring inclusive economic growth and decent employment for all will require further promotion of innovation and entrepreneurship, increased dynamism in the non-oil sector and improved working conditions for migrant workers (see the chapter on SDG 10).

◆ **Gulf Cooperation Council countries have intensified efforts to promote economic diversification to shift away from a heavy dependency on oil exports.** Private sector development has been central to diversification efforts, as heavy dependence on hydrocarbons for government revenues renders public sector expansion unsustainable as a diversification strategy. Key sectors for diversification have included logistics, finance, real estate, manufacturing and transportation. Countries have sought to attract foreign capital and businesses through generous tax incentives and investment in start-ups and other enterprises. As articulated in the national visions of all Gulf Cooperation Council countries, an underlying ambition is to position the subregion as a hub for the knowledge-based economy. In addition to attracting and investing in firms active in this space, countries have focused on education and science and on promoting innovation and opportunities in emerging sectors.

All Gulf Cooperation Council countries have created agencies or funds to support entrepreneurship, including financing mechanisms dedicated to SMEs investing in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (see the chapter on SDG 9). For instance, in **Saudi Arabia,** the SME General Authority (*Monsha'at*) was established to regulate, support and develop the SME sector to increase productivity and its contribution to GDP from 20 to 35 per cent by 2030.

◆ **Complementing economic diversification measures, Gulf Cooperation Council countries have attempted to improve their overall business environment and competitiveness through enhanced infrastructure, regulatory conditions and trade connectivity.** Efforts to boost trade and investment have been integral to economic strategies, and countries have made significant investments in infrastructure to spur business productivity and trade. One example is the plan for a Gulf Railway, a 2,117-kilometre project estimated to cost over $240 billion. Once constructed, it will be one of the largest contemporary cross-border rail networks in the world. Significant investment in sea and airport infrastructure has helped to rapidly increase capacity and position the subregion as a hub for international trade, supported by port-linked free trade zones. Container capacity more than doubled between 2012 and 2022, although utilization rates have gradually dropped. Additional efforts to support innovation have included the launch of special economic zones such as the International Investment Park in **Bahrain**, the Science and Technology Park in **Qatar** and the Prince Abdullah Science Park in **Saudi Arabia**.

Countries have used regulatory changes to improve the business environment. Recent examples include reforms of land administration and minority investor protections in **Saudi Arabia,** reforms in building standards and business registration in the **United Arab Emirates** and the launch of an online portal to facilitate business registration in **Kuwait.** Most countries have streamlined procedures for paying taxes and clearing goods through customs.[16]

◆ **"Nationalization" has been a key objective of labour planning strategies, targeting the increased role of citizens in the national labour force, particularly in the private sector.** Common measures to implement such strategies include human capital investments, job matching support, and a combination of fiscal incentives and hiring quotas meant to encourage private sector entities to hire national employees. **Saudi Arabia** nationalization efforts centre on the *nitaqat* programme, which establishes hiring quotas for nationals by industry and company size, and assigns colour-coded ratings to employers according to their success in meeting these targets. A company's *nitaqat* rating confers benefits or penalties on its ability to sponsor foreign workers, with those in the highest categories gaining access to fast-tracked processing and the ability to hire foreign workers from lower-rated companies without the permission of the sponsor. In the **United Arab Emirates**, employers have

been ordered to prioritize the recruitment of Emiratis in 160 targeted professions. Companies achieving hiring targets are offered steep fee reductions by the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation.

- **Progress on nationalization has been uneven. Foreign workers still represent large majorities of all country workforces, ranging from 75.6 per cent in Saudi Arabia to 94.8 per cent in Qatar.**[17] These shares are even greater within the private sector. Challenges to implementing nationalization policies have included long-standing private sector practices of relying on expatriate workers, a mismatch between nationals' skills and the requirements of the labour market, and a persistent preference among nationals for public sector employment, which often offers more attractive compensation packages. Many private sector employers harbour concerns over the potential for quotas to lead to lost productivity and increased costs.[18]
- **Many countries have launched reforms of their *kafala* (sponsorship) systems,** which have traditionally tied migrant workers to their employers and exacerbated their vulnerability. The power imbalances and discrimination embedded within the *kafala* system still leave migrants workers behind, however, exposed to exploitation, abuse and violence (see the chapters on SDGs 1 and 10).

In **Bahrain**, the National Employment Programme (2019) prioritizes citizens' employment in the private and public sectors. The programme includes four key initiatives: an awareness campaign to encourage citizens to register; greater unemployment compensation; increased sponsorship fees for expatriate workers; and a redesign of the training and wage support programmes of *Tamkeen*.[a] In 2020, the National Employment Program 2.0 (later complemented by the National Labour Market Plan 2021-2023) was launched, offering wage support for Bahraini job seekers and new graduates. The Ministry of Labour continues to explore ways to train Bahrainis and connect them with employers, including through electronic job fairs, a digital portal for job seekers, professional training and career guidance, and apprenticeship programmes.

Source: See Bahrain, Voluntary National Review 2023.

[a] Launched in 2006, the Tamkeen government agency's mission is to empower the private sector to drive economic growth in Bahrain by providing programmes and support for enterprises and individuals. This includes investment to enhance funding opportunities for the private sector and support the training and employment of the national workforce through various employment programmes. See the Tamkeen website, and Tamkeen programmes.

2. Arab middle-income countries

Arab middle-income countries face diverse circumstances, with a notable divide between oil-producing and non-oil-producing economies. Several are enduring severe economic and social crises. Like the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, the middle-income countries have sought to modernize infrastructure and diversify their economies, including through incentives for innovation and investment in job-creating sectors such as manufacturing, tourism and services. These efforts have met headwinds given competition from emerging economies in other parts of the world and underlying weaknesses in the business environment. Despite some reforms, transaction costs remain high in the Arab middle-income countries due to bureaucratic burdens, limiting international competitiveness. Most economies are dominated by low-value-added and low-productivity sectors. Unemployment has remained around 10 per cent for more than a decade, and economies have failed to create enough jobs to accommodate many new entrants to the labour market. The informal sector now provides nearly two thirds of all jobs, and large numbers of skilled graduates have emigrated abroad in search of opportunities, contributing to a "brain drain" that threatens future prosperity.


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◆ **Middle-income countries, particularly those that are not dependent on hydrocarbons and are not in conflict, have tried to counterbalance the decline in traditional manufacturing through initiatives to improve industrial competitiveness and support the service-driven economy.** Policies have prioritized fostering innovation and technology, incentivizing R&D, encouraging entrepreneurship, upskilling the workforce, and shoring up critical infrastructure to facilitate trade and connectivity and attract investment capital. Yet asymmetries in international trade, inefficient foreign direct investment policies, and structural barriers, including bureaucracy, corruption and limited financial inclusion, continue to hinder private sector development. **Policies to support transformation have included the development of export-oriented industries bolstered by industrial parks, free economic zones, fiscal incentives and digital infrastructure.**

- **Algeria** has sought to diversify its economy by shoring up sectors that are less dependent on hydrocarbon revenues, with priorities including industry, renewable energy and tourism. The country has introduced tax incentives for exporting companies. Through the National Export Strategy and National Investment Fund, **Algeria** has established 50 industrial parks and offered credit guarantees for eligible businesses to ensure their access to finance.
- The National Structural Reforms Programme of **Egypt** focuses on the digital economy and on expanding the ICT sector, while the draft digital code of **Tunisia** highlights the role of these sectors in transforming the economy and generating high-value-added jobs.
- The Economic Modernization Vision of **Jordan** includes more than 360 initiatives spanning several sectors, emphasizing modern industry, future services, investment in education and green economy innovations. A national reform matrix outlines policy and structural reforms to improve competitiveness, accelerate growth and generate employment opportunities through improvements to the business and investment environments.
- **Morocco** has seen significant expansion in manufacturing by becoming a regional hub for the automotive industry. The Industrial Acceleration Plan aims to create 500,000 jobs and expand industry's share of GDP through an export-driven strategy that aids companies in accessing external markets. Morocco has engaged in regional cooperation agreements such as the African Continental Free Trade Area to expand access to markets.

The automotive industry of Morocco: a diversification success story

The automotive industry of Morocco is one of the region's most successful economic diversification efforts. Over the past 15 years, the country has emerged as the top car producer of Africa and the second largest vehicle exporter to the European Union, occupying a leading position in the global automotive value chain. Approximately 220,000 jobs have been created since 2008. In 2021, the automotive industry exported 400,000 vehicles valued at $8.3 billion, making it the largest export sector in Morocco.

Economic diversification strategies targeting increased exports have driven success. They include the 2008 National Pact for Industrial Emergence and the Industrial Acceleration Plan (2014-2020). Industrial parks and significant public investment in infrastructure projects, such as the Tanger Med Port and enhancements to the road and rail networks of northern Morocco, helped the sector gain a foothold. Further support has included the creation of special economic zones offering tax breaks and investment incentives for eligible firms. Bureaucratic reforms have simplified procedures for international investors and fostered a more business-friendly environment. Various free trade agreements and proximity to the European market have accelerated growth and helped attract investment from major companies.

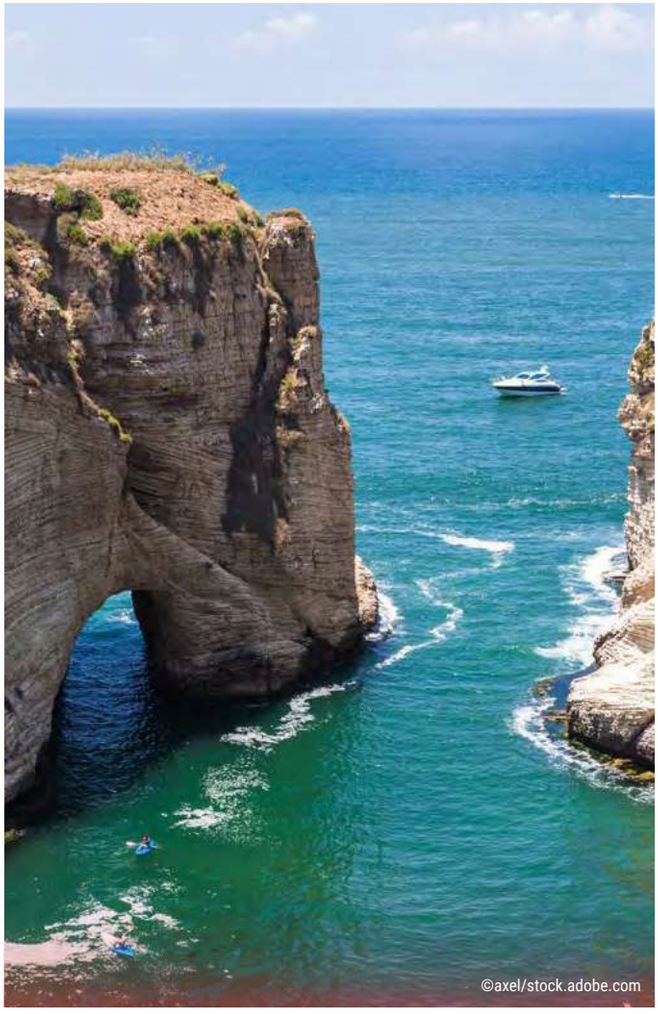
The industrial policy of Morocco has evolved in recent years to enhance local integration, scale up industrial activities, upgrade operations across the value chain, improve levels of technology and knowledge transfer, and diversify export markets. With an already installed annual capacity of 700,000 vehicles, Morocco aims to produce 1 million cars per year by 2025 and achieve a local integration rate of 80 per cent, up from 60 per cent currently. The country produces about 40,000 to 50,000 electric vehicles per year; further moves to ramp up the production of electric vehicles align with the policies of key trading partners, such as the Directive of the European Commission of July 2021 to phase out all fossil fuel-powered vehicles by 2035.

Source: UNCTAD, 2023.

◆ **Tourism has been a major focus in diversification efforts in middle-income countries. Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco** and **Tunisia** have adopted strategies and initiatives to promote new or underdeveloped destinations.

- **Algeria** has adopted measures to support tourism in the Sahara Desert, including the issuance of visas on arrival to visitors making arrangements through approved tourism agencies. Visitors to other parts of the country remain subject to standard visa procedures.[19]
- In **Egypt,** the national strategy for tourism development intends to improve competitiveness, foster investment, upskill human resources and promote new destinations. New measures facilitate entry to the country for 180 nationalities.[20]
- **Jordan** launched the National Tourism Strategy 2021-2025 and the Tourism Resilience Fund to enhance sector competitiveness in the post-COVID-19 era, emphasizing public-private collaboration, medical and film tourism, and domestic tourism. The strategy incorporates structural reforms in regulations, the business environment, accessibility, investment, human resources and governance.
- In **Lebanon,** authorities have identified tourism as a priority sector to stimulate economic growth. The Lebanon Economic Vision Report[21] envisages a diversified tourism sector, including medical and conference tourism. Notably, the National Council for Tourism promotes efforts in responsible tourism.[22]
- In **Morocco,** the 10-year tourism development strategies, Vision 2010 and Vision 2020, called for promotional campaigns, investments, the creation of new destinations and the upskilling of human resources. The plans have sought to foster collaboration between public and private actors, towards the sustainable transformation of the sector based on adapting to new market realities and anticipating increasingly responsible consumption patterns among tourists.[23]
- **Tunisia** launched Tourism 2035,[24] a roadmap to boost collaboration between public and private actors and make the country a sustainable and internationally attractive destination. This overarching framework emphasizes the promotion of cultural heritage and the preservation of the environment.

◆ **Middle-income countries have supported agricultural development through investment in irrigation systems and assistance to farmers.** Although agriculture has declined as a share of GDP, and revenues generated by agriculture are volatile due to meteorological conditions and water availability, it still accounts for an important share of workforces (see the chapter on SDG 2).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◆ **Middle-income countries have launched policies to formalize large numbers of informal workers.** Across the middle-income countries in the region, an estimated 65 per cent of employment is informal,[25] as weak regulatory frameworks, poor labour market conditions, economic concentration in low-productivity sectors, inadequate educational outcomes and conflicts have hindered decent work opportunities in the formal sector.[26] Most workers lack coverage by minimum wage laws, work safety regulations, social protection systems and other benefits afforded by labour laws. Several middle-income countries, such as **Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco** and **Tunisia,** have implemented measures to encourage formalization. These include voluntary or mandatory registration programmes for social protection systems, specific campaigns and systems targeting categories of workers (such as agricultural labourers or artisans), tax holidays for cooperating SMEs and increased enforcement measures against businesses skirting labour regulations. To date, these policies have yet to make significant headway. A lack of buy-in or awareness may hinder voluntary schemes, and increased enforcement measures have not kept up with the scale of informal labour.

◆ **Middle-income countries have promoted entrepreneurship as a solution to high rates of unemployment, offering support for start-ups and SMEs, and opportunities for self-employed people to access social protection systems.** The National Employment Strategy 2015-2025 and National Employment Promotion Plan 2018-2021 of **Morocco** underscore the potential for self-employment and micro-entrepreneurship to facilitate youth integration in the labour market. Programmes back the development of soft skills, language competencies and training in entrepreneurship. An Integrated Business Support and Financing Programme includes an Entrepreneurship Financing Support Fund sponsored in equal measure by the State and the banking sector. The *Inhad* programme of **Jordan** is a multistakeholder partnership promoting self-employment among young people through training in social innovation, entrepreneurship, business planning and finance. The programme's objectives include increasing access to entrepreneurship resources and enhancing the competitiveness of micro-, small and medium-size enterprises (MSMEs) and social entrepreneurs.

3. Arab least developed countries and countries in conflict

Arab least developed and conflict-affected countries are generally characterized by high dependence on a single economic sector, large macroeconomic imbalances and weak competitiveness due to poor infrastructure and human capital development. Most countries have dual-track economies with a prominent divide between export-oriented extractive industries on the one hand and subsistence activities based on fishing and agriculture on the other. Such economies have struggled to generate decent employment opportunities, and are vulnerable to shifts in global commodity and food markets as well as to the risks of climate change, conflict and fragility. These risks impede stability, which is crucial for long-term planning and investment in sectors that generate sustainable employment. Labour markets face serious challenges, with average unemployment rates over 17 per cent and informal employment representing 87 per cent and 76 per cent of jobs, respectively, in each group of countries. Besides economic diversification, the least developed and conflict-affected countries have taken steps to promote investment and employment, improve the management of state-owned enterprises, and enhance anti-corruption and transparency efforts.

◆ **The least developed and conflict-affected countries have launched reform agendas to achieve macroeconomic stability and firm up foundations for inclusive growth**.

These measures have accompanied plans to attract foreign direct investment and promote exports to stimulate growth and job creation.

- In **Iraq,** the Financial Reform White Paper offers a roadmap for addressing structural economic challenges through fiscal stability, infrastructure development, and legal and administrative reform. In **Mauritania,** the Strategy for Accelerated Growth and Shared Prosperity includes various reforms to stimulate the economy, such as the abolition of registration fees for SMEs, a new customs code and the reform of the banking law. In **Palestine,** laws concerning investment, intellectual property, ownership and tax reform (especially in the renewable energy and industrial sectors) have been put in place alongside reformed labour laws.
- Several least developed and conflict-affected countries have received relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, including the **Comoros, Mauritania** and **Somalia.** They have instituted economic management reforms in exchange for partial debt relief. Before the 2023 resurgence of armed conflict, the **Sudan** took steps to pursue HIPC relief. Countries have also joined regional trade blocs; for example, the **Comoros, Mauritania** and **Djibouti** are members of the African Continental Free Trade Area, while **Somalia** and the **Sudan** are still in the ratification process.

◆ **A number of least developed and conflict-affected countries have launched economic diversification policies to reduce reliance on a single sector, support the growth of non-resource sectors such as manufacturing and services, develop the private sector and create employment opportunities.** Many plans have further sought to support private investment and innovation.

- The Comoros Emerging Plan has identified key sectors to accelerate diversification in the **Comoros,** including tourism and handicrafts, the blue economy, financial and logistical services and modernized agriculture. The Industrial Development Strategy of **Mauritania** features measures to limit dependence on the mining sector, such as by promoting processing industries in the agrifood and fishing sectors through tax incentives, providing workforce training, bolstering market access and supporting production sites.
- In **Iraq,** the National Development Plan emphasizes the development of SMEs and investment in industrial areas and scientific parks. In the **Sudan,** the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper 2021-2023 calls for enabling investment in key sectors such as agriculture, energy and transport, a goal bolstered by new public-private partnership laws.
- Countries such as **Mauritania** and the **State of Palestine** have established dedicated funds to support vocational training to aid eligible participants in acquiring skills to enter the workforce.

◆ **Least developed country and post-conflict country Governments have focused on building, upgrading and reconstructing transportation, energy and telecommunications infrastructure to enhance trade and economic growth. Mauritania** has invested in road, port and airport infrastructure. An infrastructure development and maintenance programme has increased the road network and electricity production capacity. Mauritania has also embarked on a strategy to promote renewable energies. In the **Sudan,** partnerships with the private sector have facilitated improvements to the road network, with priority given to agriculture feeder roads to link production areas with markets. In addition to the establishment of road tolls, a Fund for Roads Maintenance managed by the Roads and Bridges Corporation is being created. Countries that have suffered prolonged conflicts have massive needs for reconstruction, with the total costs for rebuilding damaged infrastructure in the **Syrian Arab Republic** estimated at more than $150 billion.[27]

◆ **Many least developed and conflict-affected countries have programmes to reform agriculture and promote rural development.** The objective is to increase revenues and exports, and create employment opportunities. A large share of workers in the least developed countries is employed in agriculture, making it critical to ensure the dynamism and modernization of this sector.

- The **Comoros** has established Regional Economic Development Centres to support the implementation of rural development strategies. It has launched policies such as the National Agricultural Investment Plan to facilitate adaptation to climate change, sustainable management of water and soil resources, land tenure security and the empowerment of women. **Mauritania** has stressed opportunities to increase the value added of its agricultural sector, including through investments in irrigation, vaccination campaigns to promote livestock health and support for female entrepreneurs in rural regions. **Somalia** has moved to create an enabling environment for investors in agriculture, including through the establishment of an Agricultural Regulatory Inspection Services Agency to conduct quality checks on agricultural products and enforce standards.
- In conflict and post-conflict settings, agricultural development has been part of recovery efforts. The National Development Plan 2018-2022 of **Iraq** aimed to improve access to services and infrastructure to reduce the gap between rural and urban areas, prioritizing provinces recovering from conflict. The **State of Palestine** created its Agriculture Credit Institution to promote investment in farming and rural financial inclusion, especially for smallholder farmers impacted by the Israeli occupation.

D. Policies to leave no one behind

Although economic growth is central to efforts to eliminate poverty, reduce inequality, create employment opportunities and raise financial resources for sustainable development, it is not sufficient to achieve these goals. Growth fuelled by unsustainable practices and disproportionately providing benefits to a small segment of the population will fail to generate sufficient decent employment. If benefits are "captured" by rent-seeking behaviour, they can exacerbate inequalities among groups already left behind. Table 8.2 considers some prominent inequalities hindering equitable and inclusive growth in the Arab region, and provides examples of policies to mitigate their impacts.



Table 8.2
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

 **Young people** face an unfavourable labour market that has failed to generate enough jobs to absorb new entrants into the workforce. As a result, Arab youth have the highest rate of unemployment in the world (26.3 per cent overall). This situation inhibits social mobility, worsens inequality and has sparked both unrest and waves of emigration of skilled and unskilled job seekers. Youth unemployment perpetuates the intergenerational cycle of poverty and is sometimes associated with higher levels of crime, violence, civil unrest, substance abuse and the rise of political extremism.	In **Lebanon,** the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, the Ministry of Industry and the Association of Lebanese Industrialists signed a memorandum of understanding in 2023 to bolster TVET and lifelong learning to support youth employment. The agreement plans to deepen connections between industry and institutions and cultivate a more skilled workforce to promote innovation and competitiveness in the private sector. It highlights the importance of coordination between the public and private sectors to equip TVET students with the competencies and technical knowledge required for sustainable careers. The three parties commit to cooperating in skills planning, curricula enhancement, technology exchange, real work experience and education-to-work transitions.[a]
 **Women** in the region are systemically disadvantaged by harmful cultural norms and attitudes and unequal pay. Formal and informal barriers to women's employment contribute to gender inequality and constrain their huge and mostly untapped potential. In addition to having the highest female unemployment rate in the world at 19.9 per cent, the Arab region also has the lowest rate of women's economic participation.[b] The timeframe to close this gap is estimated at 115 years.[c]	In **Jordan,** the Women's Economic Empowerment Action Plan (2019-2024) has two main objectives: creating an enabling environment to identify and address obstacles to women's economic participation, and improving women's access to economic opportunities. Accompanying guidelines help in measuring the gender wage gap, preventing workplace harassment and implementing flexible work arrangements. Outreach efforts associated with the plan have led 60 companies to sign on as partners and benefit from support programmes to make practices more gender-responsive, including through the establishment of 76 childcare facilities in public and private entities. To facilitate unified data collection, the Interministerial Committee for Women's Empowerment developed a dashboard to prepare reports for decision-makers on gender considerations in various sectors.
 **Persons with disabilities** suffer from discrimination, accessibility and transport challenges, and lower rates of literacy and education due to inequitable access to quality education. In addition, anti-discrimination and quota laws are often insufficiently enforced. As a result, employment rates for persons with disabilities are far below those of the general population.	In addition to being a party to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, **Qatar** has enacted laws to support the participation of persons with disabilities in economic, social and cultural life. These objectives have been enshrined in the Qatar National Vision 2030. The 2004 Law on Persons with Disabilities established a hiring quota mandating that 2 per cent of positions in public sector entities be offered to qualified persons with disabilities. Employers are also required to make reasonable accommodations and adapt workplaces for persons with disabilities, with penalties for discrimination. Further initiatives focus on preparing and implementing rehabilitation and vocational training programmes to facilitate the professional inclusion of persons with disabilities in public and private sector employment. Multiple government entities, including the Ministry of Interior; the Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs; the Ministry of Education and Higher Education; and the Qatar Rehabilitation Institute actively engage in these efforts.

Table 8.2
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

 **Rural and remote regions** experience higher rates of poverty and lower rates of economic growth than well-connected urban districts. Uneven patterns of economic growth, archaic economic structures, lower rates of foreign and domestic investment, and insufficient social spending typically work to the detriment of rural and remote regions.	**Iraq** has sought to address regional inequalities and promote balanced socioeconomic development across its provinces by addressing deep urban-rural gaps and ensuring equitable access to services and infrastructure. Decentralization has been pursued in eight federal ministries, such as the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, and recent national development plans have included objectives such as promoting investment in less developed regions and accelerating the reconstruction and recovery of provinces affected by security issues. The 2018 National Urban Strategic Framework targets balanced spatial development by establishing industrial and investment zones beyond provincial centres and through spatial development programmes.
 **Informal and agricultural workers** confront poor working conditions, low wages, a lack of job security, and exclusion from social protection coverage and the provisions of labour laws.	In 2018, the **Comoros** launched the Family Farming Productivity and Resilience Support Project to assist some 35,000 smallholder farmers. The project covers enhancing rural incomes, creating jobs in agricultural communities, bolstering resilience to climate change and improving food security. It has helped farmers increase the production of indigenous crops to meet local demand and facilitate exports, and reenforces rural access to financial services to promote investment in equipment and farm infrastructure.[d] The project represents one important contribution to enhancing the agricultural sector,[e] which makes up 36 per cent of GDP. Value added has increased in recent years, progressing by 2.1 per cent in 2020 and 3.2 per cent in 2021.
 **Refugees** come up against a plethora of legal and informal obstacles that undermine access to education, employment and justice. Many refugees face employment restrictions and work in the informal sector without labour law protections. Those residing in camps face additional barriers to participating in more dynamic parts of host country economies. In many cases, refugees returning to their countries of origin continue to face obstacles during reintegration.	The Federal Government of **Somalia** has developed a National Policy on Refugee-Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons.[f] Principle 9 guards against discrimination and affirms the right of such persons to seek employment and participate in economic life. This principle is supported by provisions on livelihoods, employment and inclusion in social welfare schemes. The policy includes several tools and schemes to support the reintegration of refugee-returnees and internally displaced people in the agricultural, pastoral and fishing sectors. Programmes targeting urban areas include microcredit and grants for starting businesses, the provision of material and infrastructure for productive activities, and vocational training.

Table 8.2
Examples of policies to leave no one behind



Migrant workers are primarily hired in low-wage jobs, although many are employed in better-paid professions, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Migrant workers may face legal discrimination in terms of coverage by labour regulations and minimum wage laws, exclusion from social protection systems, and heightened vulnerability to exploitation and abuse by employers.

Female migrant domestic workers face even greater challenges. They are often bound to their employer's home while being excluded from migrant worker protections.

Many Gulf Cooperation Council countries have reformed their *kafala* systems, which tie migrant workers to their sponsoring employers and have been criticized for creating potentially abusive working situations (see the chapter on SDG 10). **Bahrain,** for example, has progressively moved to reform its *kafala* system. In 2009, the Mobility Law allowed migrant workers to switch employment without their sponsor's permission, provided they respect the notice periods stipulated in their employment contracts. The law also granted migrant workers leaving a job 30 days to stay in the country while seeking alternative employment. This reform, however, was undercut by a 2011 law restricting these rights to migrant workers who have already served one full year in their positions. Further reforms have included a 2012 law to provide labour protections, such as sick days and annual leave, to foreign workers.

While such reforms are steps in the right direction, enforcement has been questioned, and migrant domestic workers, among the most vulnerable workers in the region, have generally been excluded.



Children are at a higher risk of being in poverty than the general population. Those in poor households are more likely to be forced into work instead of completing their studies. Child labour is an alarming phenomenon that increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.[g] Risks rise in fragile and conflict-affected countries, and can result in negative consequences across a lifetime.

As a member of Alliance 8.7,[h] **Morocco** has committed to eradicating child labour, forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking. It has amended its Labour Code to prohibit the worst forms of child labour and banned those under age 18 from pursuing certain kinds of work (with exceptions for work in traditional handicraft sectors or for a family business with less than six employees). The Integrated Public Policy on the Protection of Children (2015-2025) includes grant programmes to support local civil society in combatting child labour. A National Observatory for Children's Rights offers online reporting mechanisms for child abuse, complementing an existing hotline for child labour complaints. Efforts to attack the root causes of child labour have included assistance for vulnerable children through non-formal education programmes, vocational training and support for homeless children.

[a] ILO, 2023.
[b] World Economic Forum, 2022.
[c] ESCWA, 2023.
[d] See International Fund for Agriculture Development, Family Farming Productivity and Resilience Support Project.
[e] African Union, 2022.
[f] See Somalia, National Policy on Refugee-Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).
[g] ILO and UNICEF, 2020.
[h] The Alliance focuses on SDG target 8.7, which calls on governments to work together to end the unacceptable violations of human rights that forced labour, modern slavery, human trafficking and child labour represent.

E. The financing landscape

Financial inclusion is an important component of inclusive economic growth and an enabler for the SDGs. It can be defined as universal access to useful and affordable financial products, including for payments, savings, credit and insurance. In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, financial inclusion is reflected under SDG target 8.10. It is a significant element of the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing for development.

Expanding financial inclusion in the Arab region is critical for individuals and MSMEs. For individuals, financial inclusion can improve living conditions by helping to secure investment opportunities and stretch incomes. Those who participate in financial systems are better positioned to start or expand a business, invest in education, manage risk and withstand shocks.[28] In low- and middle-income economies in particular, expanding financial inclusion generally has a positive association with economic growth.[29]

Although the Arab region has seen a gradual increase in the proportion of the population with a financial account, it remains the poorest performer globally on financial inclusion. With only 37.2 per cent of people over age 15 holding a financial account, the region is far below the global average of 68.5 per cent. It has a large gender gap, with 48.3 per cent of men holding an account compared to 25.6 per cent of women. Both figures are below those in other regions. The latter has important implications for gender equality, as women's lack of financial inclusion, driven by legal, social and cultural barriers, limits their control over household finances, decreases opportunities to earn income, and constrains their ability to insure against risk or absorb unexpected expenses.[30]

MSMEs require financial inclusion to thrive. These enterprises represent 96 per cent of registered businesses in the region and employ about half the labour force. Yet they account for only 7 per cent of total bank lending. Increasing their access to financing would have multiple advantages. According to IMF projections, closing the gap in MSME access to finance could boost economic growth in the region by 1 per cent annually, create up to 15 million new jobs and enhance the effectiveness of fiscal and monetary policies.[31]

Several strategies can deepen financial inclusion. These start with strengthening broader economic environments and financial sectors. Fundamentals include establishing a level playing field between MSMEs and other enterprises, ensuring transparency and stability in financial institutions through strong legal frameworks, and increasing the availability of credit information. Alternative finance channels, such as fintech and mobile wallets, can offer further opportunities to expand the affordability and accessibility of credit and banking services.


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F. Regional dimensions

Increased cooperation and integration among Arab countries can boost efforts to achieve SDG 8 by spurring economic growth, generating employment opportunities and promoting shared prosperity. To fully capitalize on such opportunities, however, countries need to implement reforms to dismantle trade barriers, facilitate market integration and strengthen collective competitiveness in the world market.

The region has already moved towards market integration through the adoption of the Pan-Arab Free Trade Area agreement. Yet intraregional trade continues to stumble due to multiple obstacles. At only around 13 per cent of total trade, it falls far short of its potential.[32] Challenges include exclusions in the agreement, such as a failure to address many non-tariff barriers to trade; the agreement's non-applicability to the services trade; poor implementation and compliance; an absence of dispute settlement and resolution mechanisms; and a lack of clear rules of origin. Renewed political commitments to trade integration, including through the implementation of the planned Arab Customs Union, would have several positive effects on the region's economy.

A customs union could expand total exports by more than 5 per cent among non-oil-producing countries and by as much as 7 per cent for some countries. Intraregional exports could grow even faster, by more than 7 per cent overall and nearly 9 per cent for non-oil-producing countries. In addition to increasing exports, a customs union would have positive impacts on employment. Projections indicate an up to 4 per cent drop in unemployment among skilled workers and a more than 3 per cent decrease among unskilled workers.[33]

The Arab Customs Union would strengthen the integration of regional supply chains and could reinforce efforts to support industry and manufacturing. Improved economies of scale, increased scope for product differentiation, the development of regional value chains capitalizing on comparative advantages, and technology transfer all offer opportunities to spur growth and advance economic diversification.


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Endnotes

1. See ESCWA, Financing Development in the Arab Region.
2. Kabbani and Ben Mimoune, 2021.
3. ESCWA, 2023.
4. Reuters, 2021.
5. ESCWA, 2023.
6. Ibid.
7. As defined by the ILO, a national employment policy is a comprehensive, integrated policy framework that strives to influence the content of economic, sectoral and social policies, towards full, productive and freely chosen employment and decent jobs for all.
8. ILO, UNICEF and European Training Foundation, 2023.
9. ILO, UNICEF and IPC-IG, 2020.
10. See the ILO Employment Policy Gateway.
11. Note that the State of Palestine is not a member of the ILO; ratification data are unavailable.
12. ITUC, 2023.
13. In tracking the adoption of ILO conventions, data on the State of Palestine are not available.
14. See the World Bank, GCC Economic Update, Fall 2022.
15. On average, migrants comprised 53 per cent of the populations of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries in 2020, ranging from a low of 39 per cent in Saudi Arabia to a high of 88 per cent in the United Arab Emirates. The United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait ranked first, second and third worldwide in terms of the share of migrants as a proportion of the total population, respectively. According to ILO estimates, in 2019, 24.1 million migrant workers were in 12 Arab States (Gulf Cooperation Council countries, plus Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen), representing 14 per cent of all migrant workers worldwide. They made up the highest global share of migrant workers as a proportion of the total workforce, reaching 41.4 per cent in 2019 compared to the global average of just 5 per cent. See ESCWA, IOM and UNHCR, 2022. See also the chapter on SDG 10.
16. World Bank, 2017.
17. See the Gulf Research Center, Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population Programme, GCC: Percentage of nationals and non-nationals in employed population in GCC countries (2020).
18. The Conference Board Gulf Centre for Economics and Business Research (n.d.).
19. Asharq Al Awsat, 2023; Bouchemal and Chaouche, 2023.
20. See Egypt, State Information Service; Mansour, 2023.
21. See Lebanon Economic Vision Report.
22. See more on the Medusa project and promoting sustainable tourism.
23. OECD, 2022.
24. See Tunisia, National Tourism Strategy.
25. See the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor on SDG 8.
26. ESCWA and ILO, 2021.
27. AP News, 2023.
28. UN Women and European Commission, 2016.
29. Seven and Yetkiner, 2016.
30. UN Women and European Commission, 2016.
31. See IMF, SME Development and Financial Inclusion in the Arab World, 2019.
32. ESCWA, 2019.
33. Ibid.

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SDG 9

Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

A. Introduction

A significant shift towards sustainable and inclusive industrialization is urgently needed in the Arab region. Infrastructure development is crucial in a context of rising unemployment, the inefficient and unsustainable use of natural resources, increasing debt and protracted crises. Infrastructure projects continue to face serious challenges, including financing constraints, limitations in institutional capacity and crises.

Despite recent strides in R&D, a persistent gap remains between scientific research and the demands of industries and local markets. The volume of research and publications is disconnected from practical technological applications and has little significant impact on economies and societies. There are notable attempts to mainstream technology and seize opportunities from digitalization in various economic sectors, yet the integration of technologies into manufacturing processes is either limited or non-existent. In cases where greater engagement with technologies exists, countries tend to be users instead of developers or exporters. This is especially problematic given the march of the fourth industrial revolution globally, which is leaving the region behind.

Inclusive and sustainable industrialization drives sustained economic growth and increases opportunities for decent jobs (SDG 8). Accordingly, it helps reduce poverty (SDG 1), hunger (SDG 2) and inequalities (SDGs 5 and 10). It can also improve health and well-being (SDG 3), increase resource and energy efficiency (SDGs 6, 7, 11 and 12), and reduce greenhouse gases and other polluting emissions, including from chemicals (SDGs 13, 14 and 15).

The growth of the manufacturing sector is essential for industrial development and usually generates innovations. If it is not sustainably planned, however, industrial development imposes trade-offs in terms of the SDGs due to increased emissions (SDG 13) and consumption of natural resources (SDGs 6, 7, 12 and 15).

Reliable, inclusive and sustainable infrastructure has a key role in improving rural and urban livelihoods (SDG 11). Improvements in transport can strengthen logistics and supply chains for food, boost agricultural productivity (SDG 2) and facilitate access to services such as health (SDG 3) and education (SDG 4).

R&D can make contributions to most, if not all, of the SDGs. It may be a precondition to achieving some goals. While R&D is necessary to advance agricultural production (SDG 2), produce vaccines (SDG 3) and develop clean energy (SDG 7), SDG 9 addresses the overall scientific research system.

Sources: UNIDO, 2021b; Mantlana and Maoela, 2019.



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What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).

Manufacturing remains weak despite progress after the COVID-19 pandemic. **Manufacturing value added as a proportion of GDP** was 10.3 per cent in the Arab region in 2022 compared to a world average of 16.7 per cent.

Manufacturing value added per capita was $621.80 in 2022, around one third of the world average. Alarmingly, the regional value has regressed since 2015; it was further negatively impacted by the pandemic. At the subregional level, manufacturing value added per capita was significantly higher in Gulf Cooperation Council countries ($2,898.50 in 2022). It has returned to and even exceeded its pre-pandemic level.

In a context of de-industrialization, **manufacturing employment** in the region has regressed since 2000 and was 10.3 per cent in 2021, compared to a world average of 13.6 per cent.

Small-scale industries lack financial support. Only one in seven **small manufacturers benefited from a loan or line of credit** in 2023, which was half the global value.

Carbon dioxide emissions per unit of manufacturing value added have decreased in the region since 2015, reaching 1.1 kilograms per dollar in 2020, but they are still around double the world value. Carbon dioxide emitted from fuel combustion in the region is low compared to other regions and constituted 4.6 per cent of the amount emitted globally in 2020.



Innovation remains underfunded and underprioritized. In 2021, the region had 630 **full-time researchers per million inhabitants** compared to a world average of 1,353. Only 0.61 per cent of GDP was spent regionally on R&D; the world average was 1.93 per cent.

The proportion of **medium- and high-tech manufacturing value added** reached 32.4 per cent of total value added in 2020. Although the share has fluctuated over the years, it has seen an overall increase of 1.2 per cent since 2000. The global trend has regressed.

Across the region, **2G mobile network coverage** exceeded 96 per cent in 2022, almost equal to the world average. The percentage was the same for **3G coverage**. Yet **4G coverage** was 76 per cent compared to a world average of 88 per cent.

The **volume of passengers travelling by air** increased regionally and globally from 2017 to 2019 but dropped substantially worldwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By 2021, recovery in the Arab region was slow and had reached only one third of pre-pandemic figures.

Freight volume transported by air (ton kilometres) dropped by approximately 14 per cent in 2020 due to the pandemic. It fully recovered and exceeded its pre-pandemic values in 2021, reaching over 33 billion ton kilometres or 15 per cent of the global value. Most of this value is transported by high-income countries in the region, which rank third after Europe and North America and East and South-East Asia.

For an up-to-date view of SDG 9 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please visit the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 9

- Improve the alignment of infrastructure strategies with national and regional trade strategies, and strengthen horizontal and vertical coordination within governments on infrastructure planning, public investments, public procurement and public-private partnerships.
- Prioritize manufacturing as a means for economic diversification and job creation while focusing on niche markets, utilizing technology and integrating the principles of sustainable development.
- Integrate innovation within public policy planning at the national level and enhance collaboration on innovation projects between academia and industry to encourage innovation across sectors.
- Support the science-policy interface and develop regulations that help channel scientific advice to policymakers. Establish national frameworks or observatories dedicated to industrial data collection to support the monitoring and analysis of industrial performance and to feed information into decision-making and policy design.
- Strengthen regional cooperation and develop policies, processes and structures for the effective transfer of technology, at the intra- and interregional levels, particularly for manufacturing.
- Invest in building human capacities for establishing and operating innovative, technology-focused start-ups, including through upskilling and reskilling, and push for a cultural shift in favour of entrepreneurship.
- Diversify financing instruments available to small and medium enterprises (SMEs), including small-scale industries, and facilitate their access to such financing. To that end, it is important to remove structural barriers related to business registration, licensing, permits, taxes and other relevant processes.

B. The policy landscape for SDG 9

SDG 9 is a composite goal that is difficult to fully trace through the policy landscape. This chapter addresses two core policy areas relevant across the Arab region.

The first area encompasses **sustainable industrialization policies**, with a focus on the manufacturing sector and the development of SMEs. Industrial strategies geared towards economic diversification are means to build sectors that are independent from oil and gas. Policies can focus on accelerating the development of the industrial sector, improving its competitiveness and promoting investments, while encouraging clean production and environmental considerations with clear linkages to SDGs 12 and 13.

The second area entails **scientific R&D and innovation**, with an emphasis on national strategies and means of implementation, monitoring and funding. Effective R&D strategies translate scientific research into practical applications that respond to the demands of the marketplace. Such strategies are coupled with monitoring frameworks and nationally relevant indicators that go beyond counting the number of researchers or amounts of funding allocated.[1]

Infrastructure analysis is approached from a plans and projects viewpoint. Traditionally, the definition of infrastructure has focused on large physical systems and networks necessary for nations to function, including transport, energy, water and sanitation, and telecommunications. The expansion of this understanding to include institutions providing health care, education and governance confirms infrastructure development as a priority for achieving the SDGs.

For information on each infrastructure type, refer to the corresponding SDG chapters: health-care infrastructure (SDG 3), school infrastructure (SDG 4), water infrastructure (SDG 6), energy infrastructure (SDG 7), urban infrastructure (SDG 11) and ICT infrastructure (SDG 17).



Infrastructure development in the region is mainly undertaken by governments and financed through public funding and multilateral and bilateral lenders. Despite overall progress in developing physical infrastructure in the region, performance across countries and infrastructure types is not uniform. For example, while ICT infrastructure is relatively developed, transport infrastructure is limited in terms of connectivity and logistics, a major challenge to trade and productive sectors such as manufacturing.[2] Despite this backdrop, major infrastructure projects with sizeable investments have been launched in several countries, ranging from new cities to transport schemes and nuclear plants.

The Quality Infrastructure for Sustainable Development (QI4SD) Index was launched in 2022, covering 137 countries. Out of 16 Arab countries included in it, only the **United Arab Emirates** ranks in the top 25 countries globally, followed by **Tunisia** (39), **Saudi Arabia** (45), **Egypt** (56) and **Morocco** (68). The ranking does not correlate to income level; several Arab middle-income countries rank above high-income countries in the region.


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The private sector plays a limited but important role through public-private partnerships. Political support to such partnerships is growing with countries taking measures to foster environments that incentivize businesses to provide expertise and help alleviate burdens on public budgets.[3] Fifteen Arab countries[4] have issued public-private partnership laws or updated existing ones in the past 10 years. The attributes and effectiveness of these laws vary according to national contexts and each country's legal framework.

- **Saudi Arabia** has launched real estate and infrastructure projects worth $1.25 trillion[5] as part of implementing its Vision 2030 and fulfilling an overall objective of economic growth and diversification as well as increased employment. The Government has invested in the construction of airports, ports, highways and new industrial and tourism zones. Notable megaprojects include NEOM and the Red Sea development project.
- As part of its Vision 2030, the Government of **Egypt** has acknowledged that strong infrastructure is a lever for social and economic development. By the end of 2023, infrastructure projects in construction, energy, water and transport were valued at $400 billion.[6] The Government is also implementing megaprojects budgeted at more than $10 billion[7] for housing, industrial complexes, railways, and undertakings such as the Suez Canal development and the New Administrative Capital.
- Between 2001 and 2017, **Morocco** invested between 25 and 38 per cent of its GDP[8] in infrastructure development, one of the highest rates globally. Infrastructure projects in transport, water and sanitation, irrigation, ICT and electricity have significantly improved access rates, thus diminishing the gap between rural and urban areas. Factors that have contributed to progress include partnerships with the private sector, strengthened public procurement and facilitation of mixed ownership with state-owned enterprises. Morocco continues to invest mostly in energy, transport and construction, with a current allocation of around $150 billion.[9]

Several Arab countries are planning or designing industrial policies to increase the share of manufacturing in GDP and exports as a sector with better prospects for economic diversification and growth (see the chapter on SDG 8). Industrial policies have been complemented with measures that include identifying niche areas of manufacturing, improving the business environment, strengthening links with scientific research, integrating new technologies, facilitating access to global value chains, promoting exports to global markets and trade negotiations.

- **Bahrain, Qatar** and the **United Arab Emirates** have specified key performance indicators to assess the increased contribution of the industrial sector to

GDP.[10] **Tunisia** plans to elevate the contribution of manufacturing to GDP to 20 per cent by 2035.[11]

- As part of its structural reform, **Egypt** seeks to boost industrialization through targeted interventions in manufacturing, agribusiness and ICT. These measures are expected to increase the collective GDP contribution of these sectors to at least 30 per cent by 2024.
- **Oman** plans to increase the percentage of industrial exports in total exports from 16 per cent in 2015 to 28 per cent in 2040.
- The Saudi Advanced Manufacturing Hub was launched in partnership with the World Economic Forum and aims to make **Saudi Arabia** a global hub for industrial innovation and advanced manufacturing. As a result, factories for pharma, aircraft components, metal forming and other industries have been set up, and multinational companies are establishing facilities.
- The shift in **Morocco** to targeted industrial policies over two decades has positioned the country as a leader in some industries. For example, reforms to the state-owned phosphate corporate put Morocco in the top five global manufacturers of fertilizers.[12]

Measurement gaps

Global indicators have been useful in presenting an overall measurement and comparability framework for the region's industrial performance. For example, the Index of Industrial Production for the Arab region was higher than the global average prior to 2019. Since then, it has dropped and not recovered fully. At a subregional level, the Competitive Industrial Performance Index of high-income countries (0.065) was less than half the value measured globally (0.131) in 2021.

Globally calculated indices may not be sufficient, pointing to a need to develop measurement frameworks and statistical monitoring systems customized to national and regional needs. As a good practice for measuring impact, the Industrial Observatory of **Jordan** produces evidence-based industrial analysis. It provides data sets on employment, energy, trade and industry, and includes links to regional and international databases.

Sources: UNIDO calculation of the 2021 values for both indexes; UNIDO, 2024.

◆ **To support the implementation of industrial policies, middle- and high-income countries are establishing industrial clusters**. Established or planned industrial clusters, complexes, parks, poles or cities are evident in at least 13 countries.[13] The concentration of resources (infrastructure, funding and human capacities) in industrial clusters has cultivated a conducive environment for growth and integration into global value chains. Clusters have also brought together different stakeholders, including businesses, government actors and research institutions, although collaboration with academia is still generally weak.

- **Saudi Arabia** had established 36 industrial cities by 2021 through its Saudi Authority for Industrial Cities and Technology Zones (Modon), which employs over 570,000 workers and has attracted aggregate private sector investment of over $100 billion.[14]

Industrial policies can be complemented with instruments and measures to support local manufacturing. For example, Arab countries are adopting the "Made in" label **(Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates)**.

- **Morocco** has established 149 industrial zones covering a variety of sectors and helping the automotive sector become the first exporting sector providing over 220,000 job opportunities (see the chapter on SDG 8).[15]

Patenting activities

Patents are a useful tool for stimulating technology and industry development. They are also relevant as a proxy for measuring innovation. The share of patents in the region compared to the world remains very low, although it has slightly improved since 2018. Patent applications in the region comprised a mere 0.5 per cent of patents worldwide in 2022, with a total of 17,260 applications and only 5,786 patent grants. The top countries, by order of contribution, were **Saudi Arabia, Morocco,** the **United Arab Emirates, Egypt** and **Algeria**.

Sources: WIPO, 2023. For more information, see ESCWA, 2024.



There are some promising efforts to make industries more sustainable. Although industrial policies in the region are generally sector-specific and focused on economic growth, at least eight Arab countries[16] have integrated some elements of sustainable industrial development in their policies and considered social and environmental components.

Net-zero commitments present opportunities for developing industrial infrastructure and ecosystems, and strengthening linkages with the energy and agriculture sectors.

- The Ministry of Industry and Advanced Technology in the **United Arab Emirates** seeks to increase the efficiency and sustainability of production cycles and supply chains by driving R&D, setting standards for industrial infrastructure, and implementing policies to reduce resource consumption and support carbon neutrality efforts.
- The most recent industrial strategy of **Bahrain** promotes the circular economy, environmental and social governance, and net-zero carbon emissions.
- **Morocco** plans to enhance the use of green energy and has a policy package including environment laws and financial incentives for reducing industrial pollution.

Efforts are underway to strengthen the role of SMEs and improve their competitiveness through focused measures to foster innovation. SMEs in the region account for more than 90 per cent of businesses across different economic sectors, a share that may reach 99 per cent in **Algeria**.[17] To counter barriers to SME growth, national measures are no longer limited to grants or tax exemptions but extend to providing digital transformation services, advice, mentoring, capacity-building, access to funds and links to global value chains. Sixteen Arab countries[18] support SMEs through strategies and institutions, or have passed or updated laws to facilitate access to funding, relax restrictions on establishing small firms or simplify business procedures.

SME growth and success depends on removing structural barriers in the business environment. Establishment of a fund to support SMEs, for example, will not lead to successful results if firms continue to face obstacles such as cumbersome regulations and the limited availability of skills.

SME digitalization efforts are lagging even as digitalization is key for innovation and will help SMEs reduce costs, improve efficiency, and access markets and resources such as training opportunities, talent recruitment networks and financing. While there are studies on digitalization in SMEs, a gap persists in formally measuring digitalization based on indicators such as access to and use of e-payment gateways and e-commerce.

- The Tamkeen government agency of **Bahrain** assists the development of the private sector, offers skills-building services and facilitates access to finance. It focuses on SMEs, start-ups and entrepreneurs, particularly high-potential and innovative ones. In 2022, Tamkeen contributed over $259.95 million to the economy of Bahrain and supported more than 18,400 employment and training opportunities.[19]
- **Oman** has been shaping and sustaining an enabling environment for SMEs to operate. The Government allows 100 per cent foreign ownership and has set up a one-stop-shop across ports and free trade zones to reduce red tape and speed the establishment of enterprises.[20] On the financing side, Sharakah is a closed joint stock company in Oman that offers a range of services and financial support for SME development. Over 180 SMEs have been assisted in manufacturing, services and trading. Support is planned for transformative industries such as hydroponic farms, fish processing, logistics, tourism, technology and innovation.[21]



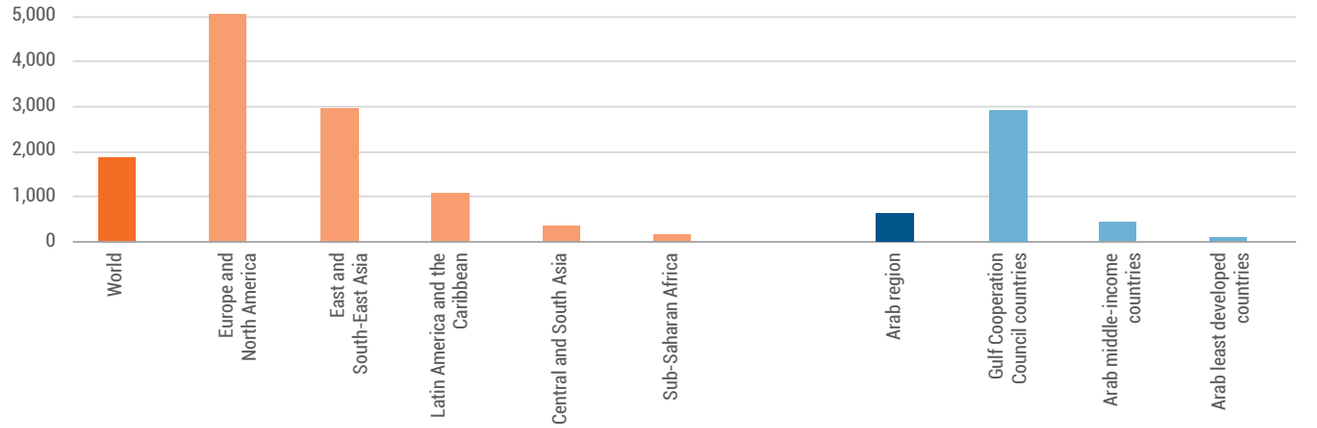
C. Policy trends by subregion

1. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

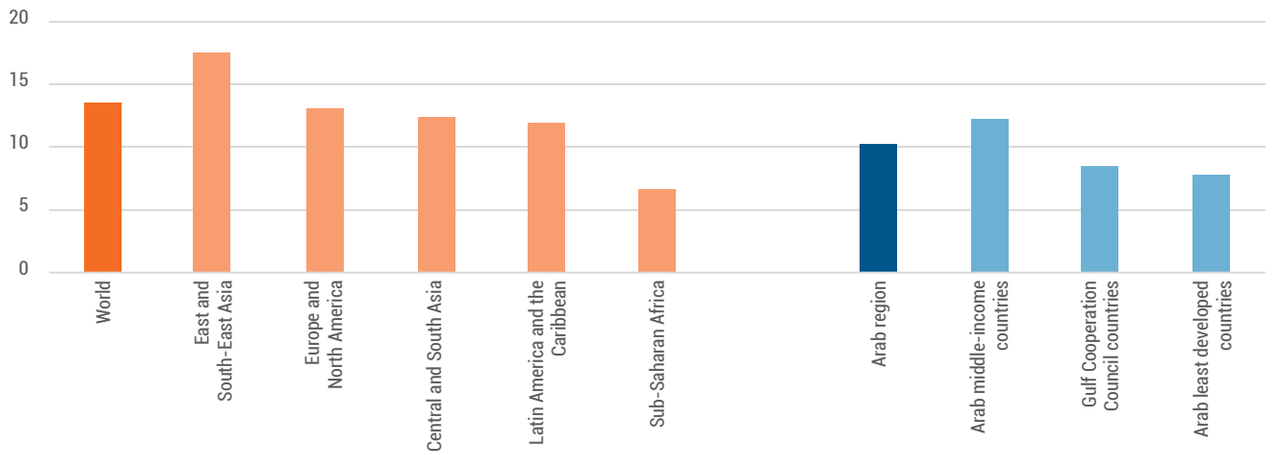
Gulf Cooperation Council countries led the Arab region in the 2023 Logistics Performance Index, particularly the infrastructure component, in which all 6 countries are in the top 50 globally.[22] The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have a manufacturing value added per capita in dollars that is around four times higher than the Arab average and is comparable to other regions globally, coming in third after Europe and North America and East and South-East Asia (figure 9.1(a)). They also have the highest proportion of medium- and high-tech industry value added in total value added compared to other Arab subregions. In contrast, manufacturing employment as a percentage of total employment is less than the regional average and the average for Arab middle-income countries (figure 9.1(b)).

Figure 9.1
Manufacturing value added and employment

(a) SDG indicator 9.2.1: manufacturing value added per capita, 2022 (Dollars)

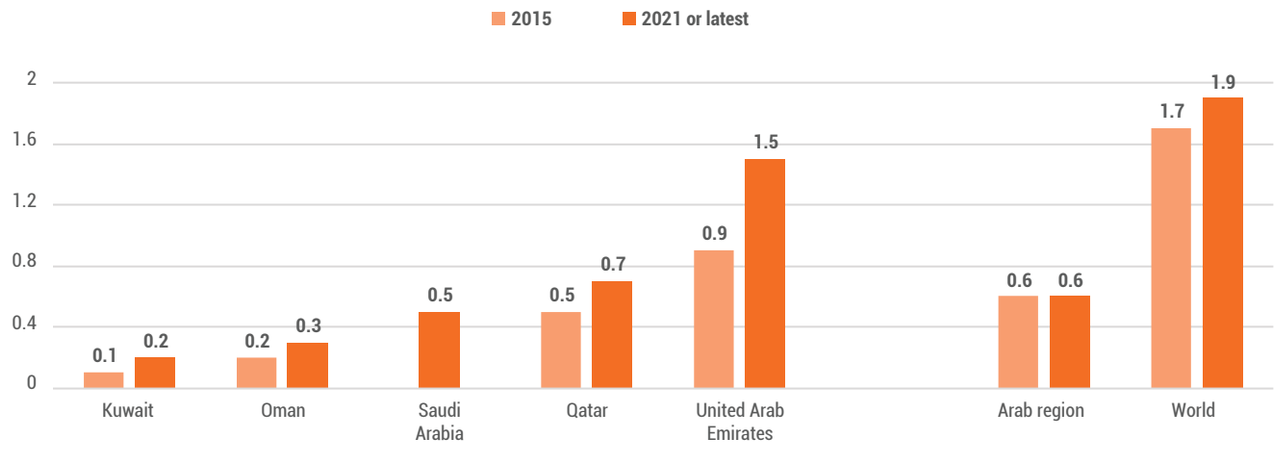


(b) SDG indicator 9.2.2: manufacturing employment as a percentage of total employment, 2021



Source: Based on data from ESCWA, 2023b.

Figure 9.2
SDG indicator 9.5.1: research and development expenditure as a proportion of GDP, 2015 and 2021 or latest (Percentage)



Source: Based on data from ESCWA, 2023b, as of December 2023.

While gross domestic expenditure on R&D in high-income Arab countries has improved since 2015, it remains less than the global average (figure 9.2), despite important amounts allocated and spent. Gulf Cooperation Council countries are allocating large sums for scientific research, more than $1 billion in **Qatar** and around $5.12 billion in **Saudi Arabia**,[23] but they may not have sufficient absorptive capacity. While such countries have sophisticated infrastructure and facilities for R&D, expenditure as a share of GDP is small compared to other countries and regions. Another gap, which applies to the region, is that **public spending is more focused on research than product development**, with limited spending by the private sector.

◆ **Industrial strategies integrate industry 4.0 (4IR) technologies.** Gulf Cooperation Council countries lead the region on 4IR transformation: four are in the third and fourth quartiles of the best performers on the Global Innovation Index. Most countries in this group do quite well on the institutions and infrastructure pillars of this index.[24] **Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates** are focusing their industrial strategies on 4IR technologies as levers to advance industries and boost productivity. **Saudi Arabia**, for example, is piloting the conversion of industrial plants to modern 4IR technologies[25] as part of a wider vision of harnessing technology for economic diversification. A dedicated Saudi Data and AI Authority established in 2019 provides services to integrate AI into all economic sectors.



A skills gap in industrial and engineering fields

Digitization, green transition and sector advancements have spurred a rising demand for new skills. The vast majority of engineering organizations in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries[a] face difficulties in recruitment due to a lack of skills or qualifications. Addressing this gap starts with quality STEM education in schools and improvements in specialized university and vocational education to match industry needs. Greater collaboration between higher-education institutions and industry on practical and research projects is also recommended.

[a] Ninety-seven per cent of organizations in **Oman** and 93 per cent in the **United Arab Emirates**, according to The Institute of Engineering and Technology, 2022, 2023.

◆ **The Gulf Cooperation Council countries are conducting free trade negotiations with China, the Republic of Korea and the United Kingdom to strengthen integration into global value chains and expand the export base beyond the traditional oil and gas sectors.** These talks seek to open avenues for economic diversification into non-oil industries such as manufacturing, technology, services and other sectors. This shift is expected to lead to the growth of local industries and development of high value-added manufacturing sectors, and encourage the creation of a skilled workforce. Free trade agreements can attract foreign direct investment, fostering innovation, productivity and technological advancements in manufacturing. Although the Gulf Cooperation Council countries work as a bloc, the outcomes will depend on the provisions and conditions of the agreements, including tariff reductions, non-tariff barriers, rules of origin and investment facilitation measures. This policy direction is not exclusive to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries in the region.

◆ **R&D priorities in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries are mainly focused on the technologies of the future, namely, digital technologies**, such as AI, robotics and others. These receive higher R&D funding and are integrated into innovation and other ecosystems to boost progress. R&D expenditure as a percentage of GDP remains less than the global average, however, ranging from 0.1 per cent in **Bahrain** to 1.5 per cent in the **United Arab Emirates**. The latter was the only Arab country allocating more than 1 per cent of its GDP to R&D in 2021. These countries have also increased the number of full-time researchers per million inhabitants so that it is well above the world average.[26] Unlike most Arab countries, where researchers are predominantly employed in higher education and government, 75 per cent of research employment in the **United Arab Emirates** is in the business sector.[27]

◆ **National research and innovation councils are means for effective governance of R&D and innovation ecosystems.** Such councils facilitate sectoral coordination within various scientific disciplines as well as vertical coordination across levels of government. **Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates** have each established a council or authority for research and/or innovation. **Bahrain** and **Kuwait** have considered the establishment of similar structures.



2. Arab middle-income countries

The Arab middle-income country group has the highest percentage of manufacturing employment (12.2 per cent) compared to other subregions. The percentage of female researchers in each of **Algeria, Egypt, Morocco** and **Tunisia** is higher than the world average (31.2 per cent).[28] The percentage of small-scale industries with a loan or line of credit (20.9 per cent) is higher than that of other subregions but the second lowest compared to other regions in the world. National research priorities are selected in a manner that maximizes the benefits of research investments and directs funds towards high-potential areas.

Increasing market share and accessing global value chains will require enabling industrial policies and political will. Between 2015 and 2020, the region's rate of growth of medium- and high-tech manufacturing value added in total value added (1.5 per cent) exceeded the global rate (0.3 per cent). The growth rate was highest in the region in middle-income countries (3.6 per cent).

Even so, medium- and high-tech manufacturing value added in total value added in middle-income countries (25 per cent) remains less than the regional value (32 per cent), demonstrating that medium- and high-tech industry is more developed in Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Low-tech industry still dominates in middle-income countries.

Source: United Nations, 2023a.

◆ **Middle-income countries are using industrial policies to increase job opportunities**. To achieve further impact, these policies need to be coupled with a proactive government role in building markets locally and for export, supporting enterprises, facilitating access to finance, building capacity and knowledge, removing infrastructure bottlenecks and encouraging the adoption of technology. Countries have included objectives or targets for increased employment in their industrial policies. For instance, **Egypt** specified a target of "3 million decent and productive job opportunities" in manufacturing.[29] **Jordan** emphasized increasing opportunities for women in factories and strengthening links between universities and industries to offer training and job opportunities to new graduates. The Faculty for Factory programme of Jordan is one modality to link universities to industry in practical terms.[30] The programme has explored areas of collaboration in packaging, chemical industries, food supply and others, and has uncovered challenges in communication between academia and industry and the availability of necessary skills. **Morocco** reported in 2020 that its industrial acceleration programme led to 405,000 employment opportunities.[31] **Tunisia** aims to increase job opportunities to over 300,000 by 2035 and will improve its position in global value chains positioning through more productive sectors that require skilled labour.

Middle-income countries have connected research areas to national priorities that include renewable energy (Algeria, Egypt and Morocco), water (Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia), conservation of natural resources and social sciences. They have also identified niche research areas, such as the pharmaceutical industry in **Jordan**. Specialized research centres and projects support priority scientific R&D areas. For instance, the Centre for the Development of Renewable Energies in **Algeria** comes first in terms of the number of patents filed compared with other research centres;[32] the country has also launched plans for mega solar energy projects.[33] The Research Institute for Solar Energy and New Energies designed the Green Energy Park in **Morocco** and hosts specialized solar energy laboratories.[34] The gap between industry and academia remains, however; industries are focused on production development, market access, risk alleviation and profit-making, whereas academic research is in most cases scientific and not readily convertible into practical applications. Time is also perceived differently; scientific research is usually time intensive whereas in industry, the longer that development or production takes, the more costly it is.

An example from beyond the region: university-industry cooperation in Türkiye

Türkiye has implemented several types of university-industry cooperation to transfer knowledge and encourage its conversion into innovation and technology. The Government has adopted regulations and laws on mechanisms to guide the relationship between industrial firms and academic institutions. Examples include:

- A revolving capital system through which industrial firms express interest in acquiring (paid) academic services and advice for specific projects.
- Techno-parks regulated through the Law on Technology Development Zones that allow faculty members to conduct commercial activities to transform research and knowledge into innovative products.
- Technology transfer offices that match universities and project proposals. The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye has a programme to support such offices.

Research has found that the main barriers to collaboration are a lack of information on available mechanisms and insufficient financial support.

Sources: Yalçıntaş, Çiflikli Kaya and Kaya, 2015; Kleiner-Schaefer and Schaefer, 2022.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Extraregional collaboration has boosted scientific research funding and publishing, and introduced new mechanisms for regional cooperation. Bilateral scientific collaborations with countries outside the region have been growing. The United Kingdom and the United States of America are among the top five collaborators for most Arab countries, including middle-income nations. China is becoming a close collaborator with some countries, such as **Egypt**. Middle-income countries are also keen to pursue research initiatives with the European Union through initiatives such as EU Horizon 2020.[35] These engagements have influenced how funding is allocated, with a shift from block transfers to research institutions to open, transparent competitions assessed through peer review for funding.[36]

The European Union has been a scientific partner of many Arab countries over the years. Under the European Union's neighbourhood policy, collaboration has been facilitated by the Union for the Mediterranean's Regional Platform on Research and Innovation. This has entailed policy dialogue and bilateral science and technology cooperation agreements between the European Union and its member States and Arab countries, including **Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco,** the **State of Palestine** and **Tunisia**.[a]

Notable initiatives following the adoption of the Valetta Declaration on Strengthening Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation through Research and Innovation include: the Research and Innovation for Blue Jobs and Growth in the Mediterranean Area (BLUEMED initiative) and the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean (PRIMA), which has a European Union contribution of €220 million in addition to national funding sources.

Sources: European Commission, 2021, 2023.

[a] Libya has observer status.

◆ **Countries are implementing policies and measures to facilitate links between scientific research and industry, towards overcoming barriers to collaboration.** Innovation policies in **Morocco** and **Tunisia** over the past two decades have focused on establishing innovative, industry-oriented enterprises by linking research institutes and universities to manufacturing. Techno-parks in both countries help implement these policies by connecting universities and enterprises to develop applications that respond to local needs and problems.[37] In **Egypt**, the national science, technology and innovation strategy includes an objective to support investment in scientific research and foster linkages with industry. As a result, law No. 23 of 2018 provides public universities and research institutions that establish start-ups with a legal framework to commercialize their research.[38] **Jordan** has placed considerable emphasis on building an ecosystem for entrepreneurs that leverages innovation. In its national policy on science, technology and innovation, Jordan has included several elements for supporting entrepreneurs and improving coordination between research and trade to facilitate the commercialization of innovative ideas.

One barrier to innovation and R&D is the stigma of failure; overcoming it will require a cultural shift, where taking risks and failing are understood as integral to innovating. Government and other relevant stakeholders have critical roles in pushing for this shift and considering ways to de-risk scientific research and discovery.



3. Arab least developed countries and countries in conflict

These two groups of countries have the lowest average in manufacturing value added as a proportion of GDP (4.3 per cent for countries in conflict and 6.7 per cent for the least developed countries in 2022). Manufacturing employment as a proportion of total employment in the least developed countries is the lowest in the region (7.82 per cent) although it comes close to the global average for this category of countries (7.96 per cent). Spending on R&D is low and data are missing for most Arab least developed and conflict-affected countries. They face a notable digital divide, ranking lowest globally in terms of the share of the population covered by a mobile network (figure 9.3). They remain largely unprepared to seize the opportunities of digitization and 4IR. Whether they have weak infrastructure in general or have suffered damaged infrastructure due to conflict, both groups face an uphill battle with reverberating consequences.

◆ **The least developed countries are in an embryonic stage of industrial development with limited or no dedicated policies.** Infrastructure underdevelopment is among the barriers to the growth of industries, resulting in the limited availability of affordable electricity, inadequate transport systems, and insufficient access to supply and global value chains, among other consequences. Countries that have included industrial development in national policies or development plans focus mostly on the food industry (processing agricultural and fishing products) and small-scale, artisanal industries. The **Comoros** and **Djibouti** have included strategic objectives in recent development or SDG acceleration plans to increase the competitiveness of the agrifood, artisanal and construction industries as well as to improve value chains and boost trade. In its newly launched national strategy for manufacturing, **Mauritania** integrated a focus on the exploitation of its natural resources (agriculture, farming, fishing and renewable energy) for industrial development.

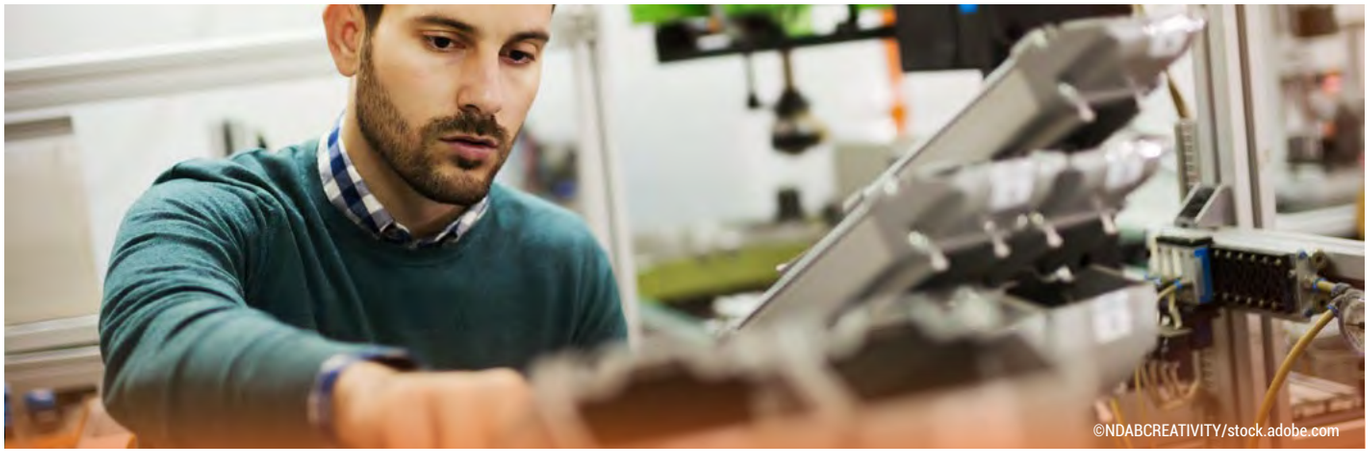
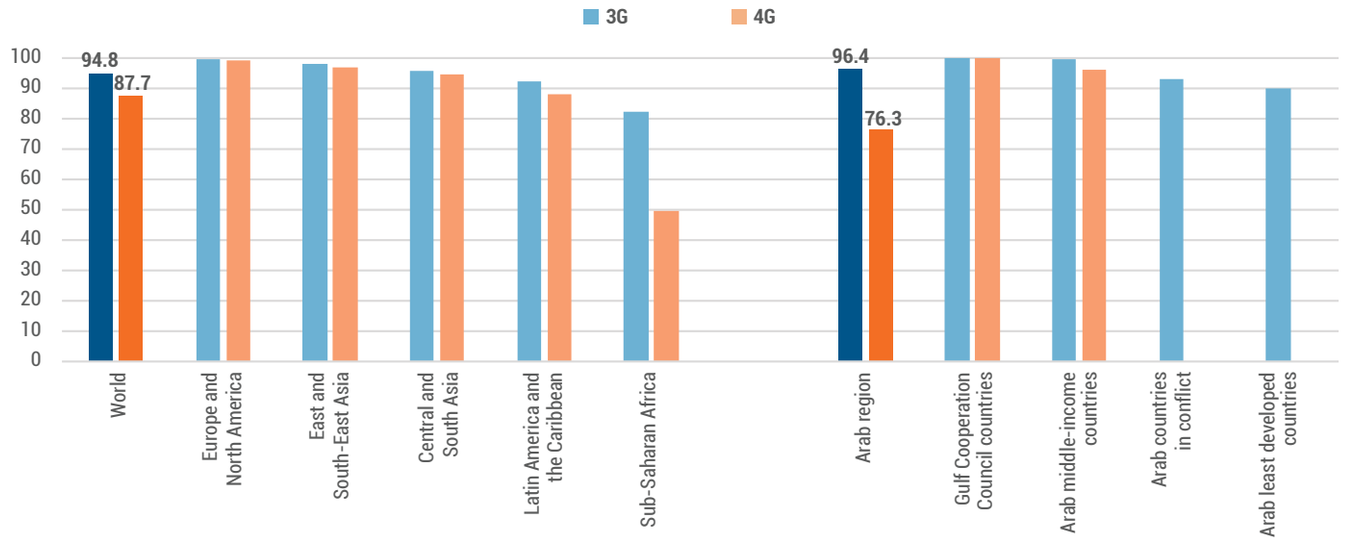


Figure 9.3
Proportion of the population covered by at least a 3G mobile network, 2022 (Percentage)



Source: Based on data from ESCWA, 2023b, as of 28 December 2023.

The development of science, technology and innovation in the least developed countries will require support from the donor community and commitment from national governments to build human capacity, improve related governance frameworks and leverage digital technologies. Grass-roots, indigenous and cost-effective innovations need to be recognized for their potential benefits in responding to development challenges and producing social value. Technology transfer is a key tool and requires strong partnerships and legal frameworks.

◆ **The evolving policy landscape in the least developed countries shows rising awareness of the importance of science, technology and innovation, and the governance of its systems.** For instance, **Mauritania** has developed a strategy for scientific research and established a supreme council for research, and is working on building a governance system for R&D and an innovation ecosystem.

◆ **Conflict has resulted in the breakdown of R&D systems, physical destruction of infrastructure and stalled manufacturing.** It poses a major barrier to regional integration, affecting supply chains and impeding the movement of goods. The **Sudan** in 2017 issued a science, technology and innovation policy and had plans to increase spending on R&D. The resurgence of conflict in 2023, however, halted implementation and severely disrupted the functioning of educational institutions.

The Government of the **State of Palestine** has a dedicated policy to support the ICT start-up ecosystem.[39] This "early-stage ecosystem that is maturing"[40] is characterized by highly educated founders and one of the largest shares of female founders.

Countries in crisis have demonstrated interest in building industry as a key productive sector for the recovery phase. This is the case in **Iraq** and **Libya**, which also focus on innovation and ICT as levers for recovery and growth, and partnership with the private sector. Libya, for example, in 2021 established the Wadi Al-Harir Special Economic Zone and in 2022 set up an industrial technology pole. In other countries in crisis, physical destruction and infrastructure damage have been extensive. Estimates for reconstruction are in the hundreds of billions of dollars.

Sources: World Bank, 2020a; ESCWA and University of St. Andrews, 2020.

◆ Considerable opportunities lie ahead for countries emerging from conflict, with a focus on infrastructure. **The rebuilding phase carries prospects for industrial development that can be connected from the onset to green and inclusive industrialization as well as technology.** This will require collective efforts by governments, non-state actors and the donor community to ensure that local talents and skills become part of the rebuilding process. The **Syrian Arab Republic** has already identified research priorities and conducted needs assessments during 2018–2020. Plans are underway for legal reforms, research units, and connections between researchers and investors.[41]

D. Policies to leave no one behind

Leaving no one behind in the context of SDG 9 is often considered through the lens of marginalization. This looks at those who lack access to technology, are digitally illiterate or require equity-based policies to integrate into the knowledge economy. Another dimension relates to geographical areas that are not connected to various infrastructure grids or networks, contributing to limited development in rural areas and to internal migration to cities. The majority of the poor cannot participate in technological development, due to the quality of education or lack of skills and infrastructure in their communities, even if some are benefiting through programmes in health or other services.

Leaving no one behind in the context of SDG 9 must be addressed through macro-level policies that target subnational inequalities, contribute to rural development, improve accessibility and address "last mile" challenges.

People with disabilities are at risk of being left behind if assistive technologies are not deployed and interface design overlooks their specific needs. Addressing these issues requires concerted efforts to prioritize accessibility in technology design and development, adherence to accessibility standards and guidelines, and engagement with persons with disabilities to understand their needs and preferences. Promoting awareness of digital accessibility can help foster a more inclusive technological landscape for all users. See the chapter on SDG 17 for more details and country examples.

Table 9.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

Arab least developed and conflict-affected countries that do not have science, technology and innovation policies or capacities to implement them are at risk of being left behind. Armed conflict creates additional obstacles by destroying infrastructure and factories.	The United Nations Technology Bank for Least Developed Countries is conducting research on science, technology and innovation needs. It also aims to facilitate technology and knowledge transfer as well as resource mobilization. A technology needs assessment is currently underway in **Djibouti**. The bank also offers capacity-building programmes to researchers, students and entrepreneurs. A programme for strengthening and establishing national science academies has already led to the formation of new academies in least developed countries outside the Arab region; the bank has committed to providing similar support in North Africa.[a] **Mauritania** recently launched innovation incubators that support and fund young entrepreneurs aiming to build innovative businesses. The most notable are the Kosmos Innovation Center and the Hadina RIMTIC. They operate within a wider national effort to improve the R&D and innovation ecosystem, including by establishing a national council and an innovation unit, and developing an R&D strategy.[b]
Women: Despite the rising number of female graduates in science and technology fields, women remain underrepresented in employment in these sectors. Further, the expected increase in automation and the integration of 4IR technologies will affect low-skilled and repetitive manual labour jobs where women often concentrate.	In Oman, Bank Muscat offers services to support and encourage women entrepreneurs at different stages of business growth. It also collaborates with Riyada – the Public Authority for SME Development to provide leadership development opportunities and vital connections to help advance women's businesses.[c] In Egypt, the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency collaborated with the United Nations Development Programme to offer loans that have reached more than 520,000 of these businesses; 48 per cent of beneficiaries have been women.[d]

Table 9.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

	Older employees/workers: Increased overlap between technology and industries has accompanied a perception that older employees/workers may be unwilling to embrace new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence. The speed at which digital technology is advancing will require the upskilling and reskilling of employees, an issue not yet widely addressed in the region. This is particularly important for employees over 55 years of age.	In **Saudi Arabia,** 47 per cent of employers are training staff to cover gaps in expertise. The Digital Government Authority launched a programme to develop digital skills in the public sector in partnership with local and global academic institutions.[e]

[a] United Nations, 2023b.
[b] ESCWA, 2017; United Nations Technology Bank for the Least Developed Countries, 2022.
[c] Bank Muscat, 2023; al Maskry, 2016.
[d] Egypt, 2021.
[e] Pwc, 2022; Alarabiya, 2021.

E. The financing landscape

By one estimate, the Arab region needs to spend at least 8.2 per cent of GDP to meet infrastructure goals by 2030.[42] Financing for quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure projects, however, cannot be adequately tracked. Some insights come from existing or emerging finance mechanisms and institutions that support SMEs as well as R&D to promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.

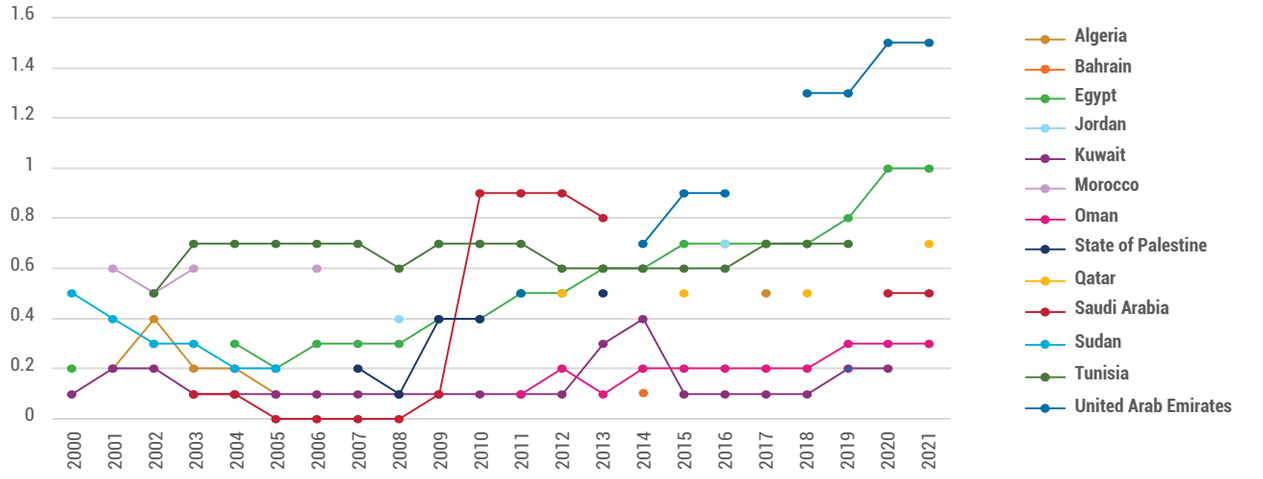
There are national efforts to support small-scale industries through dedicated funds or measures to facilitate access to finance. As an example, the Kuwaiti National Fund for SME Development was established in **Kuwait** with a capital of $6.5 billion to cover up to 80 per cent of SME funding needs.[43] Governance restructuring, programme development and a review of regulations have taken place since the establishment of the fund with a view to improving impact.

Spending on R&D in the region remains low, at 0.61 per cent of GDP in 2021, with most coming from government resources. Figure 9.4 shows that for most countries, data are sparse and outdated. Disaggregation by the source of funding[44] and type of sectoral spending is also limited or unavailable. The low percentage of spending is partly attributed to limited absorptive capacity or a high GDP value in resource-rich countries. It also seems unaffected by the significant expansion in higher education in recent years and generous public funding for universities. In some cases, contract research from oil and gas companies has provided universities with substantial funding but with limited impacts or contributions to society. There should be an increased focus on funding effective research communities and interdisciplinary approaches to produce outputs that yield social returns.[45]

The proportion of small-scale industries with a loan or line of credit is less than 50 per cent in Arab countries with data available. It is as little as 2.4 per cent in **Iraq** (2022) and the **Sudan** (2014), 3.4 per cent in **Yemen** (2013) and 4.1 per cent in **Egypt** (2020).

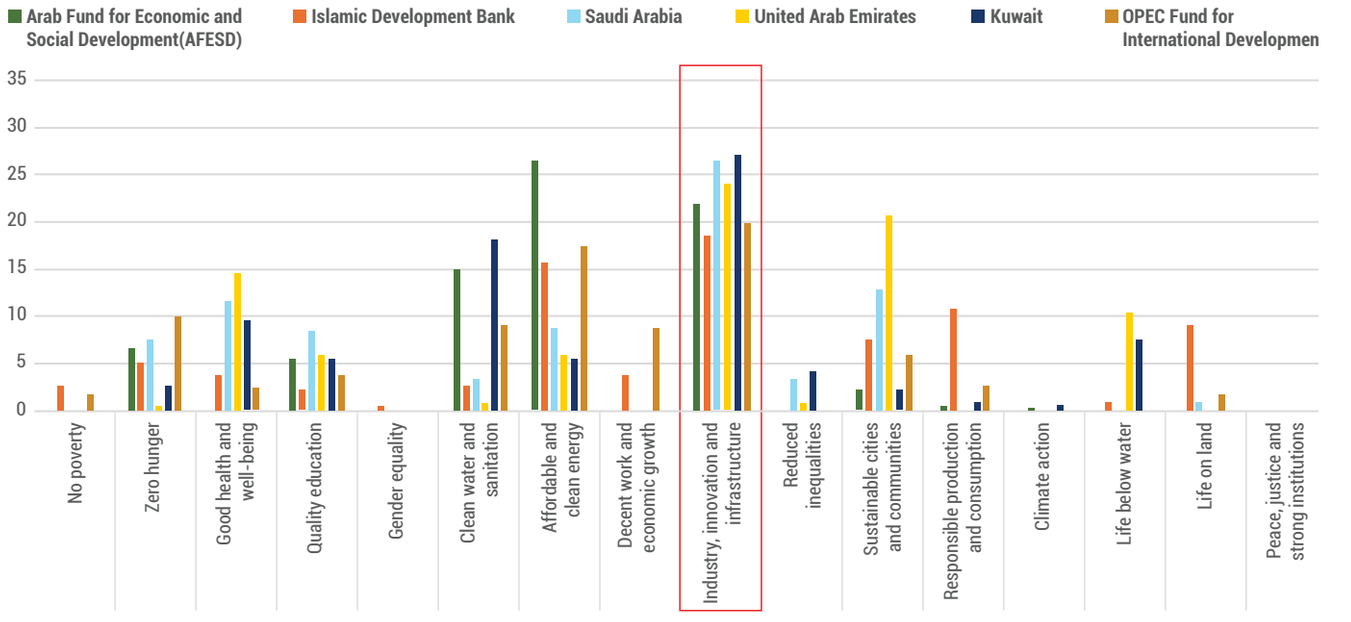
Source: ESCWA, 2023b.

Figure 9.4
Research and development expenditure as a proportion of GDP (Percentage)



Source: ESCWA, 2023b.

Figure 9.5
Official development assistance providers in the region per SDG (Percentage)



Source: OECD, 2017.

The investment needed to connect the unconnected to broadband in the region is estimated to be $28 billion.[46] Globally, the top 25 providers of official development assistance committed $18.4 billion to SDG 9 as a whole in 2019. Among Arab providers of assistance, SDG 9 is the most funded of the global goals (figure 9.5).

Existing institutions and mechanisms to optimize financing for SDG 9

◆ **National development banks** can support economic agents to ensure the continuity of their operations in times of economic turbulence. This will require developing human resources and building skills.[47] The **Qatar** Development Bank has been investing in the SME ecosystem and has launched initiatives such as the Export Development and Promotion Agency, TASDEER, and the Qatar Business Incubation Centre; both support local production. The bank also has an SME equity fund and recognizes excellence through special awards.[48] The **Oman** Development Bank offers facilities to SMEs and microenterprises in a number of industrial sectors, including manufacturing, technology and logistics. In 2021, it approved OMR 54 million ($140.3 million) for loans, with the highest allocation going to enterprises in the manufacturing sector.[49]

Table 9.1
Functions of national development banks in post-pandemic recovery

Function	Description
Counter-cyclical	Ensuring investment flows despite the economic downturn spurred by the pandemic.
Resilience-building	Enabling increased capitalization and flexible lending conditions to support resilience-building projects and the formalization of business continuity planning.
Developmental	Providing long-term capital to stimulate investment in strategic infrastructure and industries, especially in industrializing countries.
Entrepreneurial	Supporting high-risk R&D-intensive start-ups and innovative projects, thereby contributing to spur innovation and new firm growth.
Challenge-led	Funding projects that address societal challenges such as climate change, thereby contributing to industrialization and the building of resilience.

Source: UNIDO, 2021a.

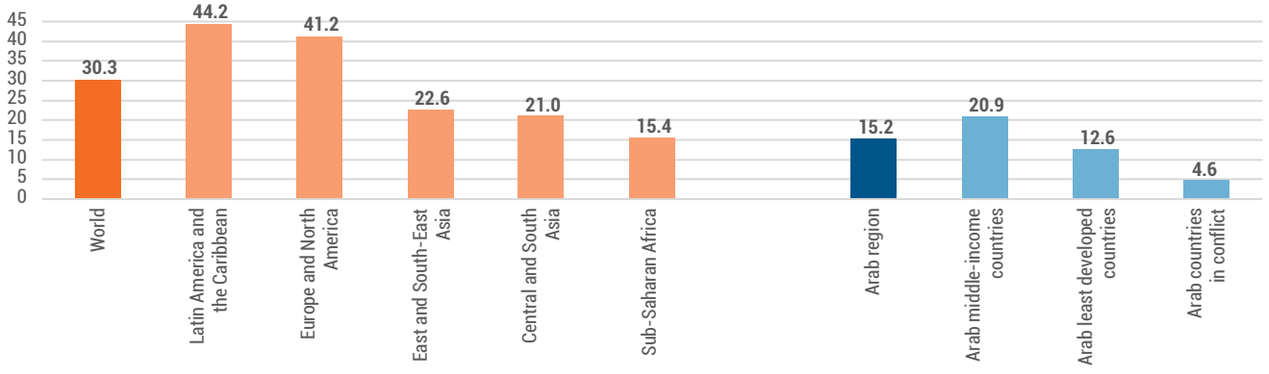
◆ **Specialized national funds:** The Saudi Industrial Development Fund supports competitive enterprises with a view to diversifying the economy of **Saudi Arabia**. Its mandate has been aligned with Saudi Vision 2030. In the past decade, the fund has approved 1,545 medium- and long-term loans for industrial projects amounting to SAR 107 billion ($28.5 billion). The fund saw capital growth from SAR 40 billion in 2012 to SAR 105 billion in 2019.[50]

◆ **Regional development banks:** These banks secure and mobilize resources to support governments of developing countries with infrastructure and economic projects. They also focus on regional integration by backing joint country projects. The Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development has committed over $36 billion in loans since its establishment. From 2019 to 2021, loans for infrastructure and productive sectors topped $1.7 billion.[51] Over the same period, loans from the Islamic Development Bank to Arab countries for infrastructure and productive sectors exceeded $310 million, with most going to **Lebanon** and **Mauritania**.[52]

◆ **Attracting foreign direct investment:** In **Morocco**, foreign direct investment for industrial development is becoming more important. Morocco has attracted substantial flows by taking concrete actions that drew investors – namely, infrastructure upgrades, upskilling and ecosystem building – instead of pursuing subsidies or tax exemptions (see the chapter on SDG 8).[53]

◆ **Financing sustainable industrial transformation:** This requires scaled-up, coordinated, and targeted public and private investments. On the public sector side, measures are needed to incentivize private investments using fiscal and financial instruments. Examples include enacting tax credits or spurring demand through public procurement that is innovative or green. Public development banks can assume a role in filling resource and knowledge gaps (market intelligence) and regulatory measures can incentivize commercial lending through risk-sharing. The proportion of small-scale industries with a loan or line of credit (15.2 per cent) is still around half the global value and less than any other region worldwide (figure 9.6).

Figure 9.6
SDG indicator 9.3.2: proportion of small-scale industries with a loan or line of credit, 2023 (Percentage)



Source: Based on data from ESCWA, 2023b, as of December 2023.

F. Regional dimensions

SDG 9 collaborations and partnerships in the Arab region have already seen fruition in certain cases, mostly on the subregional level. They are focused on industrial development and scientific research and take several forms within the region and beyond.

1. Rethinking supply chains

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, globalization led to the geographic diversification of supply chains; for Arab countries, it meant greater links to markets worldwide. Since the pandemic, there has been a reconsideration of supply chains towards more localization, in addition to an increased focus on digitization and modernization. The level of advancement is mixed. While Gulf Cooperation Council countries are developing state-of-the-art infrastructure for logistics and aiming to becoming international hubs for the movement of people and commodities, middle-income countries have made more limited progress. The pandemic highlighted the importance of **strengthening supply chain resilience** as key for manufacturing and industries. As such, **regional integration opportunities revolve around actions that streamline logistics and tariff systems, digitize supply chains, facilitate the mobility of people and goods, and promote an enabling environment for the integration of companies in supply chains.**

2. Intraregional partnerships across some Arab countries

The Integrated Industrial Partnership for Sustainable Economic Development was established in 2022 to unlock industrial opportunities and achieve integration in resources, capabilities and experiences in several sectors: agriculture, food and fertilizers; pharmaceuticals; textiles; minerals and petrochemicals. Current members include **Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan** and the **United Arab Emirates**. The partnership started with an initial investment fund of $10 billion. In early 2023, 12 agreements for 9 industrial projects were signed with an investment value exceeding $2 billion.[54] **Bilateral collaborations include the Qatar-Oman joint venture;** its first phase served transportation needs during the 2022 FIFA world cup in Qatar, where 800 buses out of 4,000 were fully electric with zero carbon emissions.[55]

3. Regional initiatives led by one or more countries

Saudi Arabia launched the Middle East Green Initiative to incentivize regional collaboration in meeting climate targets and mitigating climate change impacts. It has set an ambitious target of collectively achieving a 60 per cent reduction in emissions regionally. Including many regional activities, the initiative provides a platform to accelerate the circular economy and its potential to transform the future of industries in the region. See more details in chapter on SDG 12.

4. Coalitions aim to mobilize commitment

Countries have joined coalitions to advance the production and use of low-carbon industrial materials. **Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are members of the Industrial Deep Decarbonisation Initiative, which is a global coalition of governments and private sector companies aiming to decarbonize heavy industries** (steel, cement and concrete) responsible for over 50 per cent of carbon emissions. The initiative includes a commitment to a Green Public Procurement Pledge. Members will work towards shaping a global framework of standards on low and near-zero emissions as well as an approach to data collection and reporting.[56]

> The Arab Industrial Development, Standardization and Mining Organization has been collaborating with the ESCWA Technology Centre on regional integration in industrial research and links between universities and industries. The organization has several programmes that push regional integration and cross-sector collaboration in artificial intelligence, nanotechnology and sustainable mining.
>
> For more information, see AIDSMO.

5. Intra- and interregional scientific collaboration among countries

From outside the region, the European Union is a top collaborator with Arab countries in scientific research. Within the region, the largest number of co-authored papers is between **Egypt** and **Saudi Arabia**.[57] With scientific research capacity largely locked inside universities and research centres, these collaborations could strengthen links to industry and commercialization.

Endnotes

1. The relationship between the number of researchers and amounts of R&D funding versus innovation output is not necessarily linear.
2. OECD, 2021.
3. Ibid.
4. The Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.
5. Zawya, 2023.
6. MEED, 2023a.
7. Egypt, 2021.
8. World Bank, 2020b.
9. MEED, 2023b.
10. See for example: Qatar, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2018; The United Arab Emirates, 2023.
11. Tunisia, Ministry of Industry, Energy and Mines, 2022.
12. Tanchum, 2022.
13. Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.
14. Saudi Authority for Industrial Cities and Technology Zones – Modon, 2021.
15. Morocco, Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2023; Zawya, 2021; Riera and Paetzold, 2020.
16. Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.
17. European Union, 2023.
18. Algeria, Egypt, Kuwait, Mauritania, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates have laws and Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the State of Palestine and the Syrian Arab Republic have structures, strategies or initiatives to offer support or finance. For more information, visit ESCWA's Arab SMEs Portal.
19. Tamkeen, 2023.
20. Zawya, 2020; Sohar, 2023.
21. Sharakah, 2023.
22. World Bank, 2023.
23. Invest Qatar, 2023; Saudi Arabia's General Authority for Statistics, 2022.
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41. UNESCO, 2021.
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43. The National Fund for Small and Medium Enterprise Development, 2023.
44. UNESCO defines five main sources for R&D funding as: business enterprise, government, higher education, private non-profit and the rest of the world.
45. UNESCO, 2021.
46. ITU, 2020.
47. UNIDO, 2021a.
48. Qatar Development Bank, n.d.
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51. Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 2022.
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53. Cherkaoui, 2023.
54. Hussein, 2023; Bahrain, Ministry of Industry and Commerce, n.d.
55. The Peninsula, 2022.
56. UNIDO, 2023.
57. UNESCO, 2021.

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10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

SDG 10

Reduce inequality within and among countries

A. Introduction

Regionally, there is a dearth of officially published data on inequality. Most countries do not collect or publish information on income and wealth distribution, discrimination or the redistributive impacts of public policies. Available data on many SDG indicators omit critical information for understanding inequality, including data on income and wealth distribution by sex, age, disability status, national origin, ethnicity, employment, geographical location and other relevant factors. This lack of data reflects insufficient policy attention to inequality and poses a significant obstacle to understanding the evolution of cross-cutting inequalities within the region.

What is without doubt is that economic growth has not been sufficiently inclusive or created the quality work opportunities needed to sustainably reduce poverty as aggregate growth rates did not transmit to households. Simultaneously, redistributive policies remain weak. Tax systems in the region are largely regressive, and social expenditures are both relatively low and relatively inefficient (see chapter on SDG 1). Long-running conflicts have also a detrimental impact on reducing wealth inequalities within and between countries in the region.

Social inequalities emerging from discriminatory laws, norms and practices, relatively weak rule of law and limited civic space to advocate for social justice also contribute to inequalities of opportunity that leave millions of people behind. Reducing inequality will require Arab countries to reassert the role of the State as the guarantor of economic and social rights through policies to promote pro-poor growth and decent job generation, effectively tax and redistribute wealth, and protect the rights of all people.

Recent crises including the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2022 escalation of the war in Ukraine and the global acceleration of inflation have had varying impacts across the region's population. As in many other regions, high exposure to risk and relatively weak safety nets have led to vulnerable groups disproportionately bearing the brunt of these crises, contributing to widening gaps between the richest and poorest people. The most vulnerable have been much more likely to lose their jobs, have difficulty accessing critical health care, experience food security or face disruptions to education as a result of these crises. Between 2020 and 2023, nearly 28 million people in the region are estimated to have fallen into poverty according to national definitions. In contrast, the region's millionaires saw the value of their assets grow by 44 per cent between 2019 and 2020.

Source: ESCWA and others, 2023; ESCWA, 2022b.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).

In terms of wealth distribution, 6 of the 20 most unequal countries globally are in the region,[1] and recent events have only exacerbated disparities. While the average person in the region has seen their wealth decline by approximately 28 per cent between 2019 and 2020, millionaires saw their collective wealth grow by 44 per cent, from $1.28 trillion to $1.85 trillion.[2] While 70,000 individuals in the region became millionaires between 2019 and 2021,[3] some 29 million fell below the international extreme poverty line of $2.15 per day.[4]

Estimates of women's share of national income put the region well behind global averages, reflecting continued gender gaps in wages and labour force participation. While 35.1 per cent of income accrues to women globally, no country in the Arab region achieves this level of distribution. In 15 countries, women earn 15 per cent or less of total labour income (see table 10.1).[5]

The region continues to be a prominent locus for international migration and forced displacement, as a place of origin, transit and destination. It hosts nearly 41.4 million migrants[6] (including 9.4 million refugees) who constitute 15 per cent of all international migrants worldwide.[7,8]

Since 2010, the region has experienced a dramatic increase in displacement and forced migration. Consequently, the number of refugees per 100,000 people has exploded from 816 to 1,914, nearly quintuple the global average. The region hosts more than a quarter of all refugees in the world and is the source of more than 40 per cent of all refugees globally.

Inequality is a cross-cutting issue constraining the realization of each SDG. Inequalities contribute to the region's high rates of poverty (SDG 1) and food insecurity (SDG 2), differential outcomes in health (SDG 3) and education (SDG 4), and variable access to basic services such as clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), clean and affordable energy (SDG 7), and safe and affordable housing and transportation (SDG 11). Additionally, inequality is shaped by gender divides (SDG 5), unevenly distributed benefits from economic growth (SDG 8), environmental factors (SDGs 12, 13, 14 and 15), and institutions that fail to ensure participatory governance and protect individuals and vulnerable groups from discrimination (SDG 16).

Table 10.1
Female labour income share (Percentage)

Algeria	12.5	**Lebanon**	21.7	**Somalia**	8.0
Bahrain	12.9	**Libya**	24.7	**Sudan**	14.7
Comoros	24.9	**Mauritania**	15.8	**Syrian Arab Republic**	13.5
Djibouti	30.6	**Morocco**	13.8	**Tunisia**	19.5
Egypt	15.0	**Oman**	8.6	**United Arab Emirates**	10.5
Iraq	6.4	**State of Palestine**	12.5	**Yemen**	1.0
Jordan	11.1	**Qatar**	8.0	**World**	35.1
Kuwait	15.6	**Saudi Arabia**	6.7		

Source: According to estimates from the World Inequality Database, accessed on 15 July 2023.



For an up-to-date view of SDG 10 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 10

- Institute transparent and participatory policymaking processes to embed equity considerations into sector plans and programmes, and address the needs of those left behind by the status quo.
- Enact and enforce measures to guarantee equal political, social and economic rights, including through enhanced protection against discrimination and policy measures to ensure such rights are enjoyed by all people in the region.
- Amend tax policies to ensure sustainable and equitable means to finance public services and investments, including through measures to increase the progressivity of tax systems and strengthen the redistributive role of the State.
- Increase and enhance the efficiency of social expenditures to advance equality of opportunity for all, with particular attention to the differentiated needs of those at risk of being left behind.
- Bolster accountability mechanisms and institutional transparency to allow greater public scrutiny of public entities and enhanced monitoring of results.
- Strengthen judicial independence and enact reforms to facilitate access to justice for marginalized groups to encourage equitable treatment of all and offer pathways to address grievances when rights are not adequately fulfilled.
- Adopt policies to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration, and strengthen intraregional and interregional cooperation on migration (in particular, for emergency situations).
- Guarantee the human and labour rights of migrants and ensure their access to basic services through legislative action, increased enforcement of protections and expanded access to enforcement mechanisms to respond to abuses.
- Invest in data collection and expand data disaggregation to track inequalities according to sex, age, disability status, migratory status, race, ethnicity, geographical location and other relevant characteristics, and to support evidence-based policy development.

B. The policy landscape for SDG 10

Achieving equality will require countries to enhance pro-poor macroeconomic planning and carefully design policies based on a sound understanding of specific obstacles faced by different groups in particular policy areas. Globally, involving marginalized and vulnerable groups in policy processes has proven critical to devising solutions that meet their needs.

In the Arab region, a variety of factors related to personal characteristics, such as household income, social class, religion, race, ethnicity, native language, national origin, gender, age, geographical location and others, impact individuals' and communities' access to opportunities. Disparities are evident in differential access to quality social services, patterns of intergenerational wealth transfer, the varying strengths of interpersonal networks and discriminatory practices rooted in law or social norms. **Inequalities are frequently intersectional**, resulting in individuals experiencing compounding effects as a result of belonging to multiple disadvantaged groups.

Many of the Arab region's shortcomings in reducing inequalities are closely tied to deficiencies in achieving SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). In addition to various conflicts and crises impacting the region, deficits in the responsiveness and transparency of State institutions, high levels of corruption, and limitations on freedom of expression amid a trend towards shrinking civic space have contributed to deepening or reinforcing inequalities and limiting opportunities to effectively challenge their root causes.

As such, the region's ability to achieve SDG 10 will be closely linked to progress on SDG 16. For example, increasing transparency and accountability, eliminating corruption and adopting inclusive governance approaches are vital to establishing a level playing field and ensuring policies serve the public interest. Strengthening the rule of law, access to justice and freedom of expression is vital for advancing equality for disadvantaged communities and rectifying exclusion and marginalization.

This chapter largely focuses on fiscal dimensions of inequality as well as on migration. The chapter on SDG 16 provides a fuller picture of institutional factors that contribute to inequality and shape prospects for change.

While acknowledging the many dimensions of inequality in the region, and given the relative scarcity of data on SDG 10 targets, **this chapter primarily focuses on two policy areas relevant to achieving SDG 10 – fiscal and wage policies (SDG target 10.4) and the adoption of responsible and well-managed migration policies (SDG target 10.7)**. While each of these are important components of advancing equality, they must be considered alongside interventions across policy areas to ensure inclusive and equitable development for all.

Accordingly, it is recommended to read this chapter alongside chapters on SDG 1 (No poverty, focusing on social protection and expenditures) and SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth). In other chapters, the (policies to leave no one behind) sections provide further information on the many manifestations of inequality in the Arab region and identify measures that countries are taking to address inequalities of outcome and opportunity.

Several common trends can be observed in Arab countries' efforts to reduce inequalities, which transcend income levels and geographic subgroupings.

Constitutional protections

Constitutions across the region include guarantees of equal rights and protection against discrimination based on several characteristics. Many Arab countries have signed international conventions to uphold the rights of vulnerable populations. Although constitutional provisions vary in scope, the following characteristics are most frequently offered specific protections:

- Gender (16 constitutions)
- Race (16 constitutions)
- Religion (16 constitutions)
- Disability status (6 constitutions)
- Political belief (6 constitutions)

Most countries have further ratified landmark human rights conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW – 20 countries), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD – 22 countries) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD –21 countries).



Constitutional guarantees have proven insufficient to eliminate discriminatory practices and ensure social and economic rights. While anti-discrimination laws exist in some countries, in many cases, they lack robust enforcement. Persistent discrimination can be attributed to prevailing cultural attitudes, a general absence of engagement with concerned communities during the policy design process, and insufficient financial resources and data to support implementation.

Fiscal policies

Tax rates are generally low across the region. At an estimated 8 per cent of GDP, the region's tax-to-GDP ratio is considerably below the median rates for middle- and high-income countries globally, which were 18 and 25 per cent, respectively, in 2019. Tax-to-GDP rates in the Arab countries that year stood at:

- 1.5 per cent in conflict-affected countries.
- 4 per cent in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.
- 7 per cent in the least developed countries.
- 19 per cent in middle-income countries.[9]

Countries across the region are underutilizing the potential of taxation as a tool for income and wealth redistribution. The region has substantial room to strengthen progressive personal and corporate tax systems to finance social expenditures, support the achievement of the SDGs and reduce inequality.

Tax systems in the region generally do not have a large redistributive impact. Countries heavily rely on indirect taxes, with personal income taxes contributing a relatively small share of total tax revenue. Value-added taxes and levies on natural resource exploitation generally contribute most government finances. While this is particularly true in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, which impose few direct taxes, income and corporate taxes also make up a relatively small share of total tax income in middle-income countries, typically not exceeding 20 per cent, and even less in the least developed countries. Although most middle-income and least developed countries have personal income taxes in place, value-added taxes typically constitute the largest source of tax revenue. In **Jordan**, they account for nearly 70 per cent of total tax revenues.[10] The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have recently introduced value-added taxes, but have few forms of direct taxation on income.

Consequently, tax systems in the region are largely regressive and impose a greater relative burden on the poor and middle class than on the rich. Although value-added tax systems include exemptions on basic goods and services, these tend to result in greater benefits for wealthier households.[11] This tendency is worsened in some cases by value-added tax exemptions on luxury goods.[12]

While official tax systems in the Arab region have had minimal impacts on the redistribution of wealth, *zakat* provides substantial funding for welfare provision. ***Zakat*** **is an obligatory 2.5 per cent almsgiving for Muslims with savings and wealth above a minimum amount to aid specified beneficiaries**. *Zakat* policy differs among countries. Payment is obligatory in **Saudi Arabia**, the **Sudan** and **Yemen**. In several other countries, contributions are voluntary, with State involvement in managing funds, while in other countries the State is not involved in the collection or distribution of funds.

While exact totals of *zakat* funds are difficult to estimate, they are significant sources of social spending globally, amounting to at least $200 billion. *Zakat* is an important element of social welfare and protection, and in some cases has been more effective in reaching vulnerable groups than State-provided assistance. Where distribution methods rely on personal and social networks, however, there are risks of leaving out certain populations and reinforcing social stratification, underscoring the importance of such funds in complementing rather than replacing State efforts.

Source: Gallien, Javed and van den Boogaard, 2023.

◆ **Social expenditures are low in the region compared to global averages and underutilized as a tool to combat inequality.** Despite comparable levels of total government spending, the region channels only 8.3 per cent of GDP to health, education and social protection, compared to a global average of 19.8 per cent. Meanwhile, Arab countries spend considerably more than the global average on consumption subsidies and military and police forces.[13] This imbalance means that public expenditures fall short of their potential to empower populations and reduce inequalities of outcome and opportunity. Instead, they reinforce the status quo of high inequalities.



Although Arab countries continue to navigate challenging fiscal situations amidst high debt levels, social expenditures remain effective investments to reduce inequality, spur social mobility and fuel economic growth. To maximize the impact of social investments, countries need to ensure that programmes are well-managed and built on a strong evidence base. For additional analysis, see the chapter on SDG 1.

Migration

◆ **As migration flows increase across the region, there is a growing consensus on the need to adopt frameworks to ensure the orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people**. By 2020, the region's total migrant and refugee population was estimated at nearly 41.4 million people. Increasing recognition of the need for well-managed migration policies is reflected in the wide endorsement by Arab countries of recent global frameworks on the subject:

- 19 Arab countries voted in favour of the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.
- 21 Arab countries voted in favour of the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees.

The ratification status of major international legal instruments on migration is mixed (see table 10.2).[14]

Despite recent reforms, migrants remain at an elevated risk of having their rights violated. They are often excluded from or face obstacles in accessing public services. Unfair work conditions, discrimination and patterns of exclusion deepen inequalities, including between migrants and local populations, between migrants working in different sectors, and between migrant women and men. Other chapters in this report offer insights into the challenges faced by migrants in specific policy areas.



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Data collection

◆ **Many Arab countries lack policies or legislative frameworks mandating data disaggregation by characteristics such as age, sex, disability, migratory status, income or geographic area, complicating efforts to assess the full extent of inequalities in the region**.[15] Most countries do not systematically collect or publicly report information on income and wealth distribution, and the absence of disaggregated data on other indicators makes it challenging to fully understand the depth of inequalities among groups. In many cases, data collection efforts such as household surveys are conducted irregularly, depriving policymakers of (real-time) data to inform evidence-based policy measures. Consequently, it is often difficult to assess the size of inequalities within countries and the extent to which policies are addressing them – or not.

Data limitations complicate efforts to assess gender gaps, urban-rural disparities, the disadvantages faced by persons with disabilities and the well-being of migrant communities. Further, they reduce policymakers' capacities to make efficient resource allocation decisions informed by clear understandings of the needs of particular groups or areas.

C. Policy trends by subregion

Fiscal and wage policies

As called for by SDG target 10.4, fiscal policy reforms can offer pathways to increase government revenues, reduce economic inequality and finance social expenditures to bolster equality of opportunity.

Gulf Cooperation Council countries

Fiscal policies in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have been shaped by their vast oil resources. Governments in the subregion impose minimal taxes on personal income and wealth, thereby minimizing the redistribution of resources between social classes. In recent years, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have sought to diversify government revenues by introducing new taxes, but these are predominately indirect taxes that are not optimized for achieving a more equal distribution of wealth.

◆ **The GCC states have historically relied on their substantial oil wealth to finance government expenditures and have among the lowest tax rates and narrowest tax bases in the world, but they have recently introduced reforms to diversify revenue streams**. In 2021, the hydrocarbon sector represented more than 70 per cent of total government revenues in **Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman** and **Qatar**; roughly 60 per cent in **Saudi Arabia** and nearly 50 per cent in the **United Arab Emirates**.[16] The Gulf Cooperation Council countries do not impose taxes on most personal income, nor have any implemented a wealth tax.

Outside the hydrocarbon sector, corporate income tax generally applies only to foreign-owned companies. In **Oman** and the **United Arab Emirates**, corporate income tax also applies to companies owned by nationals of Gulf Cooperation Council countries. **Bahrain** does not have such a tax beyond the oil and gas sector.[17] In **Qatar** and **Saudi Arabia**, companies are mandated to pay *zakat*, with the latter also extending this obligation to individuals.[18]

◆ **Volatile energy prices and changing economic structures have prompted reforms to diversify revenue bases, largely through the introduction of consumption taxes**. Taxes in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have historically been very low but collections grew from around 2 per cent of GDP in 2017 to more than 6 per cent in 2021 following reforms.[19] Value added taxes have been the main driver of this increase following an agreement among Gulf Cooperation Council countries, adopted in 2016, to levy such taxes at a minimum rate of 5 per cent. As of April 2024, **Kuwait** and **Qatar** had not yet implemented the tax. **Bahrain** and **Saudi Arabia** had value-added tax rates of 10 and 15 per cent, respectively. Further, the Gulf Cooperation Council states have signed a Common Excise Tax Agreement applicable to sales of tobacco products, energy drinks, and carbonated and sweetened beverages, which has been implemented by all countries except **Kuwait**.[20] Despite boosting revenues, the Gulf subregion remains considerably below the global high-income country average tax-to-GDP ratio of 16.4 per cent.[21] The predominance of value-added taxes in tax revenue limits tax systems' redistributive potential.

◆ **Most Gulf Cooperation Council countries have not established universally applicable minimum wage rules.** The guarantee of minimum wages is often limited to particular sectors or to nationals (as in **Oman**[22] and **Saudi Arabia**),[23] despite expatriate workers making up more than 75 per cent of the labour force.[24] **Kuwait** and **Qatar** are the only Gulf Cooperation Council countries with minimum wages applicable to employees of all sectors and nationalities. In **Bahrain**, regulations establish a minimum wage only for nationals in the public sector.[25] The **United Arab Emirates** does not have any minimum wages, although the labour law stipulates that salaries must cover employees' basic needs.[26]

Arab middle-income countries and least developed countries

Most Arab middle-income and least developed countries[27] lack oil and gas resources compared to Gulf Cooperation Council countries and rely on taxes to finance public expenditures. Amid rising poverty rates and increased wealth concentration, tax policies have not effectively redistributed wealth, as Governments generally privilege indirect and regressive forms of taxation. Large informal sectors have limited the scope for labour and wage policies to reduce inequalities, underscoring the need for inclusive economic growth that creates decent employment opportunities for all (see the chapter on SDG 8).

◆ **Over the past decade, middle-income and least developed countries have seen total revenues as a share of GDP fall and debt levels balloon,[28] severely impacting the fiscal space available to Governments and threatening social policy agendas. Although countries have sought to reform their tax systems, revenues remain dominated by regressive indirect sources of taxation.** Most countries in this group have some form of progressive taxation in place, with the number of personal income tax brackets ranging from just 2 in **Libya** to 9 in the **Syrian Arab Republic**. Rates applied to top earners range from 13 per cent in **Libya** to 38 per cent in **Morocco**. In recent years, many countries have adjusted tax brackets and increased the rates applied to the highest earners, including **Egypt**, **Jordan**, **Lebanon** and **Mauritania**.[29] **Algeria** has taken a different approach, introducing progressive cuts to the personal income tax rate in 2022 in an effort to preserve residents' purchasing power amid accelerating global inflation.[30]

Despite elements of progressivity, tax systems in most Arab middle-income and least developed countries rely largely on regressive indirect taxes, such as value-added taxes, to raise the bulk of their public revenues. In most cases, personal income tax as a proportion of total revenue has not increased over the past decade, with the notable exception of **Tunisia**. Value-added taxes have recently represented 40 to 50 per cent of total tax revenues in **Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco** and **Tunisia**; 50 to 60 per cent in **Mauritania** and **Palestine**; and over 70 per cent in **Jordan**. Several countries in this group, including **Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Mauritania,** the **State of Palestine** and **Tunisia**, have raised their value-added tax rates in the past 10 years. Efforts to expand the tax base have often led to more low-income earners entering the tax system, thereby increasing the relative burden of taxation on the lower and middle classes.[31]

◆ **In general, increased statutory tax rates have not led to commensurate increases in revenue, pointing to underlying problems with tax compliance and administration. These challenges are common in middle-income and least developed countries, although to differing extents**. In some cases, measures to increase tax revenues have been followed by a decrease in funds raised. In **Egypt**, for example, corporate income tax revenue fell from 35 to around 25 per cent of total tax revenue between 2010 and 2019, despite increases to the general corporate income tax rate. Similarly, increased value-added tax rates in **Lebanon** and **Tunisia** were followed by decreases of the shares of such taxes in total revenue.[32]

Underlying challenges to revenue collection include high rates of tax evasion; corruption leading to a lack of transparency or uneven enforcement in the tax system; inefficiencies in tax collection; and high levels of informality, with many individuals and small businesses not participating in tax collection systems.

Corporate tax collection in Arab countries is often undermined by generous, sometimes overlapping fiscal incentives that erode the tax base without commensurate positive effects on investment. Further, illegal practices such as trade mis-invoicing and corporate tax abuse cost the region more than $80 billion annually. Middle-income, least developed and conflict-affected countries all face these challenges, with their severity depending on administrative capacity and other factors specific to country contexts.

Source: ESCWA, 2022a.



◆ **Although most middle-income and least developed countries in the region have established minimum wages, their impact on inequality is often limited.** The informal sector represents a majority of employment. In the middle-income countries, it is common for 50 to 70 per cent of jobs to be informal. In many least developed countries, this figure is closer to 90 per cent.[33] As such, most workers, and especially low-wage workers, fall outside the scope of employment regulations, severely limiting the capacity for wage policies to reduce inequality. Such measures can be more impactful when paired with inclusive economic growth driven by sectors that create decent employment opportunities and incentives for businesses and individual workers to formalize.

Arab countries experiencing conflict or fragility

Like other middle-income or least developed countries in the region, Arab countries experiencing conflict or fragility[34] struggle with shrinking fiscal space and rising public debt. These countries face additional challenges, however, as these issues are compounded by acute economic decline, significantly decreased capacity to mobilize domestic resources, and the effects of destruction and violence. These issues disproportionately impact poorer populations and complicate policy efforts to address inequalities.

◆ **In many countries, crises have been accompanied by high rates of inflation and the devaluation of national currencies.** Such consequences disproportionately hit poor and middle-class households, who tend to have less diversified assets and lower savings, and spend a greater proportion of their income on necessities, making them more vulnerable to price increases.[35] In **Lebanon**, a severe economic crisis gravely impacted multidimensional poverty rates, which grew from 42 to 82 per cent between 2019 and 2021.[36] In **Yemen**, due to the ongoing conflict and depreciation of the rial, food now represents more than half of all expenditures for 73 per cent of households;[37] 19 million Yemenis require food assistance and some 2.2 million children are acutely malnourished.[38] Conflict and crisis situations also deepen gender inequalities as women and girls face additional exposure to gender-based violence, higher risks of child marriage and disproportionate negative effects on their health, education and nutrition.[39]

◆ **Fractured political control and administrative challenges in conflict-affected countries impede revenue collection efforts and can give rise to parallel taxation structures that exacerbate inequalities.** With tax collection representing only 1.5 per cent of GDP, countries experiencing conflict have by far the smallest tax intake in the region. Challenges to compliance are evident in countries in conflict and crisis situations globally; for example, despite on average having much higher statutory tax rates than non-fragile States, these countries have significantly lower effective tax collection.[40] In **Yemen**, tax-to-GDP ratios have fallen by nearly 75 per cent since the outbreak of conflict as enforcement and compliance have dropped drastically. Tax compliance in the service sector has fallen below 15 per cent, and the general sales tax is now effectively imposed only on imports.[41] Poor performance of direct taxation in countries experiencing conflict or fragility typically leads to more regressive tax systems, with wealthier individuals frequently having lower rates of effective taxation than the poor and middle classes.

In countries with fragmented political control, individuals may be subject to taxes imposed by competing parties, which can exacerbate vulnerability and inequality. Citizens and businesses in **Yemen** face double taxation from the north and south due to customs procedures between the zones,[42] and fees of up to 100 per cent for transferring funds into and between regions of the country.[43] Armed groups in conflict-affected countries often institute extralegal revenue collection systems in areas under their control, and engage in extortion and racketeering against already suffering populations, as has happened in **Iraq**, **Somalia** and the **Syrian Arab Republic**.[44,45]

◆ **The absence of redistribution mechanisms to ensure equitable development gains can fuel conflict. Revenue-sharing between income groups, economic classes and geographic regions is crucial to addressing and rebalancing inequities.** While conflict increases inequality, the inverse can also be true as inequality can contribute to the outbreak of conflict. In deepening underlying tensions and amplifying group differences, inequality can undermine social cohesion and the stability of the State.[46] Grievances related to intergroup and interregional inequities have been core drivers of conflict or fragility across the region.


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Migration policies

Migration is an increasingly important policy area within the Arab region, although the nature of movements of people and policy responses varies. In aggregate, Arab countries host nearly 41.4 million international migrants and refugees, with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries standing out as a leading global destination for migrant labour from South and South-East Asia, Africa and elsewhere. Outbound migration is significant; 32.8 million migrants and refugees originated from the region in 2020. Approximately 14.5 million migrants and refugees from the region relocated to other Arab countries, representing more than one third of the region's total migrant population. Additionally, as poor economic conditions, political instability and insecurity push people around the world to emigrate, the region's location at the crossroads between Africa, Asia and Europe has meant that growing numbers of people traverse Arab countries en route to their destinations.

Despite the growing significance of migration, Arab countries vary in the extent to which they have adopted international legal instruments related to the issue. They have taken different approaches to extending services to migrants and refugees. Table 10.2 summarizes the adoption status of select international legal instruments related to migration in the Arab region.[47]

Table 10.2
Adoption status of select international legal instruments related to migration in the Arab region

Instrument	Adoption status
International Labour Organization (ILO) Migration for Employment Convention (1949)	Adopted by four countries **(Algeria,** the **Comoros, Morocco** and **Somalia)**
International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990)	Adopted by seven countries **(Algeria,** the **Comoros, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco** and the **Syrian Arab Republic)**
ILO Convention concerning Migrations in Abusive Conditions and the Promotion of Equality of Opportunity and Treatment of Migrant Workers (1975)	Adopted by three countries **(**the **Comoros, Mauritania** and **Somalia)**
ILO Convention concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (2011)	Not adopted by any countries
ILO Private Employment Agencies Convention (1997)	Adopted by three countries **(Algeria, Morocco** and **Somalia)**
The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol	Adopted by nine countries **(Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia,** the **Sudan, Tunisia** and **Yemen)**
Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Crime, (2000)	Adopted by 20 countries **(Algeria, Bahrain,** the **Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia,** the **Sudan,** the **State of Palestine,** the **Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia** and the **United Arab Emirates)**
Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Crime, (2000)	Adopted by 15 countries **(Algeria, Bahrain,** the **Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Oman, Saudi Arabia,** the **Sudan,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Tunisia)**
Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (1954)	Adopted by three countries **(Algeria, Libya** and **Tunisia)**

Source: Authors.

Gulf Cooperation Council countries

The Gulf Cooperation Council countries host 74 per cent of the total number of migrants and refugees in the region, most of whom are migrant workers, primarily from South Asia, South-East Asia and Africa. These countries have historically relied on migrant labour, with large numbers of expatriates employed across the economy. Migrants from outside the Gulf Cooperation Council countries made up 52 per cent of their total population in 2020.[48] They comprised more than 75 per cent of the employed labour force of each country.[49] While migrants make significant positive contributions to their communities and work in critical sectors, many face obstacles accessing services and increased risks of exploitation due to provisions of labour governance frameworks and other relevant policies.

Deep inequalities persist between nationals of Gulf Cooperation Council countries and the sizeable expatriate population, between low- and high-skilled migrant workers, and between regular and irregular migrants, who face differing barriers in accessing services such as health and education (see the chapters on SDGs 3 and 4), generally lack social protection coverage (see the chapter on SDG 1) and confront obstacles to asserting legal rights (see the chapter on SDG 16).

◆ **Increasingly, Gulf Cooperation Council countries are taking steps to improve the living conditions of migrant workers, including through legal reforms. Yet significant barriers remain to the realization of migrant rights.** Most Gulf Cooperation Council countries have launched reforms of their *kafala* (sponsorship) systems, which have historically tied workers' legal residency to their employers, who in turn may exercise extensive control over employees. Migrant workers subject to the *kafala* system are often required to seek their sponsor's permission to change jobs or travel and face difficulties in quitting employment at will. Such practices deny migrant workers their rights, institutionalize power imbalances between employees and their sponsors, and enable abuse and exploitation. Reforms have curbed such controls, increased the flexibility for migrant workers to change jobs, and strengthened government oversight powers to address abuses, although such efforts are not necessarily applied to workers in all sectors.

Qatar made substantial changes to its *kafala* system in 2020, including abolishing requirements for migrant workers to obtain an employer's permission to change jobs before the end of a contract (including for migrant workers excluded from labour law protections, such as domestic employees) and removing requirements for employer permission to travel for most migrant workers. Imbalances remain, however. Employers remain responsible for obtaining residency permits for expatriate workers and retain the right to cancel such permits, contributing to conditions ripe for abuse.[50] **Saudi Arabia** launched a labour reform initiative in 2020 that eased employer permission requirements for migrant workers covered by the labour code; however, reforms excluded certain categories of migrant workers, including domestic employees and agricultural labourers.[51] In **Bahrain**, reforms to dismantle the *kafala* system were announced in 2009, however measures were undermined by legislation requiring employees to complete a full year of service before being able to change employers.[52]

Other recent measures launched to strengthen protections for migrant workers include the introduction of standard work contracts, as in **Kuwait**, and the creation of institutions charged with identifying and supporting victims of human trafficking, such as the Expat Protection Centre of **Bahrain**.[53] Some countries have introduced social protection reforms to increase the coverage of migrant workers (see the chapter on SDG 1).

Arab middle-income countries

Arab middle-income countries[54] are, to varying extents, origins, destinations and transit points for international migrants – many of whom are refugees or asylum seekers. Although national approaches to migration vary, some commonalities in migration patterns and policy responses can be identified across geographical areas, with clear differences in these matters observed between the Mashreq and Maghreb countries.

◆ **Mashreq countries have seen their migrant and refugee populations more than double since 1990, largely as a result of protracted conflicts and forced displacement within the subregion.** Several major crises have driven displacement and migration between Mashreq countries, with three quarters of their international migrants being either Palestinian or Syrian refugees.[55] Notably, **Jordan** and **Lebanon** have the highest refugee populations per capita in the world.

Host countries have taken different approaches to extending services to refugee communities. **Egypt** legally offers refugees of all nationalities access to public health care on equal terms with citizens. In **Jordan**, registered refugees are offered health care in government hospitals at the non-insured Jordanian rate.[56] While refugees are generally able to access some education services, the conditions and quality of these services vary (see the chapter on SDG 4). Refugees face challenges in acquiring sustainable livelihood opportunities, as the issuance of legal work permits is subject to conditions and host countries often limit the occupations they are eligible to pursue.[57,58]

◆ **Maghreb countries lie at the heart of migration routes connecting Africa, Europe and Western Asia. They have experienced a notable increase in irregular transit migration in recent years.** The Maghreb hosts a relatively small number of migrants and refugees (3 per cent of the region's total) but is the site of significant transit migration between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe. Given the subregion's significant emigration trends, expatriate and diaspora governance has received heightened attention. The Maghreb countries participate in the 5+5 Dialogue to promote cooperation with European partners on a host of issues, including migration, and have increased border control efforts in collaboration with European Union partners. The 2020 session of the dialogue resulted in an agreement on the need to better understand migration trends, facilitate mobility and regular migration, and enhance coordination to address irregular migration and exploitation of migrants.[59]

Arab least developed countries and countries experiencing conflict or fragility

Although they are not generally destination countries for international migrants, Arab least developed countries and countries experiencing conflict or fragility[60] are major migration origin countries as large numbers of people seek safety or economic opportunity. Several are also transit countries due to their locations along important international migration routes. Nearly three fourths of migrants and refugees in the least developed countries come from non-Arab African countries.[61]

◆ **Several countries have recently strengthened measures to combat human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants**. These include the restructuring and expansion of the anti-trafficking directorate in **Iraq** and the launch of anti-trafficking measures (including action plans and legislation) in the **Comoros, Iraq, Mauritania** and the **Sudan**.

◆ **Refugee return is another significant policy area for countries emerging from conflict, although approaches vary significantly.** For example, **Somalia** established an Internally Displaced Persons and Refugee-Returnee Policy in 2019 to facilitate the reintegration of such persons into mainstream life by establishing a framework for protecting their rights and providing them with assistance. Measures within the national social protection policy and land and housing policies specifically seek to address the needs of internally displaced persons and refugee-returnees. The Durable Solutions Secretariat of the Ministry of Planning support the development of policies targeting internally displaced persons, returned Somalis, and refugees and asylum seekers. In the **Syrian Arab Republic**, Cabinet Decision 46 (2020) requires Syrian citizens and Palestinian refugees previously resident in the country to exchange $100 to Syrian pounds at official exchange rates at the border before being allowed reentry into the territory. For Palestinians seeking to return to refugee camps, registration is limited to former residents with proof of ownership of a structurally sound house within camp boundaries.[62]

Arab countries are both recipients and sources of international remittance flows

Overall, the region received $57.9 billion in remittance inflows in 2020, 8 per cent of the global total, and a sum significantly above its foreign direct investment and official development assistance receipts. Remittance inflows are especially significant in the Mashreq countries, which receive 75 per cent of the region's remittance inflows, although the scale of received remittances varies substantially across countries. While remittance inflows amount to 2.1 per cent of regional GDP, such funds totalled more than 14 per cent of GDP in the **Comoros** and **Lebanon**.

The Gulf Cooperation Council countries are a major source of global remittances. In 2019, they accounted for 95 per cent of the nearly $120 billion in remittances sent from the region and nearly 25 per cent of all global remittance outflows.

In 2020, the cost of sending remittances to the region was estimated at 6.58 per cent. While this was more or less in line with the global average, it remains far above the 3 per cent fee target set by SDG target 10.3. Factors driving high fees include inconsistent data formats for cross-border payments, complex compliance requirements aimed at reducing illicit financial flows, limited operating hours, outdated technology platforms, long transaction chains and weak competition.

Source: ESCWA, IOM and UNHCR, 2022.

D. Policies to leave no one behind

Tackling inequality in the Arab region will require steps to address both vertical inequalities (primarily relating to distributional issues between individuals and households) and horizontal inequalities (pertaining to differences among demographic groups). To sustainably reduce inequality, countries will need to adopt wide-ranging policies to enhance the quality of governance and foster macroeconomic conditions for broad-based growth. They will need to enact redistributive fiscal policies to ensure that the fruits of progress are equitably shared.

Policies also need to respond to the causes of marginalization and address the differentiated needs of specific groups at risk of being left behind. Depending on the issue, within the region, such groups frequently include women and girls; children and youth; older persons; persons with disabilities; migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons; residents of rural areas; and the economically disempowered.

As a cross-cutting issue, addressing inequality lies at the heart of the 2030 Agenda's call to leave no one behind. Although work remains to be done to adequately address the root causes of marginalization and close gaps caused by overlapping inequalities, measures to bridge these divides are observable in every SDG policy area. Examples relevant to each goal can be found in the corresponding chapters of this report.

E. The financing landscape

Against a backdrop of rising poverty and inequality, the pace of wealth accumulation and concentration among the wealthiest individuals in the Arab region has accelerated since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, the wealthiest 10 per cent of people controlled an estimated 75 per cent of the region's wealth, a share that climbed to 81 per cent by the end of 2020. The same period saw the wealth of the poorest half of the population fall by roughly one third.[63] By the end of 2022, the richest 1 per cent of adults held an estimated 44.7 per cent of total wealth while the poorest 50 per cent had a combined total of just 3.2 per cent.[64] Few policy measures have been introduced to respond to the increasing concentration of wealth in the region. Efforts to implement wealth taxes have been limited and primarily focused on real property. The scope of such taxes is usually minimal, sometimes only applying to the transfer of property ownership and frequently subject to exemptions. Further hurdles include out-of-date property valuations, and fragmented land governance and property tax administration that challenge enforcement and compliance. Within the region, **Algeria** has gone the furthest in efforts to institute a wealth tax that applies to personal assets, including real estate holdings, vehicles, artwork and stocks in companies principally engaged in wealth management.[65]

In addition to implementing reforms to make tax systems more progressive, Arab countries can improve the equity of revenue collection and raise significant resources for sustainable development financing by tackling tax leakages and evasion. Further analysis of tax abuse, illicit financial flows, trade mis-invoicing, and other leakages are in the chapter on SDG 16.



This policy shift has been frustrated by a lack of quality data on the size and composition of private fortunes, resulting in low revenue collection, although measures have been taken to digitally compile such information and strengthen tax authorities' capacities to evaluate this information.[66]

Efforts to tax wealth in other regions have also encountered challenges in identifying those subject to such levies and calculating the value of their taxable assets. Lobbying efforts have often resulted in significant exemptions from such taxes, and many wealth holders have avoided payment by transferring assets to jurisdictions with lower tax rates. Overcoming these challenges, however, could significantly contribute to reducing inequalities. Strategies to effectively tax the income generated by wealth and its transfer between generations have potential to yield substantial revenues for social expenditures.[67]

Analyses of wealth concentration and poverty have underscored the potential that even modest rates of taxation on property and wealth could have in financing measures to eliminate income poverty. In 2019, it was estimated that the richest 10 per cent of the population in the Arab region held $4.4 trillion in wealth, whereas the cost of closing the income poverty gap using nationally defined poverty lines stood at roughly $38.6 billion. At the regional level, there is great potential for wealth taxes to mobilize the resources needed to close the income poverty gap. At the national level, wealth taxes could be an effective tool for reducing inequality in middle-income countries, although significantly less so in the least developed countries.[68]



The richest 10 per cent of people in the Arab region held $4.4 trillion in wealth in 2019…

while the combined income poverty gap in the middle-income and least developed countries was estimated to be **$38.6 billion**…

suggesting that a **0.9 per cent** wealth tax at the regional level could mobilize sufficient resources to close the income poverty gap.



In the Arab middle-income countries, the richest 10 per cent of people held $1.3 trillion in wealth in 2020…

while the cost to close the income poverty gap was estimated to be **$15.6 billion**…

indicating that the average rate of wealth taxation needed to close the income poverty gap was just **1.2 per cent**.



However, in the Arab least developed countries and the Syrian Arab Republic, the richest 10 per cent of people held $66.8 billion in wealth in 2020…

while the cost to close the income poverty gap was estimated to be **$29.5 billion**…

implying that the national wealth tax needed to close the income poverty gap would **exceed 44.1 per cent**, underscoring the need for sustained economic growth and increased international support to raise resources to eradicate poverty.

F. Regional dimensions

National actions to achieve SDG 10 can be complemented by regional cooperation to reduce inequalities. Regional actions based on solidarity and common approaches to problems requiring international coordination can help to achieve greater equality within and among countries. Examples of possible actions include:

Financing

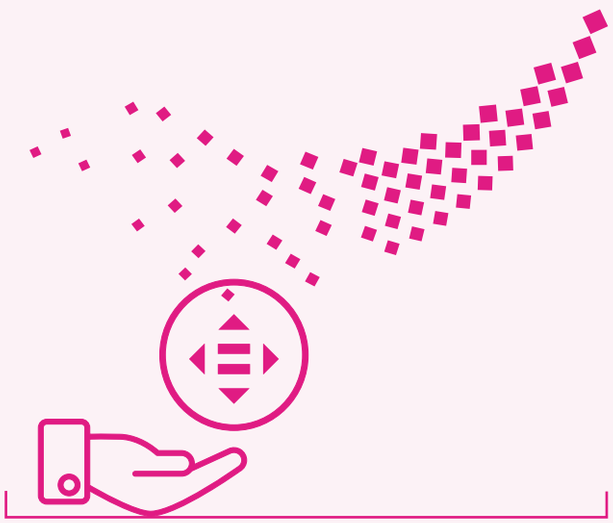
- **Strengthening cooperation on tax policy and combatting illicit financial flows:** an estimated $7.5 billion in annual tax revenues are lost in the region due to corporate tax abuse. Tackling issues such as tax evasion, avoidance and competition requires international cooperation, as cross-border tax evasion and planning have hindered authorities' capacities to enforce policies. Countries can work together to combat tax evasion, coordinate tax incentives, improve tax certainty and resolve disputes. While international momentum has recently emerged around international tax cooperation (as through the OECD Inclusive Framework on Base Erosion and Profit Shifting), countries considering such agreements should ensure that they fairly and effectively address their needs, while advancing the necessary legislative and policy reforms to reduce tax competition and tax avoidance.[69]



Migration

- **Deepening cooperation on migration and refugee affairs:** as major origin, transit and destination points for migrants and refugees, Arab countries have a pressing need to promote a common understanding of the causes, dimensions, patterns and effects of migration in the region. In 2015, the League of Arab States launched the Regional Consultative Process on Migration and Refugee Affairs to meet this goal, with thematic focuses including migration management, brain drain, irregular migration, forced migration, remittances and the protection of migrant rights.[70]

  Other processes, including regional reviews of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in the Arab Region, have highlighted further opportunities for international cooperation, including bilateral and multilateral work on data and experience-sharing, border management, labour migration, the portability of social protection coverage and financial backing for efforts to improve migration management.[71]



Endnotes

1. ESCWA, 2022d.
2. Ibid.
3. ESCWA, 2023c.
4. ESCWA, forthcoming.
5. Ibid.
6. The term "refugee" is defined by international law as people requiring international protection and living outside their country of origin because of feared persecution, conflict, violence or other circumstances. The term "migrant" does not have an internationally accepted definition. As used here, the term refers to any person residing (permanently or temporarily) outside their country of origin, for any reason.
7. ESCWA, IOM and UNHCR, 2022.
8. See the UNHCR Refugee Data Finder, accessed on 19 January 2024.
9. ESCWA, 2022e.
10. Ibid.
11. IMF, 2022.
12. ESCWA, 2022e.
13. ESCWA, UNDP and UNICEF, 2022.
14. ESCWA, IOM and UNHCR, 2022.
15. According to national self-assessments reported in the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, 9 of 16 respondent countries have provisions in their national statistical law referring to data disaggregated by specific groups or characteristics such as age, sex, disability, migratory status, race, ethnicity, income or geographic area.
16. World Bank, 2021.
17. Information on corporate and individual tax rates was derived from the PWC Worldwide Tax Summaries.
18. IMF, 2016.
19. PWC, 2022.
20. Information on value added and excise tax rates was derived from the PWC Worldwide Tax Summaries.
21. See the World Bank Data Bank on Tax Revenue (% of GDP) – High Income Countries.
22. ILO, 2019a.
23. Saudi Gazette, 2021, accessed on 4 May 2023.
24. See GCC Stat on Labour Statistics in the GCC Countries, first quarter 2022, accessed on 4 May 2023.
25. ILO, 2019a.
26. The United Arab Emirates, the United Arab Emirates' Government portal.
27. In this analysis, middle-income and least developed countries include Algeria, the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen.
28. ESCWA, 2022e.
29. Ibid.
30. Journal Officiel de la République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire, 30 décembre 2021.
31. ESCWA, 2022e.
32. Ibid.
33. Data from ILOStat, Indicator 8.3.1, Proportion of Informal Employment in Total Employment by Sex and Sector.
34. In this analysis, countries experiencing conflict or fragility include Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.
35. Gill and Nagle, 2022.
36. ESCWA, 2021b.
37. Joint SDF Fund and others, 2023.
38. FAO, UNICEF and WFP, 2022.
39. ESCWA, 2019.
40. OECD, 2021a.
41. OECD, 2021b.
42. SEMC, 2021.
43. Al-Akhali, 2021.
44. European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies, 2017.
45. Bahadur, 2022.
46. ESCWA, 2023b.
47. ESCWA, IOM and UNHCR, 2022.
48. Gulf Research Center, Percentage of Nationals and Non-nationals in Gulf Populations (2020).
49. Gulf Research Center, Percentage of Nationals and Non-nationals in GCC Countries' Employed Populations (2020).
50. Human Rights Watch, 2020.
51. ESCWA, IOM and UNHCR, 2022.

52. Migrant Forum in Asia, 2012.
53. See the Expat Protection Center.
54. In this analysis, middle-income countries include Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the State of Palestine and Tunisia. Maghreb countries include Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia. Mashreq countries include Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the State of Palestine and the Syrian Arab Republic.
55. According to the Situation Report on International Migration 2021, the Mashreq region hosts 7.2 million migrants and refugees. UNHCR reports that 3.5 million Palestinian refugees are in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, and 1.9 million Syrian refugees are in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon.
56. UNHCR, n.d.
57. ILO and UNHCR, 2018.
58. ILO, 2014.
59. ESCWA, IOM and UNHCR, 2022.
60. In this analysis, least developed countries and countries experiencing conflict or fragility include the Comoros, Djibouti, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, and Yemen.
61. ESCWA, IOM and UNHCR, 2022.
62. Ibid.
63. ESCWA, 2022d.
64. ESCWA, 2023a.
65. Algeria, 2022.
66. Algerie Eco, 2022.
67. Brumby and Keen, 2018.
68. ESCWA, 2020.
69. ESCWA, 2021a.
70. See more on the IOM Arab Regional Consultative Process on Migration and Refugee Affairs.
71. ESCWA and others, 2021.

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11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

SDG 11

Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

A. Introduction

With up to 75 per cent of the Arab population expected to be living in urban areas by 2050,[1] urban policies are critical to the well-being of hundreds of millions of people. Located largely in coastal areas and often challenged by outdated infrastructure, cities in the region are strongly exposed to climate change-related disasters. Domestic migration from rural to urban areas remains the primary source of urbanization, but Arab cities are also the world's leading destination for displaced persons.[2] This situation exacerbates problems related to informal employment, substandard housing, the overexploitation of natural resources and the depletion of environmental quality.

While national urban policies[3] have been launched and disaster preparedness has progressed, vast policy gaps remain on affordable housing, access to basic services and public open spaces, and waste management, to name a few. Arab countries face unsustainable patterns of urban sprawl and obstacles to the achievement of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) such as limited decentralization, environmental vulnerability and the destabilizing impacts of political turmoil and conflicts. Priorities include affordable housing, access to basic services for all, climate change adaptation, better air quality, improved waste management, sustainable transportation, more green and public spaces, and protection of cultural and natural heritage.

This chapter covers SDG 11 policy areas related to informal settlements, slums and affordable housing, inclusivity and transport, resilience to disasters and urban governance.

SDG 11 addresses issues in cities and local communities such as housing, transportation, waste management, urban planning and the environment. It includes indicators related to disaster risk reduction that repeat under SDGs 1 and 13.

Progress on SDG 11 relies on shifts in consumption and production patterns (SDG 12), innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), access to water, sanitation, and electricity (SDGs 6 and 7), and accountable governance (SDG 16).

Advancing SDG 11 can catalyse progress in alleviating poverty (SDG 1), improving human health (SDG 3), rendering public services accessible to women and girls (SDG 5), and reducing environmental risks (SDGs 12, 13, 14 and 15).


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What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).



The proportion of the **urban population living in slums, informal settlements or inadequate housing** in the Arab region declined from 39 per cent in 2006 to 32 and 24 per cent in 2010 and 2018, respectively (about 61 million urban inhabitants in 2018). The global average in 2020 was 24 per cent.



The proportion of **the urban population with convenient access to public transport** in the region varied considerably from 8 and 10 per cent in Baghdad (Iraq) and Amman (Jordan), respectively, to 62 and 79 per cent in Doha (Qatar) and Marrakesh (Morocco), respectively, in 2020. Cities in middle-income countries have better coverage in terms of public transport networks, at 48 per cent in Tunis (Tunisia) compared to 41 and 39 per cent in Dubai (United Arab Emirates) and Kuwait, respectively, or 36 per cent in Alexandria (Egypt) compared to 21 per cent in Bahrain.[4] This reflects high dependency on private cars in the high-income countries of the region.



The proportion of the **urban population with access to open public space** diverges considerably from 18 and 20 per cent in Sohar (Oman) and Baghdad (Iraq), respectively, to 82 and 91 per cent in Al Fujayrah (United Arab Emirates) and Tozeur (Tunisia), respectively, in 2020.[5]



The number of **persons internally displaced by disasters** was almost 1.8 million in the region in 2020 against around 200,000 in 2015, reflecting a growing trend of displacement related to environmental disasters.



The region is on track in developing **national disaster reduction strategies** but only a few countries have **local disaster risk reduction strategies:** 32 cities across 10 countries have such local strategies and action plans (see the chapter on SDG 13).



Air quality in Arab cities is worse than the global average. In 2019, Arab cities had 45.7 micrograms per cubic metre of annual mean levels of fine particulate matter (PM2.5), on average, compared to a world average of 32.9.



The **cost of air pollution** in the region is $141 billion per year, around 2 per cent of GDP.[6]

For an up-to-date view of SDG 11 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 11

The following policy messages aim to address the challenges the Arab region faces from rapid urbanization, environmental stressors in cities, and the need for social and political transformations in urban settings.

- Operationalize administrative and fiscal decentralization mechanisms to grant local governments and authorities more responsibility in raising revenues and budgeting (including taxes, licenses, traffic fines, etc.) to better respond to people's needs for basic infrastructure and services.
- Strengthen the capacity of local governments and authorities in budgeting, mainstreaming gender and the inclusion of vulnerable groups (such as persons with disabilities and older people), building project proposals, raising funds from donors and fostering partnerships.
- Introduce mechanisms to monitor progress on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs at the local level through urban observatories to improve data collection, processing and analysis, and to stimulate inclusive governance and bottom-up transformations.



- Promote the concept of healthy cities[7] to link the deployment of the circular economy, resilience to climate change and improved public health and well-being, among other benefits.

Urban observatories are a starting point for more robust local assessments, supporting evidence-based policymaking and monitoring mechanisms at the city level. They provide decision-makers, other stakeholders and citizens with unbiased information to facilitate informed feedback, extend technical assistance for policy formulation and review, and encourage participation through the transparent sharing of information. This results in comprehensive reviews that capture a variety of perspectives and that can help in holding decision-makers responsible for implementing tangible improvements. The combination of urban observatories and local reviews offers a potent mechanism for monitoring urban challenges and promoting cooperative solutions.

Voluntary Local Reviews

As a bridge between the global vision of sustainable development and local actions, **Voluntary Local Reviews can be a powerful accelerator of SDG localization.** They promote evidence-based policies, reflect on the challenges and opportunities of specific territories, and provide a common vision and entry point for long-term planning for sustainable development at the local level. These reviews enhance stakeholder engagement and multi-level, horizontal governance, while opening an opportunity for local governments and authorities to articulate strategic priorities with global agendas and engage in the international arena.

Voluntary Local Reviews recently undertaken in Amman **(Jordan)** in 2022 and Agadir **(Morocco)** and Al Madinah **(Saudi Arabia)** in 2023 contributed to local stakeholders' dialogue and urban policy coherence. These reviews have resulted in an unprecedented push for developing local data, giving cities the impetus to strengthen data-related processes and improve horizontal cooperation for information-sharing and vertical coordination with national statistical offices. In addition, these reviews have reinforced accountability and transparency through multistakeholder participation. They have also contributed to identifying financing mechanisms for priority development areas.

Sources: UN-Habitat, 2023b; ESCWA, UN-Habitat and UCLG-MEWA, 2024.

- Implement a comprehensive and integrated housing and urban planning policy framework that comprises targeted investment in infrastructure and incentivizes private sector participation in the development of adequate and affordable housing (for example, through public-private funds for social housing).
- Regulate land and real estate markets, direct the use of public lands for affordable housing projects and upgrade low-quality housing stock, while containing urban sprawl through compact forms of urbanization.
- Invest in public transportation systems to encourage a modal shift from individual cars to sustainable mobility systems, including mass transportation and interconnectivity with other patterns of mobility.
- Enshrine transport considerations in urban planning and decision-making, incentivize soft modes of mobility, and integrate smart technologies for traffic management to achieve efficient, accessible, and environmentally friendly urban transport systems.

The obstacles women face in accessing safe and efficient public transport hinder their employment opportunities, restrict access to education, and curtail participation in cultural and social activities. Limitations on mobility adversely affect women's earning potential, contributing to gender inequalities in employment due to missed work opportunities and financial setbacks. Closing these gaps requires measures to enhance the affordability and safety of public transport for women, encourage greater female participation in the transport sector, and leverage technology to bolster transport accessibility and efficiency.

- Eliminate discriminatory laws in access to land and housing, reform land titling, simplify registration mechanisms, and digitize land titling and cadastral systems to protect the rights of vulnerable groups, including women.
- Prioritize inclusive urban planning in reconstruction in post-conflict settings, using the rehabilitation of built heritage as a tool for reconciliation among communities; preserve and protect natural and cultural heritage; and restore damaged heritage with respect for the inherited values and traditions of different cultural contexts.



B. The policy landscape for SDG 11

Urban policies in the Arab region continue to focus primarily on providing adequate housing and basic services. The policy framework has yet to further integrate environmental and disaster risk management (including early warning systems); a balanced approach to territorial development, such as between urban and rural areas and among various neighbourhoods within cities; and opportunities for fostering economic development at the local level in line with the Arab Strategy for Housing and Sustainable Urban Development 2030.

Endorsed by the Arab Council for Housing and Construction under the auspices of the League of Arab States, the **Arab Strategy for Housing and Sustainable Urban Development 2030** is complemented by a 2016 report, **Towards an Arab Urban Agenda**, including in terms of mechanisms to boost regional cooperation. The regional strategy calls on Arab countries to limit urban sprawl, boost affordable housing, and engage various stakeholders in urban planning and development.

A number of policy trends are common at the regional level

◆ **Providing access to adequate and affordable housing and basic services for all remains the primary focus of urban policies in most countries of the region.**[8] National programmes have upgraded informal settlements and eliminated slums, including through resettlements and social housing operations targeting the most vulnerable communities. Assessments of social housing programmes reveal recurring issues, however, such as low quality, a loss of economic opportunities and social spaces due to relocation, a lack of community-based approaches and low-cost construction neglecting green standards. In addition, home ownership and access to formal services (such as water and electricity) result in additional costs that are difficult to meet from the budgets of households benefiting from social housing projects, even with public subsidies. The rising cost of land in urban areas makes the development of affordable housing even more challenging. All these issues can exacerbate social exclusion.

Outdated building codes hinder energy-efficient construction. While higher energy efficiency in buildings raises initial costs, it also leads to lower energy bills, enhancing affordability in the longer run. Design optimization is crucial to balance construction costs with ownership and operation expenses, ensuring affordability over a dwelling's life cycle. Using inherently energy-efficient materials from the start is preferable to costly retrofits.



Morocco implemented social housing programmes, providing support for home ownership through caps on the sale price of social housing, opening new urban areas and creating new towns, using public land for housing projects, encouraging collaborations between local and national stakeholders, and establishing financing and guarantee mechanisms. This has significantly reduced the housing deficit and diversified the housing supply, including through private sector participation in expanding affordable housing.[a] Under the Cities Without Slums programme, 59 of 85 cities were declared free of slums as of December 2022.

[a] See Morocco, Rapport national sur la mise en œuvre du nouvel agenda urbain 2016-2020, 2022.

In **Tunisia,** the Housing Loans Guarantee Fund for Social Groups of Non-Continuous Income was created in 2018. It enables groups with non-fixed income who are excluded from bank loans, due to the irregularity of their monthly income, to finance their homes with a guarantee from the fund. The fund's interventions include guaranteeing housing loans entrusted by banks under the title of acquiring a ready-made house. The fund also aims to introduce as many buildings as possible into an organized framework to reduce chaotic construction and the spread of illegal settlements.

◆ **Urban policies are progressively shifting from sectoral social housing programmes to more integrated approaches and broader economic development strategies.**[9] The adoption of national urban policies illustrates an evolution in managing urbanization, which is no longer seen as a disruptive phenomenon with negative externalities but as an opportunity to foster economic development, including through economic diversification and job creation. Only four countries of the region have explicitly formulated a national urban policy, however; most are middle-income countries. **Saudi Arabia** is the only Gulf Cooperation Council country with a national urban policy. Ten countries have issued a national report on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda,[10] including three Gulf Cooperation Council countries, six middle-income countries and one country in conflict (see Table 11.1). These countries have committed to integrating the different pillars of the New Urban Agenda into policymaking, planning, budgeting and governance. They have also agreed to adopt gender-sensitive climate change policies and programmes.

Table 11.1
National urban policies and the New Urban Agenda in Arab countries

Country	National urban policy	New Urban Agenda - national report
Algeria	2010	2021
Bahrain	No explicit national urban policy	2021
Comoros	No explicit national urban policy	No national report
Djibouti	No explicit national urban policy	No national report
Egypt	2023	2022
Iraq	Feasibility phase started in 2023	In progress
Jordan	2023	2022
Kuwait	No explicit national urban policy	2022
Lebanon	Formulation phase	2022
Libya	No explicit national urban policy	No national report
Mauritania	No explicit national urban policy	No national report
Morocco	No explicit national urban policy	2022
Oman	No explicit national urban policy	No national report
Qatar	No explicit national urban policy	No national report
Saudi Arabia	2019	2023
Somalia	Diagnosis phase	No national report
State of Palestine	2023	2021
Sudan	Diagnostic study completed in 2021	No national report
Syrian Arab Republic	Diagnosis phase	No national report
Tunisia	Formulation phase (approved by the National Committee in 2022 but not yet endorsed by the Government)	2021
United Arab Emirates	No explicit national urban policy	No national report
Yemen	Feasibility phase	No national report

Source: Authors' elaboration. See the Urban Policy Platform and the Urban Agenda Platform.

◆ **Urban environmental issues are often covered by sectoral approaches instead of being addressed in integrated urban policies. Capacity and investment in this domain remain low.** Rarely featuring in national urban policies, climate change adaptation is addressed through national sectoral strategies by specialized central bodies or in specific development programmes. For instance, **Egypt** formulated national strategies on climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction and the environmental management of vulnerable areas, such as coastal zones. Yet measures and actions in these areas are not integrated in the national urban policy. National urban policies and national adaptation programmes have yet to be instrumentally linked to maximize impact.

The region lacks capacity and expertise in climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. Data limitations make it challenging to develop adaptation strategies at the local level – where financing is missing for small towns as the focus is mainly on capital cities. Some cases are however exemplary in terms of disaster risk strategies at the local level (see the chapter on SDG 13). For instance, the Government of **Morocco** supported cities in designing urban resilience strategies, with local action plans aligned with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) 2015–2030.[11] Nablus City in **Palestine** also aligned its disaster risk management strategy with the Sendai Framework.[12] Dubai **(United Arab Emirates)** adopted an institutional framework that enables stakeholders to assess disaster risks and direct resources to reduce them. Aqaba **(Jordan)** has integrated the risk of flooding and earthquake mitigation into land use planning. Ain Draham **(Tunisia)** has initiated partnerships between the private sector and NGOs to address flood risks, while **Lebanon** has created a national flash flood risk assessment that incorporates recommendations for urban planning.[13]

Amman Climate Action Plan: A Vision for 2050

In **Jordan,** the Amman Climate Action Plan outlines a local government strategy for a carbon-neutral capital by 2050. It targets a 40 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 while meeting the needs of a rapidly growing city. The plan encompasses various sectors such as sustainable mobility, energy efficiency, renewable energy, waste reduction, water conservation, urban planning and green infrastructure. It includes measures such as a rapid bus transit system, LED street lighting, green building incentives and waste-to-energy facilities. Urban farming is encouraged through zoning and financial incentives. Cross-sectoral initiatives emphasize community engagement, education and recreational projects, with coordination across public agencies, civil society and the private sector. Amman has also developed complementary strategies and action plans, namely Amman Green City, Amman Smart City and Amman Resilience City.

◆ **While cities have major infrastructure projects, mobility strategies remain largely car-oriented, limiting the transformative potential of urban mobility.** The focus remains on physical infrastructure (roads, mass transportation systems), neglecting neighbourhood designs that can reduce traffic by creating a physical environment for walking and cycling. Although public-private partnerships have proven efficient in ensuring better service levels, public transport in most Arab cities continues to face challenges. The gap is often filled by informal operators, a sign of the failure to deliver a more holistic and integrated approach to transport at the community level. Planning and investments are not sufficient to enhance public transportation and to encourage people to shift from private vehicles to public transport. Integrated urban transport systems to improve "last mile connectivity", where the last mile to and from public transportation hubs allows commuters to transition between modes of transportation, are largely absent. This undermines the shift from private vehicles to more sustainable modes of transport. In the same vein, many Arab cities do not have safe and accessible walking and cycling infrastructure, hindering environmentally friendly mobility. A lack of "pedestrianization" results in traffic congestion and poor safety.

Reducing the impacts of urban mobility on the environment: Policies promoting eco-friendly models of urban mobility using green technologies and smart digital services have potential to reduce the impact of urban mobility on the environment, resulting in more inclusive, smart and sustainable cities. Yet developing these models requires funding, such as for investing in electric vehicle fleets for the public sector and charging infrastructure. Incentives and facilities to catalyse the adoption of electric vehicles may also be required, such as tax breaks, wavers and reduced electricity fares for electric vehicle charging.



◆ **Sustainable smart cities are emerging in the region: 14 out of 22 countries have related initiatives** (see the sections on the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and middle-income countries). Smart digital solutions are enhancing urban safety, increasing traffic safety, unlocking the potential of real-time data in predicting and preventing crime and terrorism, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and addressing violence against women and girls in public spaces. In the rapidly evolving urban landscapes of the Arab region, the integration of emerging technologies and the adoption of people-centred smart city approaches are crucial to achieve sustainability. Leveraging digital technologies, AI and big data analytics, people-centred smart cities could enhance the efficiency of urban services and infrastructure and build urban resilience. Digital platforms could facilitate citizen engagement and participatory governance, allowing more transparent and inclusive decision-making. People-centred smart cities in the Arab region should be seen with a focus on aligning technological innovations with the cultural, economic and social needs of the population, ensuring that technology enhances the quality of life for all residents.

◆ **The decentralization process is unfinished in most countries of the region.** Decentralization has been pursued to enhance local governance, service delivery and participation in decision-making, especially after the 2011 uprisings. Yet the experiences and outcomes of decentralization vary significantly. Overall, since they depend on transfers from the central government, local governments and authorities still have weak capacities for mobilizing local resources. Central government actors and national public agencies retain major roles in urban governance, with limited room for manoeuvre by local authorities.

Some attempts to engage the private sector, civil society and the public have emerged in the formulation and implementation of urban policies and projects. In the **Comoros,** the elaboration of the National Urban and Housing Policy involved a participatory approach at the local level. The most advanced example of an inclusive approach is the "Politique de la Ville" in **Morocco.** The formulation phase was accompanied by national debates, and implementation relies on contracts between national institutions, local authorities and other stakeholders.

The national management of infrastructure with the limited and sometimes non-existent involvement of local governments and authorities has hindered the ability of Arab cities to innovate and contribute to meaningful change.

Sources: UN Habitat, 2023c.

C. Policy trends by subregion

1. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

Gulf Cooperation Council countries have invested in urban planning and infrastructure to support rapid urbanization and accommodate growing populations. They are focused on building smart cities that incorporate technologies for energy efficiency, waste management, sustainable transportation and green building initiatives.

◆ **Housing policies target nationals, using a variety of financing mechanisms to support different income levels. Migrant workers, who form a significant share of the populations in these countries, are not covered by these policies. Their accommodation falls under the purview of private employers.** National urban policies and disaster risk reduction strategies do not consider migrants.

- In 2022, **Bahrain** completed a royal directive issued in December 2013 to provide 40,000 housing units to citizens through constructing five new cities.[14] These were financed through the Gulf Cooperation Council Development Programme and built in partnership with the private sector.
- Since its population is mainly in the Kuwait Metropolitan Area, which represents 8 per cent of national land, **Kuwait** has launched policies to geographically redistribute the rapidly growing population in new cities.
- **Oman** has addressed growing demand for housing, including among low-income households, through low-interest loans and subsidized housing units in new settlements.[15]
- In **Saudi Arabia,** Vision 2030 includes the Housing Programme 2030, which aims to increase Saudi home ownership to 70 per cent by the end of 2030. The Sakani programme facilitates homeownership among

Saudi citizens, and the Jood Eskan initiative enables charitable donations to households in need of housing support.[16]

- In the **United Arab Emirates,** the Sheikh Zayed Housing Programme provides financial assistance to Emirati households to build, purchase or renovate their homes, including grants for low-income families and those with special needs.

◆ **Being strongly urbanized,[17] the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have integrated their urban policies in national planning instruments, focusing on the diversification of the economy, and using oil wealth to develop a knowledge-based economy in specialized new towns.** Climate and environmental concerns are being embedded in urban policies, including through the creation of green spaces and increased energy efficiency.

- **Bahrain** has announced that the construction of new towns will be green and smart, using environmentally friendly materials, providing green areas and planting trees along streets.
- The Dubai 2040 Urban Master Plan **(United Arab Emirates)** encourages public transportation and soft mobility, housing projects, green spaces and recreational facilities.[18] Furthermore, Dubai has made the "smart city" an essential component of its urban strategy.
- In Riyadh **(Saudi Arabia),** a series of megaprojects include a 135 kilometre-long green urban corridor based on converting a utility highway into a green urban boulevard (the Sport Boulevard).[19] The "Green KSA" and "Green Riyadh" environmental initiatives include the creation of green spaces, pedestrian walkways and recreational areas.[20]

◆ **Gulf Cooperation Council countries have made progress in addressing jointly climate change and urban issues. Oman** has the National Strategy for Adaptation and Mitigation to Climate Change 2020–2040. In the **United Arab Emirates,** the Green Agenda 2015–2030 is an implementation framework for the United Arab Emirates Green Growth Strategy, complemented by the National Climate Change Plan 2017–2050, which is expected to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. **Bahrain,** which aims to have net-zero emissions by 2060, has established the Joint National Committee on Climate Change chaired by the Supreme Council for the Environment. **Kuwait** has issued the National Adaptation Plan 2019–2030. **Qatar** is preparing a climate change strategy focused on urban planning and development.[21]

◆ **Gulf Cooperation Council countries have made significant investments in high-tech transportation solutions.** As impressive as public transportation systems are, however, the networks do not cover entire cities. A heavy reliance on private vehicles remains due to cultural and behavioural preferences.

- High-tech transportation solutions include the Dubai Metro (**United Arab Emirates**), the longest driverless rail system and one of the most advanced metro networks worldwide; the Doha Metro, an integral component of the larger **Qatar** rail network and one of the fastest driverless trains in the world; and the automated Bus Rapid Transit system under the smart mobility programme in Abu Dhabi (**United Arab Emirates**).
- The road infrastructure in **Bahrain** has witnessed continued upgrades, including safe paths for bicycles and sidewalks, afforestation and beautification, and traffic safety requirements. Under its Urban Transit Network Project, Bahrain recently launched the construction of a 100-kilometre light rail network and four fully automated and driverless metro lines.
- The King Abdulaziz Project for Riyadh Public Transport **(Saudi Arabia)** aims to address traffic congestion by reducing high dependence on private cars. It includes a 176-kilometre metro network, comprising 6 metro lines and 85 stations, and connecting residential, commercial and recreational areas, hospitals and universities. This is in addition to 24 Bus Rapid Transit lines (1,200 kilometres) and 25 park-and-ride locations as connectivity points in a multi-modal transportation system.[22]

◆ **The centralization of urban affairs is still strong. Local governments and municipalities depend on oil revenue transfers from central governments,** which approve local initiatives prior to implementation. Some major cities have relative autonomy in urban planning, such as Medina and Mecca **(Saudi Arabia).** The impact of the delegation of authority has yet to be fully assessed.

2. Arab middle-income countries

Arab middle-income countries contend with unplanned urbanization fed by migration from rural areas, inadequate urban planning, socioeconomic disparities and the proliferation of illegal settlements. In the Mashreq countries,[23] these issues are exacerbated by the flow of refugees from conflict-affected countries. Middle-income countries have implemented various national programmes to upgrade informal settlements and enhance access to basic services. They have invested in mass transport systems and the creation of new towns. But progress towards decentralized decision-making is unfinished.

In the Maghreb,[24] urban policies seek to redirect urban growth and economic opportunities from coastal agglomerations to secondary cities and new towns. This follows a generation of **social housing programmes** backed by strong political commitment and operations carried out by national agencies collaborating with local authorities and the private sector. The housing policies of countries in North Africa are among the best practices in tackling a challenge faced by the entire Arab region. In addition to government-built social housing units, **Morocco** and **Tunisia** have increasingly incorporated private sector participation, developing mixed models and enhanced mechanisms for housing finance, and creating more opportunities for low-income housing. Their achievements in the **rehabilitation of historical cities (medinas)** have garnered international recognition.

In the Mashreq, flows of refugees combined with rural migration put enormous pressure on cities to provide adequate shelter. Urban policy has focused on densification, the upgrading of informal settlements and the redirection of urban growth along transport corridors. Countries adopt varied approaches to social housing, with prominent State-provided housing in **Egypt**[25] and **Jordan.**[26] **Lebanon** primarily has rent controls. Persistent informal housing points to prevailing inadequacy in housing policies.

- In **Jordan** and **Lebanon,** most refugees live in shelters that are overcrowded, do not meet humanitarian standards and/or risk collapse.[27] In 2017, up to 43 per cent of refugee households in **Lebanon** had either borrowed money to pay rent or were unable to pay it.[28] Initially intended for temporary accommodation, many refugee camps have become permanent neighborhoods, with high rates of slum conditions. Migrant households experience greater difficulties than national counterparts in accessing housing, struggling with high rents and unattainable guarantees required to obtain a lease.[29]
- In 2022, Amman's Voluntary Local Review[30] **(Jordan)** became the first in the Arab region. It points out major challenges related to housing vacancy, affordability and informality. The refugee crisis has further stressed existing housing infrastructure. Amman has explored various strategies for fostering urban development, such as reducing the housing vacancy rate to 8 per cent by providing assurances to property owners. This encourages bringing large shares of unoccupied apartments into the rental market instead of constructing new residences on the city's periphery. Approximately 75 per cent of the city's anticipated population growth could be accommodated in existing vacant homes by 2030, while urban sprawl and the depletion of natural environments would be better contained.
- **Lebanon** faces housing challenges due to a highly liberalized real estate market, where urban housing prices surge and become unaffordable for middle- and low-income households. The oversupply of high-income housing exacerbates the issue. The influx of displaced Syrians intensifies pressure on urban housing markets, forcing refugees, migrants and the urban poor into informal and substandard settlements on city outskirts or in overcrowded neighbourhoods. This results in precarious tenures, deteriorating living conditions and inflated prices, creating a complex housing crisis.[31]

In middle-income countries, the diversification of the economy is an innovative component of national urban policies, including through investment in new towns and sustainable smart cities. Elements comprise the construction of new cities with a "specialized" economic focus and policies to steer urban growth away from scarce agricultural lands as well as primary cities. Attempts to redirect urbanization have still not alleviated pressures in major cities (as in **Jordan**) or prevented further urban encroachment on agricultural land (as in **Egypt**).[32]

- In **Algeria,** five new towns are under construction and are included in the 2030 National Urban Planning Scheme. In the region of Algiers, the Sidi Abdallah Technopark is expected to accommodate an industrial park and firms specialized in advanced technologies.
- In **Egypt,** the national urban policy balances the preservation of scarce agricultural land with the need to broaden the country's economic base, including through job creation in new urban settlements. The construction of 22 "fourth generation cities" is intended to satisfy the growing need for housing and employment. In addition, the Green and Smart Cities initiative pursues a holistic approach to urban planning.[33] With urbanization expanding on desert land, however, total inhabited land is expected to increase.
- **Jordan** has developed measures for in-fill development, using vacant land to achieve more compact urban development.
- In **Morocco,** the "Politique de la Ville" aims to strengthen the role of cities as socioeconomic development poles and employment generators. Casablanca was the first African city to join the network of 25 smart cities selected by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers in the United States, enabling it to accelerate its digital transformation. The Casablanca Smart City Initiative includes the digitalization of services, video-assisted driving in trams, the monitoring of electricity consumption in new buildings and carpool sharing.

- **Tunisia** has promoted the creation of technopoles in secondary cities. The Smart Africa start-up investment fund contributed to the Smart Tunisia Initiative, which complements the Digital Tunisia 2020 strategy.

◆ **Public investments in multi-modal transport systems, including mass transportation, are notable in middle-income country capitals and major cities.** Nevertheless, some mass transportation projects can be interpreted as showcasing modern and forward-looking agglomerations and city centres, potentially neglecting the essential needs of residents. In that context, informal transportation networks, such as shared taxis, remain prevalent in cities in the Maghreb and Mashreq, especially to link slums and informal settlements with other part of urban areas. This is due to a lack of transport to meet demand in underprivileged neighbourhoods.[34]

- As part of the 2035 Urban Development Master Plan for Algiers **(Algeria),** considerable efforts aim at providing eco-friendly public transport solutions such as trams and metros, and park-and-ride facilities. The completion of subway and tramway infrastructure in the capital has been followed by ongoing projects in other large cities.



- Under the Greater Cairo Urban Transport Master Plan **(Egypt),** an integrated urban transport system includes a metro, suburban railways and expressways, complemented by a Bus Rapid Transit project and the Cairo Monorail with two automated lines.[35]
- The national urban policy in **Jordan** promotes urban connectedness and multi-modal transportation, including a Bus Rapid Transit system in Amman. The Long-Term National Transport Strategy and Action Plan 2014–2030 introduces zero-emission electric vehicles and 3,000 charging stations powered by renewable energy. The Transport and Mobility Master Plan for Amman is expected to increase the modal share of public transport trips to 40 per cent by 2025.
- **Lebanon** is revisiting the Master Plan of the Beirut Port towards a comprehensive vision of its interaction with the hinterland, considering the relative advantages of all Lebanese ports together and the need for an integrated strategy for the development of port cities.
- In **Morocco,** 10 years after its inauguration, the Rabat-Salé tramway complements bus and taxi networks, a modal shift that contributes indirectly to the protection of the environment. By 2024, Casablanca, where two tramway lines are already operating, will also benefit from an exclusive right-of-way public transport network, offering an environmentally friendly alternative to the private car.
- In **Tunisia,** the Five-Year Strategic Development Plan for Transport seeks to enhance public transportation and advance city centre decongestion in Tunis. More prominent projects include the Trans-Maghreb rail link to connect all regions of the country with the Algerian and Libyan borders. Ongoing major projects comprise a new airport by 2030, the Tunis-Carthage international airport expansion, Rapid Rail Tunis, an intercity rail system and five express railway lines.

The rehabilitation of staircases after the 2020 Beirut port explosion

In close coordination with the Municipality of Beirut **(Lebanon)**, UN-Habitat has partnered with Catalytic Action to rehabilitate and revive urban public stairs in the neighbourhoods of Gemmayzeh and Mar Mikhael in the city centre. Beyond support to pedestrian mobility, the stairs are historical landmarks used as lively spaces for social interaction. The project strives to preserve this heritage and enhance social activities by fixing damages, adding furniture and improving accessibility. The success of the project has been demonstrated by increased daily social and commercial activities on the stairs.

Source: Beirut's Public Stairs.

Decentralization reforms in the middle-income countries have led to a partial devolution of urban management responsibilities to the local level but decentralization remains incomplete. Without commensurate fiscal decentralization, local governments and authorities cannot raise their own resources, making them dependent on central transfers.

- In **Jordan,** the new Local Administration Law should expand the autonomy of local administrations and deepen citizen participation in decision-making.
- In **Lebanon,** unions of municipalities represent a platform for cooperation on common geographic or other aspects, such as solid waste management, environmental protection, water pollution, and education and health facilities. The unions have a legal power to elaborate their own development plans but do not have full autonomy in decision-making.
- **Morocco** has undertaken many decentralization reforms since its independence in 1956. The 2011 Constitution advanced a regionalization model supported by organic laws in 2015 that define the competencies of regional, provincial and municipal authorities. As a result, municipalities work with regional and national governments, businesses, civil society organizations and other public and private stakeholders to support the delivery of urban infrastructure and services.
- **Tunisia** created a fund for supporting solidarity among local communities, allocating more fiscal resources to municipalities and financing local development projects.

Joining over 150 cities worldwide in developing a Voluntary Local Review, and promoting the SDG-aligned model of smart, sustainable and inclusive city development, the Municipality of Agadir **(Morocco)** in 2023 carried out the first Voluntary Local Review in North Africa. This helped the local authority to monitor progress on the SDGs, improve policy coherence, and reinforce policy dialogue between national and local institutions. The municipality has showcased its determination to use modern, SDG-aligned, inclusive urban management tools such as gender-sensitive and citizen-centred budgeting. The review informed the Municipal Action Plan 2022–2027.

Source: Morocco, Municipality of Agadir, 2023 Voluntary Local Review.



3. Arab least developed countries and countries in conflict

Arab least developed countries and countries in conflict face huge challenges in providing social housing and basic services and rehabilitating and conserving heritage due to a combination of rapid urbanization, poverty, displacement and political instability. They lack adequate urban planning, infrastructure and resources to accommodate growing urban populations, leading to poor living conditions and slums. They struggle to combine urbanization and economic development priorities, suffer from a lack of technical capacities related to sustainable urban development, and have made unequal progress towards decentralization.

Plans are emerging for specific cities to provide adequate shelter and basic services. Some cities have shown resilience through forward-thinking reconstruction initiatives. Political instability often diverts resources from social housing initiatives and long-term planning, however. Financial constraints, such as high levels of public debt, limit government abilities to invest in housing. In countries with protracted conflicts, such as the **Syrian Arab Republic**, the toll of destruction is heavy. Most of the original population displaced from Syrian cities has returned and is living in damaged houses without any alternatives. Refugee communities in the cities of **Jordan** and **Lebanon** add pressure on municipalities and local governments. In **Lebanon,** which hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world and is in the midst of a major political and socioeconomic crisis, tensions between host communities and displaced persons simmer over access to economic and natural resources.

- The **Comoros** is preparing a cadastral plan in Moroni to ensure land tenure for citizens and better provide urban services. After destruction caused by Cyclone Kenneth in 2019, reconstruction efforts have taken place but effective national frameworks on affordable and climate-resilient housing are still missing.
- In **Iraq,** the National Housing Policy outlines a roadmap for expanding housing provision across the country. It emphasizes the creation of an enabling environment, including through partnership with the private sector.
- In **Mauritania,** as part of vast social housing programmes, plots of land are provided to households with official deeds of allocation that are not transferable to avoid resale, speculation and the return of beneficiary populations to other or new precarious areas.[36]
- In **Palestine,** as is common in middle-income countries in the Mashreq, a comprehensive protection plan seeks to safeguard sensitive agricultural lands and redirect spatial development away from them. The Spatial Development

Strategic Framework for Jerusalem Governorate is implementing an agreed housing programme for youth and low-income families until 2030.[37]

- In the **Sudan,** after unsuccessful attempts at slum eradication, Khartoum adopted a "sites and services" approach to slum upgrading, providing land plots with basic services for a low price, title deeds and deregulated building standards. The policy had negative effects, however, prompting migration, including of internally displaced persons, to the capital and contributing to extensive urban sprawl. The Government now promotes denser forms of housing and emphasizes the importance of connectedness through road infrastructure investments to create efficient links between urban and rural areas.[38]
- In the **Syrian Arab Republic,** multisectoral recovery plans have been developed for the cities of Homs, Aleppo, Dar'a and Deir-Ezzor, in addition to neighbourhood recovery plans in more than 90 locations. These link short-term humanitarian activities with resilience-based activities.[39]

◆ **Urban policies are affected by tensions and conflicts that create humanitarian emergencies and security issues.** Because of these emergencies, economic development is not yet sufficiently targeted in responses to urbanization challenges. For instance, war and humanitarian crisis in **Yemen** have prevented the elaboration of urban policies. Unrest in **Libya** stalled implementation of urban policies. The crisis in the **Syrian Arab Republic** halted some exemplary progress in developing an integrated approach to urban planning. The Urban Recovery Framework has become a key instrument in enhancing responses to urban crises; clarifying institutional arrangements, policies and plans; and guiding coordination mechanisms and financing instruments needed in urban recovery interventions.[40] Overall, however, linking urban resilience, humanitarian interventions and social inclusion has not yet taken off as a policy approach in conflict settings, either among national and local governments or donors.


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The rehabilitation of Al-Yarmouk Park in Mosul, Iraq

Al Yarmouk Park is one of the largest public spaces on the west bank of Mosul, a city known for its limited green space. Prior to two decades of neglect and war, the park was renowned for its palms and pine trees and large open grounds. Its rehabilitation as a multipurpose public space is a critical component of an area-based, integrated project aimed at restoring essential public services disrupted by war and conflict.

◆ **Efforts to develop disaster risk management strategies are still limited.** Climate change adaptation, disaster preparedness and post-conflict reconstruction call for major investments in infrastructure and demand the forward-looking reconceptualization of urban planning, but insufficient progress has been made so far. Some positive developments include those in Kaéd **(Mauritania),** where the City Resilience Action Planning Tool is implemented to assess and enhance resilience to natural disasters and climate change. In the **Comoros,** City Resilience Frameworks for Action have been prepared for four cities.

◆ **Conflict or post-conflict countries with a federal system can have much more decentralized administration,** as in **Iraq** and the **Sudan.** The federal structure of the Sudan has delegated the responsibility for urban policy to provincial governments. The withdrawal of the national government from urban policy, however, can undermine a comprehensive vision for urban development and limit coordination among territories and administrative levels.[41] The most decentralized policy in the Arab region is found in Area A in the West Bank of the **State of Palestine,** where elected local councils can raise their own revenues and are responsible for urban planning and provision of basic services.[42] The National Development Plan (2021–2023) prioritizes decentralization in the provision of public services but commitments to decentralization have not fully materialized due to many factors, including geopolitical complexities, weak political will and the economic crisis.[43]

D. Policies to leave no one behind

Table 11.2
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

	**Women and girls suffer from heightened mobility limitations due to instability, conflict and/or the lack of safe transport and public spaces,** impacting their access to employment and participation in public life. In addition, cultural and social norms, prevailing customary laws and barriers to accessing information inhibit women's exercise of property and land ownership rights. Despite the lack of gender-sensitive planning at the local level, **some progress is evident in mainstreaming gender considerations in urban policies.**	**Egypt** updated conditions to access social housing units to include female-headed households.[a] **Jordan** launched the National Framework for Gender-Sensitive Public Transport as well as the Gender Action Plan for Equitable Mobility. Legislation in **Palestine** recognizes women's unrestricted right to ownership and does not discriminate in land or property registration or housing construction, although the prevalent patriarchal culture prevents the adoption of legislation on women's inheritance.[b]
	**The poor and less well-off, including informal workers and migrant workers who reside mostly in urban areas, are squeezed out of housing markets** by prohibitive land and property prices. This forces them into informal settlements, as well as poorly designed migrant worker centres in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, with inadequate access to basic services.	**Egypt** plans to eradicate slums by 2030 through the Urban Development Fund and a participatory city-wide urban upgrading approach. Efforts are ongoing to support rental markets and address affordability gaps.
	**Rural migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons and people living in slums or inadequate dwellings face discrimination** and are more vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change. **Poorer people lack access to green public spaces,** which are typically concentrated in wealthier neighbourhoods.	Amman and Irbid (**Jordan**) launched the Urban Planning and Infrastructure in Migration Contexts Programme to improve access to reliable services and socioeconomic opportunities for migrants and displaced populations, in coordination with humanitarian interventions. This approach allowed in-depth analysis of challenges and opportunities to support municipalities and key stakeholders in mainstreaming migration challenges into spatial urban analytics and urban infrastructure investment planning.[c] Through its Green City Action Plan and Climate Action Plan, Amman intends to create new parks and gardens, including in underserved areas, and upgrade existing ones.
	**People with disabilities frequently confront greater risks of social and economic isolation** due to the lack of accommodation of their needs. Creating inclusive spaces for persons with disabilities would benefit other vulnerable groups, as well as **older people and children.**	The second section of the Algiers Metro line and all tramways in **Algeria** are accessible to persons with disabilities and comply with international accessibility standards. In addition, regulations provide persons with disabilities with free transport or reduced fares. **Jordan** places significant emphasis on fostering inclusion and diversity, ensuring the rights and participation of persons with disabilities in education and all aspects of society. This commitment is reflected in the disability law, which prohibits discrimination based on disability and includes the provision of reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities. Persons with physical disabilities and older persons, however, still encounter persistent difficulties in accessing public transport, impacting access to school, health care and employment.

[a] Lobet, Abdelkader and Eldidi, 2020.
[b] See the State of Palestine, Implementation of the New Urban Agenda: National Report for the State of Palestine.
[c] UN-Habitat, 2022a.

E. The financing landscape

As is the case for other SDGs, shrinking fiscal space hinders progress on SDG 11. A structural challenge relates to the fragmentation of financing for urban policies across different levels of government. National urban policies have primarily been the responsibility of line ministries owing to the tradition of strong central Governments. This results in limited cohesion and collaboration to maximize resources and efficiency in their use. In most Arab countries, the **budgets of local governments and authorities depend on transfers from national Governments,** and the management and financing of urban projects is often supervised by the central government, which is not as attuned to local needs, challenges and solutions.

Predominantly top-down, the region's urban planning system does not respond to the increasing needs of growing cities and towns.

To address the consequences of rapid urbanization, reforming urban planning instruments and procedures is imperative; it should go hand-in-hand with ongoing decentralization reforms.

People-centred approaches should be at the forefront of urban development and infrastructure provision, and more autonomy should be given to local governments and authorities because they are often best placed to respond to the needs of residents.

Compared to other regions in the world, Arab cities have lower rates of local revenue collection due to **centralized budgeting mechanisms at the national level, corruption, inefficient transaction and land records management, and poor accountability.** Local authorities have limited ability to collect property taxes, the primary source of locally generated revenue. This is due to inadequate data and human resources and to the dynamics of urbanization, including unregistered property transactions in informal settlements located on the urban fringe. Local revenue generation essentially remains low due to inefficient fiscal operations, a lack of clear divisions of power, insufficient enforcement powers within municipal jurisdiction, outdated legal frameworks and the generally low financial management capacity of local governments.[44] In some instances, where public utilities and other services are operated by parastatal organizations (such as state-owned enterprises or private companies supplying basic services through public-private partnerships), these revenues are not accessible to city governments. As a result, cities may be unable to meet demands for operating costs, such as employee salaries, building rents and equipment, and instead must rely on subsidized operations by using transfers meant for capital investments.

Diverse financial strategies and mechanisms, including public-private partnerships, green bonds, tax reforms, Islamic finance and international aid, provide opportunities for financing infrastructure projects and bringing cities closer to realizing sustainable development targets.[45] To improve the resilience of the local financial environment, an initial strategy could involve promoting decentralization in budgets and revenues, empowering cities to establish their own sources of revenue. Examples of income streams may include revenues from licenses, taxes, traffic fines and parking spaces, all of which contribute to self-sufficient, resilient local financing. The next phase would entail creating relevant frameworks to enable cities to tap into diverse source of finance. Examples could include public-private partnerships, land- and asset-based financing, and municipal bonds, all of which could mobilize private capital and help to bridge funding gaps. Lastly, efforts should be made to create additional funding channels that finance small and medium-sized enterprises, as they represent a significant source of job creation and economic diversification. Their financial support directly contributes to the resilience and stability of the local financial environment.

The potential participation of the private sector in financing SDG 11 at the local level in Arab countries largely remains unknown and unexplored. **Public-private partnerships are still typically large-scale megaprojects with billions of dollars in sovereign funding.** Some Gulf Cooperation Council countries have developed exemplary public-private partnerships. Examples also exist in **Egypt, Morocco** and **Tunisia** and may be transferable to other countries. Such partnerships tend, nevertheless, to be catalysed through national government policies and programmes, transfers of public lands for private development (such as for social housing projects) and the delegation of public services. Some public-private partnerships have been subsidized with public resources to make them profitable enough for the private sector.

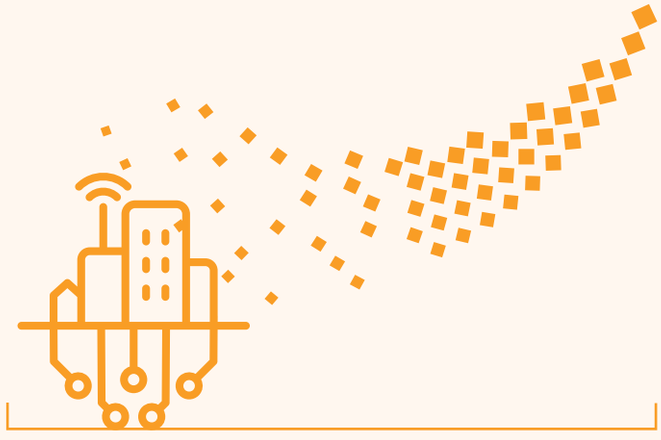
Islamic finance represents another potential vehicle for financing SDG 11. Green and social impact *sukuk* can be used to scale up socially responsible and environmentally focused investment in urban development projects.



F. Regional dimensions

Arab countries can seize several opportunities for regional collaboration on SDG 11.

- **Accelerate local data collection to measure progress on SDG 11 through the creation of urban observatories and monitoring systems on the environment and development.** These can aim at stimulating vertical integration and bottom-up transformations, supporting integrated and inclusive local governance frameworks, and reinforcing evidence-based policymaking processes. The global Urban Monitoring Framework endorsed by the United Nations Statistical Commission in March 2020 offers opportunities to standardize local monitoring systems, which can also benefit from synergies in activating cooperation mechanisms. In **Jordan,** the Amman Urban Observatory is an example of a knowledge management platform that maximizes local capabilities for data collection and analysis. Its role in the Voluntary Local Review of Amman was crucial in leading the process and facilitating data collection and analysis.
- **Strengthen the capacities of local authorities and facilitate exchanges of knowledge and good practices through regional networks of cities and local governments to advance sustainable urban development.** The involvement of Arab cities in regional networks has the potential to boost city-to-city cooperation and bring positive impacts in terms of urban skills and management. Regional and international networks of cities and local authorities serve as platforms for information sharing, exchanges of best practices and problem-solving on sustainable urban development and strategic urban planning. By engaging in them, cities can harness the knowledge and experiences of their regional counterparts and increase their capacity to address local challenges. Examples of such networks include the International Coalition of Cities of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities,[46] United Cities and Local Governments Middle East and Western Asia,[47] Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI),[48] the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy,[49] the Arab Towns Organization, MedCities,[50] Connective Cities,[51] the Strong Cities Network[52] and C40 Cities.[53]
- **Support promising "healthy cities" initiatives that are spreading in the region,** focusing on interlinkages among different SDGs and partnerships that contribute to achieving SDG 11. These initiatives encourage better urban planning to reduce road traffic injuries, improve air quality, promote physical activity and save lives from disasters. Currently, 109 cities from 15 Arab countries are part of the Eastern Mediterranean Healthy Cities Network.[54] The recently launched global Quality of Life in Cities initiative builds on the Quality of Life Program in **Saudi Arabia.**[55] This initiative intends to produce an index to measure common values, needs and objectives based on high-quality, and disaggregated urban data to fill significant information gaps that have limited the implementation of the SDGs at the local level.



Endnotes

1. UNDP, 2022a.
2. UN-Habitat, 2018.
3. National urban policy is understood as "a coherent set of decisions through a deliberate government-led process of coordinating and rallying various actors towards a common vision and goal that will promote more transformative, productive, inclusive and resilient urban development for the long term" (UN-Habitat and Cities Alliance, 2014).
4. UN-Habitat data for 2020, in UN-Habitat, 2023c.
5. Ibid.
6. World Bank, 2022.
7. According to the WHO, "a healthy city is one that continually creates and improves its physical and social environments and expands the community resources that enable people to mutually support each other in performing all the functions of life and developing to their maximum potential". See "What Is a Healthy City".
8. UN-Habitat, 2017.
9. Ibid.
10. The New Urban Agenda was adopted at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito, Ecuador, on 20 October 2016. It was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly on 23 December 2016 and represents a shared vision for a better and more sustainable future urbanization.
11. See the World Bank, 2020.
12. See the State of Palestine, Implementation of the New Urban Agenda: National Report for the State of Palestine.
13. UN-Habitat, 2023c.
14. See Bahrain, Voluntary National Review report 2023.
15. Prabhu, 2021.
16. See Saudi Arabia, Report on the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda.
17. The Gulf Cooperation Council countries are the most urbanized in the region with more than 80 per cent of their populations on average residing in urban areas. The country with the highest urban population share is Kuwait at 100 per cent (UN-Habitat, 2023c).
18. See more on the Dubai 2040 Master Urban Plan.
19. See more on the Sports Boulevard.
20. See Saudi Arabia, Report on the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda.
21. UN-Habitat, 2023c.
22. See Saudi Arabia, Report on the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda.
23. Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon; Iraq, the State of Palestine and the Syrian Arab Republic fall under the group of fragile or conflict-affected countries.
24. Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia; Libya and Mauritania fall under the groups of fragile or conflict-affected countries and the least developed countries, respectively.
25. In addition, based on the published 2020 National Housing Profile Strategy, a shift from area-specific development to a participatory city-wide urban upgrading approach was endorsed in Egypt (UN-Habitat, 2023c).
26. In Jordan, despite efforts to implement policies that encourage the construction of affordable homes for the poor, it is still easier to find expensive high-end homes than more affordable alternatives (UN-Habitat, 2023c).
27. United Nations Inter-Agency Coordination in Lebanon and others, 2020.
28. UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP, 2017.
29. See Morocco, La Migration Forcée au Maroc – Résultats de l'Enquête Nationale.
30. See Amman, Voluntary Local Review.
31. See Lebanon, 2021, National Report on the Progress of the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda.
32. UN-Habitat, 2017.
33. UNEP, 2023.
34. UN-Habitat, 2017.
35. See Egypt, Voluntary National Review Report 2021.
36. See Mauritania, Voluntary National Review Report 2019.
37. See the State of Palestine, 2020, Spatial Development Strategic Framework: Jerusalem Governorate.
38. UN-Habitat, 2017.
39. UN-Habitat, 2022c.
40. See UN-Habitat, Urban Recovery Framework publication series.
41. UN-Habitat, 2017.
42. Ibid.

43. See the State of Palestine, Implementation of the New Urban Agenda: National Report for the State of Palestine.
44. UN-Habitat data for 2020, in UN-Habitat, 2023c.
45. Ibid.
46. See more on the International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities.
47. See more on United Cities and Local Governments-Middle East and Western Asia.
48. See more on Local Governments for Sustainability.
49. See more on the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy.
50. See more on MedCities.
51. See more on Connective Cities.
52. See more on the Strong Cities Network.
53. See more on the C40 Cities.
54. Elfeky and others, 2019.
55. See more on the Quality of Life Programme.

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12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

SDG 12

Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

A. Introduction

SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) encapsulates sustainable development at all levels, from local to global, and in all its dimensions, linking the environment and natural resources with the social and economic components. Around the world, not a single country is fully engaged in the required fundamental shifts in consumption and production patterns. The current linear economic model of extract, make and dispose is rapidly depleting natural resources and progress in greening the economy remains negligible. **While the Arab region is still developing and has not yet reached the excessive levels of resource consumption seen in industrialized nations, its economies are heavily carbon intensive and operate at the expense of natural resources.**

The region's sustainable consumption and production challenges are further aggravated by accelerating rates of resource depletion, losses in biodiversity and ecosystem health, increasing water scarcity (SDG 6), rapidly rising energy use (SDG 7) and associated greenhouse gas emissions (SDG 13). The escalating generation of waste and very low levels of reuse and recycling hinder progress on the environmental SDGs, including SDG 12. Ensuring careful management of waste is important in making cities and human settlements sustainable (SDG 11) and preserving the integrity of marine and terrestrial ecosystems (SDGs 14 and 15). SDG 12 is interlinked with economic growth and industrial development (SDGs 8 and 9) as well as sustainable agrifood systems for a world free of hunger (SDG 2). The cross-cutting character of sustainable consumption and production explains why relevant programmes are often reported under more sector-specific SDGs.

Only a few Arab countries have a strategic vision with targets to transition to sustainable consumption and production and the green economy. Some countries have nevertheless moved forward with national action plans on sustainable consumption and production and green and circular economy policies. They are making efforts to improve waste management, reduce food loss and rationalize fossil fuel subsidies. Initiatives to reduce pollution, advance sustainable tourism and organic agriculture, and institute sustainable public procurement engage the private sector, civil society organizations and the public in the more efficient use of natural resources. Many good practices and demonstration projects need to be scaled up. Policy implementation is weak and insufficiently supported with financial resources.


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Sustainable consumption and production refers to using services and products that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as emissions of waste and pollutants. This process must occur over the life cycle of services and products to avoid jeopardizing the needs of future generations.

A green economy is defined as low-carbon, resource-efficient and socially inclusive. In a green economy, growth in employment and income are driven by public and private investment in economic activities, infrastructure and assets with reduced carbon emissions and pollution, and enhanced energy and resource efficiency. Growth operates in line with the prevention of the loss of biodiversity and the provision of ecosystem services.

The circular economy is a system where materials never become waste and nature is regenerated. In a circular economy, products and materials are kept in circulation through processes such as maintenance, reuse, refurbishment, remanufacture, recycling and composting. The circular economy tackles climate change and other global challenges, including biodiversity loss, waste proliferation and pollution, by decoupling economic activity from the consumption of finite resources.

Sources: UNEP, Sustainable Consumption and Production Policies and the Green Economy; Ellen Macarthur Foundation, What Is a Circular Economy?.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).



Economic growth still comes at the expense of natural resources: the Arab region's material footprint per capita increased from 11.7 to 12.4 tonnes between 2015 and 2019, compared to a global average of 12.4 tonnes.



Arab economies are highly dependent on the consumption of natural resources and extractive activities: the region's material footprint per unit of GDP increased from 1.88 kilograms per constant dollar in 2015 to 1.96 kilograms in 2019. It decreased from 1.22 to 1.14 kilograms globally over the same period.



Petroleum consumption per capita stagnated at 1.18 tonnes from 2015 to 2019 but is still approximately double the world average, which decreased from 0.58 to 0.56 tonnes in the same period.



Arab economies depend strongly on fossil fuels, as exemplified by domestic petroleum consumption per unit of GDP, which was at 1.188 kilograms per dollar in 2019 against 0.052 on average globally.



Food loss stood at 16.29 per cent in 2020, compared to 13.3 per cent globally. Household wasted food per capita in 2019 was 141 kilograms compared to 120 kilograms on average globally.



The region's fossil fuel subsidies represented more than 15 and 17 per cent of total fuel subsidies worldwide in 2019 and 2020, respectively, yet the Arab population is less than 6 per cent of the global total.



Fossil fuel subsidies (consumption and production) declined by more than half from 2015 to 2020, falling from $118 billion to $57 billion (nominal dollars). This was mostly due to substantial decreases in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

For an up-to-date view of SDG 12 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 12

- Sustainable consumption and production principles need to be integrated into national development plans across various economic sectors, including through the promotion of environmentally friendly and socially responsible product standards and labels.
- To become efficient, sustainable consumption and production policies need to be translated into proactive regulations, including command-and-control and market-based instruments to engage producers and consumers in sustainable consumption and production patterns.
- At the production level, regulations can include incentives, subsidies and tax breaks for using low-emissions technologies and improving energy efficiency. The environmental producer responsibility[1] approach and R&D in sustainable consumption and production technologies and innovations need to be promoted.
- At the consumption level, incentives and disincentives can engage the public and consumers in sustainable consumption and production and related behavioural changes. These can be combined with awareness, education and training programmes on sustainable practices.
- Investment in green technologies can improve resource efficiency, the use of renewable resources and the reuse of non-renewable ones to support the transition towards a low-carbon economy. This process can also cut production costs, enhance competitiveness and address environmental concerns.
- Sustainable public procurement can help public agencies prioritize environmentally and socially responsible products and services while encouraging businesses to adopt sustainable practices.
- Stronger governance structures and legislation can enforce integrated solid waste management, including efforts to separate, recycle, treat and decompose waste as well as to formalize recycling practices.



The concept of **leapfrogging** is relevant for the region. Arab countries that have not yet become entrenched in resource-intensive development paths can embrace efficient and advanced technologies offering an opportunity to excel by using innovative approaches and fewer natural resources.

A swift transition to a greener economic paradigm should prioritize safeguarding environmental assets and addressing the triple planetary crisis of pollution, climate change and biodiversity loss. Failure to act promptly may lead to irreversible environmental damage, posing significant threats to human health and livelihoods.

Source: UNEP, 2023e.



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B. The policy landscape for SDG 12

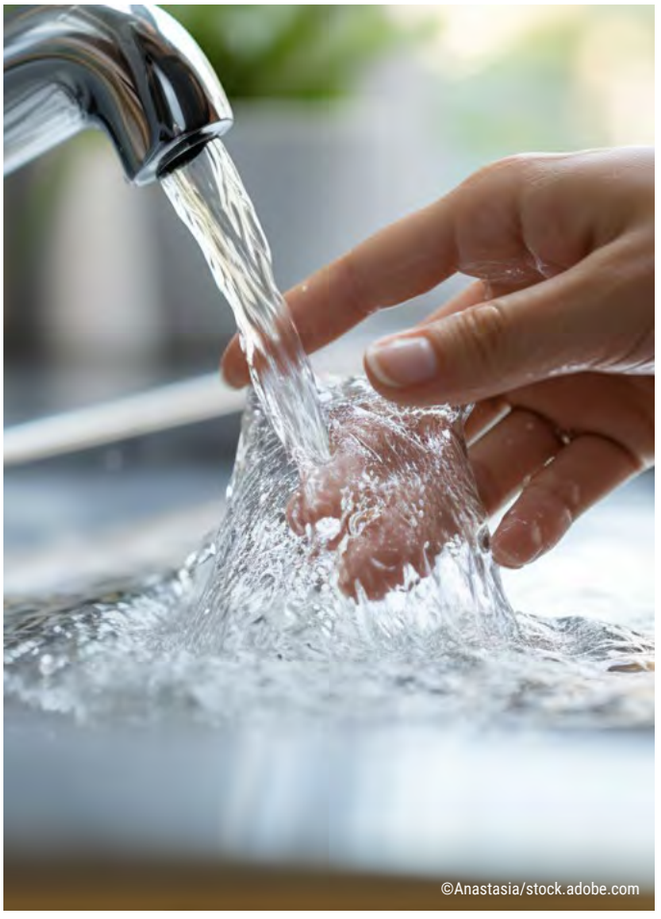
The challenges in advancing sustainable consumption and production in the Arab region are multifaceted. First, **sustainable consumption and production is often looked at from a sectoral perspective and tends to be restricted to waste management.** In addition, inadequate coordination among government actors, various economic sectors and different stakeholders is exacerbated by resistance from vested interests, compounding the difficulties of an already vast and complex domain. From a social perspective, changing deeply ingrained consumption patterns is problematic in a context of increasing population needs and evolving lifestyles with more but not necessarily more resource-efficient consumption. Poverty and inequality and a lack of public awareness further complicate the transition.

Although sustainable consumption and production and green economy paradigms go far beyond sectoral waste management approaches, the policy landscape related to SDG 12 in the Arab region mostly focuses on waste management and food loss and waste. There is some attention to sustainable procurement and tourism too. This restrictive approach is reflected in the policy areas covered by this chapter.

Many countries have launched policies on sustainable consumption and production and the green economy but these policies are more aspirational than actionable. Most countries fall short in fulfilling international and regional agreements and obligations linked to environmental protection, even where these frame the policy landscape. As the COVID-19 pandemic has been interpreted as humanity being on a collision course with nature, the post-COVID-19 era represents a unique opportunity to embrace green economic models as the new normal, strengthen environmental laws, and harmonize socioeconomic development with the preservation of natural resources for the well-being of communities.

1. Regional strategies and initiatives

Developed under the auspices of the League of Arab States, the Arab Regional Strategy for Sustainable Consumption and Production[2] was endorsed by the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment in November 2009. But in 2023, it was not yet monitored, evaluated or updated. The strategy promotes sustainable consumption and production through the rational use of resources to protect the environment and contribute to poverty eradication and a sustainable lifestyle.[3] Priority areas and policy objectives include energy efficiency, renewable energy technologies, sustainable and integrated water resources management, waste management, rural development, education, responsible lifestyles and sustainable tourism. National translation of the regional strategy is advancing at varying degrees. Several countries have adopted sustainable consumption and production action plans and have mainstreamed related targets and indicators into their national development strategies. Some countries have developed a holistic vision with targets; others have put sectoral policies in place. Some are still in the early planning phase in a selected sector, especially solid waste management.



◆ **Supporting the regional policy framework, several initiatives bring countries into dialogues with potential to drive policy change. Regional round tables have engaged stakeholders since 2008.**[4] Aligned with the Regional Action Plan on Sustainable Consumption and Production in the Mediterranean,[5] the SwitchMed Programme[6] supports **Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco,** the **State of Palestine** and **Tunisia** in shifting to sustainable consumption and production patterns, developing enabling national policy frameworks, and connecting eco-entrepreneurs and micro-, small and medium-sized Enterprises in an active regional network. **Morocco, Somalia,** the **Sudan** and **Tunisia** are involved in the African Circular Economy Network.[7]

◆ **Sectoral regional strategies include, inter alia, the Pan-Arab Sustainable Energy Strategy, which expanded the Pan-Arab Renewable Energy Strategy 2010–2030.** Adopted by the Arab Ministerial Council of Electricity under the auspices of the League of Arab States, these strategies cover renewable energy, energy efficiency, energy access and carbon dioxide emissions, and include specific targets and indicators. They promote sustainable energy and enhanced regional coordination and investment (see the chapter on SDG 7). The regional strategies touch on institutional and financial frameworks, grid infrastructure and a skilled workforce for accelerating the transition to renewable energy. They also call for increased private sector engagement in electricity markets.

The region has some of the greatest potential for solar power generation worldwide, in addition to high potential for wind energy and waste-to-energy. Renewable energy potential needs to be activated to decouple growth in living standards from fossil fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. This can also accelerate economic diversification and the transition to a low-carbon economy, while creating new and decent jobs.

2. Commitments related to multilateral environmental agreements

◆ **Most Arab countries are parties to international agreements on protecting human health and the environment from hazardous wastes and other chemicals.** The **Comoros** and **Egypt** are not parties to the Rotterdam Convention,[8] however, and **Egypt, Libya,**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Morocco, Somalia, the **Sudan**, **Tunisia** and **Yemen** are not parties to the Minamata Convention on Mercury. Although national legislative structures reflect the commitments of international agreements, in 2020, only 63.6 per cent, 61.6 per cent, 39.2 per cent and 48.1 per cent of Arab parties to the Basel,[9] Rotterdam, Stockholm[10] and Minamata conventions, respectively, met obligations in transmitting required information. All Arab countries are parties to and compliant with the Montreal Protocol.[11]

- There are important gaps in the enforcement of environmental agreements, such as in the poor control of illicit transboundary movements of hazardous wastes and their disposal, and a lack of monitoring, financing and technical capacities.
- Updates and amendments are required to strengthen environmental protection regulations in countries where laws addressing international commitments were established in some cases more than two decades ago.
- Coordination among relevant ministries (health, industry, agriculture, environment) and with other entities is required.

Source: UNEP, 2019.

3. Slow adoption of green technologies

Industries are still struggling to adopt green technologies. Pre-conditions, such as an enabling environment and adequate capacity-building for businesses, have not been met.[12]

- Most countries subsidize water, discouraging efficient use and leading to uncontrolled overextraction (see the chapter on SDG 6). Only 20 per cent of wastewater is reused in irrigation and industrial applications. Efficient irrigation practices, crop selection and taxes on pesticides and fertilizer use can encourage more efficient water use.
- Reducing waste generation and reuse and recycling should be at the core of any waste management policy. Suitable technologies encompass a spectrum of solutions, spanning sorting and recycling lines, composting methods, mechanical-biological treatment, refuse-derived fuel and biogas. Economic instruments such as waste generation charges, tipping fees and pollution taxes can serve as cost-recovery mechanisms, ensuring a return on investments in green technologies.
- The region's transport sector faces challenges such as an ageing vehicle fleet, inefficient fossil fuel use and increasing emissions. Countries must embrace green transport technologies, particularly in public transport. This shift can reduce the use of private cars, cut fuel costs, enhance mobility and alleviate road congestion (see the chapter on SDG 11). The Mecca monorail of **Saudi Arabia** exemplifies such efforts. Other initiatives include the transition of **Egypt** to gas-powered public transport and promotion of electric cars, and the development of rapid express bus infrastructure in **Jordan.**
- Paying more attention to social and environmental responsibilities in their marketing practices, tourist enterprises are increasingly engaging in eco-labelling schemes. In **Tunisia,** the Center for Environmental Technologies, a public agency of the Ministry of the Environment, expanded a voluntary certification scheme to improve the environmental performance of products and services offered by the tourism sector. In **Egypt,** ecotourism is a pillar of the 2019 national tourism strategy, and natural areas listed under international conventions are promoted as ecotourism sites. The Ministry of the Environment oversees policies to rebrand the country as an ecotourism destination. In that context, a ministerial decree (No. 760–2019) set new green criteria for ranking hotels, and the Green Star eco-label was revised to encourage hotels and resorts to commit to improving their environmental and social performance.

4. Waste management policies

Countries have policies related to waste management and legislation banning single-use plastic and/or plastic bags (table 12.1). Some have strategies and legislation on integrated solid waste management. Examples include the National Strategy for Integrated Waste Management by 2035 of **Algeria**, the Waste Management Law (2020) of **Egypt,**[13] The National Strategy and Action Plan for Municipal Solid Waste Management 2015–2034 and Waste Management Framework Law (2020) of **Jordan,**[14] the Law on Integrated Solid Waste Management of **Lebanon,** the National Strategy for Waste Reduction and Recovery (2019) and Waste Management and Disposal Law of **Morocco**, and the Integrated Strategy on Waste Reduction and Management of **Tunisia.** Waste disposal is gradually shifting from uncontrolled dumpsites and illegal landfills to sanitary dumps.

- Municipal solid waste generation has reached 2.7 kilograms per person per day in some parts of the region.
- Although 90 to 95 per cent of all municipal solid waste goes to landfills, open dumping accounts for more than 50 per cent of overall waste in the region.
- A very limited amount of collected and disposed waste is separated, recycled, adequately treated or composted. Collected household waste is often mixed with industrial and medical waste during handling and disposal.
- Improved solid waste landfilling would not solve the issue of increasing waste generation.

◆ **Several States have adopted recycling plans,** including the **Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon** and **Morocco**. Most recycling and incineration plants are in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. The region's largest recycling plant is in **Saudi Arabia**; the **United Arab Emirates** has an incineration plant.[15] **Qatar** adopted a comprehensive plan for solid waste management and recycling, resulting in a fully integrated solid waste management facility in *Mesaieed*. In 2020, the centre produced more than 30,000 tons of organic fertilizer and generated about 269,000 megawatts per hour of electric power and more than 33 million cubic metres of biogas. This was in addition to processing more than 30,000 tons of car tires and recycling about 420,000 tons of construction waste.[16] In general, however, across the region, inadequate governance, such as multiple levels of responsibilities, as well as a lack of legislation remain barriers to integrated solid waste management. Other challenges include inadequate planning and improper waste disposal, rapid population growth, limited collection services, inappropriate use of technology and insufficient financing.

Opportunity:

In 2022, the Fifth United Nations Environment Assembly adopted a resolution to prepare a global treaty to end plastic pollution.[a] A global treaty will be highly relevant for the Arab region, both from an economic perspective for oil-producing countries, since plastic comes from oil, and from an urban perspective when it comes to plastic waste generation, collection and treatment. Coastal cities in particular struggle with deficits in waste management and the proliferation of marine debris.

[a] United Nations Environment Assembly, 2022.

Reducing marine litter in Jordan

Following the One Dead Sea Is Enough initiative launched by the Ministry of the Environment during the World Science Forum in the Dead Sea in 2017, Jordan made waste management and the reduction of marine litter one of its national environmental priorities. For instance, the Plastic Shopping Bags Bylaw regulates the importation, production and distribution of single-use plastic bags. The campaign aims to reduce bag use and replace single-use bags with biodegradable alternatives.

Source: UNEP, 2023c.


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Table 12.1
Countries with legislation banning plastic bags

Country	Comment
Algeria	No data.
Bahrain	2019: Importation of non-biodegradable single-use plastic bags is prohibited. 2021: Manufacturing, importing and trading plastic water bottles and cups below 200 millilitres are prohibited but water bottles and cups below 200 millilitres that are manufactured for export are exempt from the order. 2022: Importing, manufacturing and distributing single-use plastic bags with a thickness of less than 35 microns are prohibited but bags used for medical purposes and those manufactured for export are exempt from the order.
Comoros	2018: Production, importation, marketing and distribution of non-biodegradable plastic packaging and bags are prohibited.
Djibouti	2016: Importation and marketing of non-biodegradable plastic bags that are not produced in Djibouti are prohibited.
Egypt	2019: Red Sea Governorate prohibited the single use of plastic bags and plastic cutlery used in restaurants, coffee shops, supermarkets, groceries, butchers, fisheries and pharmacies, and during safari and boat trips. In South Sinai, the city of Dahab announced a ban on the use of plastic bags in July 2021.
Iraq	Iraq lacks specific legislation to address plastic pollution.
Jordan	2017: Regulations limit the use of plastic bags by imposing fees on their distribution. They prohibit the use and production of black plastic bags, excluding those for waste collection, and oblige manufacturers to indicate with a symbol that bags are biodegradable and have obtained the approval of relevant national institutions. Plastic bags continue to be used widely, however.
Kuwait	2019: Regulations prohibit certain single-use plastic items such as bottles, hot drink cups and food containers on Kuwaiti and foreign ships while in port in Kuwait or in Kuwaiti waters.
Lebanon	2018: The Municipality of Jbeil banned single-use plastic bags.
Libya	No data.
Mauritania	2013: Plastic bags ban.
Morocco	2015: Plastic bags ban. In 2019, the law was amended to define the legal framework for inspections and seizures. There is a ban on manufacturing, importing, exporting, marketing and using plastic bags through Law 77–15.
Oman	2021: Use of single-use plastic shopping bags is prohibited. 2023: Importation of single-use plastic bags is prohibited.
State of Palestine	The State of Palestine lacks specific legislation dedicated to addressing plastic pollution.
Qatar	2022: Regulations prohibit companies, institutions and shopping centres from using single-use plastic bags unless they are biodegradable, reusable or recyclable.
Saudi Arabia	A three-staged phase-out of single-use plastics from 2017 to 2019.
Somalia	2005: Local ban.
Sudan	2017: Local ban (Khartoum State).
Syrian Arab Republic	The Syrian Arab Republic lacks specific legislation to address plastic pollution.
Tunisia	2017: Production, possession and use of single-use bags, bags containing a high concentration of heavy metals and plastic bags of unknown origin are prohibited. This decree was implemented from 1 March 2020 for commercial spaces and pharmacies and from 1 January 2021 for producers and suppliers of plastic bags.
United Arab Emirates	2022: Importation, manufacture and circulation of single-use plastic bags, irrespective of their material (including biodegradable bags), are prohibited. Specific legislation exists in each Emirate with several exemptions.
Yemen	2021: Use, manufacture and importation of non-biodegradable plastic bags for commercial and household packaging are prohibited.

Source: Compiled based on UNEP, 2018, among other sources

Note: Blue indicates national legislation, beige a local ban, orange a lack of legislation and white no data.

5. Policies to reduce food loss and waste

◆ **Although non-targeted subsidies for food items indirectly encourage food loss and waste, some countries have developed legislation, policies, national guidelines and action plans to address food loss and waste.** The National Food Security Strategy 2021–2030 of **Jordan** sets a subobjective to reduce food loss and waste and enhance food safety. The *Génération Green 2020–2030* of **Morocco** builds on achievements in primary production under the *Plan Maroc Vert* by emphasizing downstream agrifood system activities and modern and efficient distribution chains. The National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (2019–2030) of the **State of Palestine** connects food loss and waste with food and nutrition security through sustainable food production systems and resilient agricultural practices. The National Food Security Strategy 2051 of the **United Arab Emirates** makes cutting food loss and waste one of five strategic pillars and targets a 50 per cent reduction by 2030.

Most countries lack sufficient information to develop action-oriented strategies and policies to prevent food loss and waste. The region produces high amounts but information about drivers of food waste is scarce. Significant gaps exist in institutional set-ups and coordination, with food-related issues spread across various ministries (e.g., agriculture, commerce, industry and health). This suggests the need for a common vision and commitment to effective policies addressing food loss and waste.



The reduction of food loss and waste is becoming a more prominent issue in updated nationally determined contributions to cut emissions and adapt to climate impacts. The 2021 submission of **Tunisia**[17] called for a national food waste programme. The first submission of the **State of Palestine**[18] highlighted the vulnerabilities of the agrifood sector in its adaptation plan and addressed improved cold storage, grain storage and livestock value chains. The updated submissions of **Jordan** and **Lebanon** refer to food loss and waste and the improved efficiency of agrifood value chains.

Among the 11 States with national pathways for food systems transformation, 8 have specific actions and measures to address food loss and waste.[19] The General Food Security Authority in **Saudi Arabia** has set a food loss and waste baseline. **Qatar** developed a household food waste baseline in compliance with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Food Waste Index.[20] **Jordan** is advancing efforts to implement a national food systems pathway, selecting food loss and waste reduction as a key entry point to transform agrifood systems.[21]



A variety of initiatives related to food loss and waste could be scaled up and reflected in policies to create structural changes, with adequate implementation and financing. For instance:

- In the **United Arab Emirates,** the Dubai Municipality's Food Safety Department has taken actions to reduce food spoilage and waste through recycling and food transfers to the national food bank.
- Food Bank of **Bahrain** collects surplus food from hotels, restaurants, markets and various events, redistributing it to families, expatriate workers and individuals in need.
- In **Lebanon,** the Food Waste Law regulates donations of leftovers and surplus to charities.
- In **Egypt,** a new draft law on regulating food waste and encouraging its redistribution, recycling and donation has been referred to relevant parliamentary committees.
- In **Tunisia,** the *Institut National de la Consommation* has led awareness campaigns about food loss and waste, producing educational materials and a teaching guide for secondary students.
- In **Saudi Arabia,** the National Transformation Programme signed an agreement with the Saudi Grains Organization and the Savola World Foundation to minimize food waste.[22] The Saudi Grains Organization has provided training to businesses on best practices to reduce food waste. In cooperation with a food donation society and a recycling company, Eastern Province launched an initiative to use food waste for conversion into organic fertilizers.
- In the **United Arab Emirates,** the I'M PERFECT campaign encourages the use of imperfectly shaped fruits and vegetables to reduce food waste and support local food production. The Food Waste Pledge mobilizes commercial kitchens in the hospitality sector to cut food waste. *Ne'ma,* the National Food Loss and Waste Initiative,[23] brokers collaboration among governmental entities, the private sector, NGOs and communities to combat food loss and waste throughout the entire value chain. It involves farms, producers, distributors, retailers, restaurants and households, and fosters new national social norms that promote responsible consumption and contribute to reducing food loss and waste.

6. Lack of e-waste management

No country has specific e-waste legislation. In countries without comprehensive waste laws, such as **Mauritania**, all e-waste and other hazardous waste is treated alongside municipal waste, posing threats to the environment and human health. Without relevant legislation, **producers and importers play minimal roles in e-waste collection.** A policy approach based on extending a producer's responsibility for a product to the post-consumer stage can support financing to establish and improve e-waste management. As of 2021, however, the **United Arab Emirates** is the only country in the region that applies the principle of extended producer responsibility to e-waste and battery waste. **Jordan** and **Lebanon** are establishing similar approaches.

Generation of e-waste in the region increased by 61 per cent from 1.8 megatons (4.9 kilogram per inhabitant) in 2010 to 2.8 megatons (6.6 kilogram per inhabitant) in 2019.

In 2019, only 0.1 per cent of e-waste was collected. No e-waste was recycled.

The largest e-waste generator is Saudi Arabia at 595 kilotons (or 13.2 kilogram per inhabitant) in 2019. The lowest is the Comoros at 0.6 kilotons (or 0.7 kilogram per inhabitant). This reflects vast diversity in the region.

Source: Iattoni and others, 2021.

Data on e-waste and its management are limited, with information available only for **Jordan, Qatar,** the **State of Palestine** and the **United Arab Emirates. Egypt** has licensed treatment facilities but lacks official data on e-waste collected and managed. Some countries have more limited e-waste initiatives, involving various formal and informal actors. The **Regional E-waste Monitor for the Arab States 2021 is the first regional effort to develop e-waste statistics, legislation and e-waste management infrastructure.**[24] Its purpose is to enhance understanding and interpretation of regional e-waste data towards facilitating environmentally sound management.

C. Policy trends by subregion

1. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

Facing challenges related to hydrocarbon reliance, policy coordination and changes in behaviour linked to sustainable lifestyles, Gulf Cooperation Council countries have among the highest carbon footprints and carbon emissions per capita worldwide. They have nevertheless streamlined environmental policies in line with international agreements and adopted policies to transition towards green and circular economies. They have also launched initiatives to reduce waste generation, expand recycling facilities and encourage sustainable waste disposal practices.

◆ **Green and circular economy policies are proceeding through legislative changes and national programmes.** For instance, **Qatar** published a Circular Economy Policy Paper[25] paving the way to a national strategy. The circular economy and waste management is one of four pillars of the national environment and climate change strategy of Qatar. **Saudi Arabia** launched its Circular Carbon Economy National Programme to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through energy efficiency, storage and capture of carbon dioxide, and other energy-focused measures. The **United Arab Emirates** established a Circular Economy Council to oversee the Circular Economy Policy 2021–2031, which includes coordinating national and local actions, developing sectoral plans and projects, and encouraging the participation of the private sector and cooperation between public and private entities. The policy focuses on the manufacturing, infrastructure, transport and food sectors. The United Arab Emirates is exemplary in updating its legislation in line with international commitments on the environment at both the federal level and within each Emirate.


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In the **United Arab Emirates,** Dubai has achieved has achieved notable progress in green procurement, mandating government entities to reduce transport fuel, electricity and water consumption. Key milestones include issuing Green Public Procurement Guidelines in 2015, appointing Green Procurement Officers, and defining baselines and targets. A pilot regulation on indoor lighting is in place for public administrations. Regulations on electric motors, vehicles, information technology, air conditioning, irrigation equipment, indoor water fixtures and solar panels are underway. Purchasing criteria include prioritizing LED technology and prohibiting mercury vapor, incandescent lights and halogen lamps, where technically feasible.

◆ **Gulf Cooperation Council countries are improving waste management practices[26] and increasing recycling rates.** The National Centre for Waste Management of **Saudi Arabia** has set a target to divert 82 per cent of its waste from landfills by 2030, mainly through recycling, composting, energy production and incineration. In addition to a new waste management law, a governance framework has been established, linking national institutions and private companies through public-private partnerships.[27] **Bahrain** reviewed its National Waste Management Strategy, emphasizing reduction and recycling initiatives. It has issued legislation to regulate plastic waste, a ministerial order on the management of hazardous medical waste, and special legislation on managing e-waste in a sound, safe and sustainable manner.

2. Arab middle-income countries

Arab middle-income countries show varying degrees of progress and challenges. Most have developed national action plans on sustainable consumption and production as well as laws and regulations related to waste management, energy efficiency and environmental protection. They have made efforts to reduce pollution and improve waste management, despite inadequate infrastructure and limited capacities and financing.

Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and **Tunisia have adopted sustainable consumption and production national action plans.** The European Union-funded SwitchMed programme has supported them, as well as the **State of Palestine,** in developing these national frameworks and promoting good practices by the private sector, mainly micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and eco-entrepreneurs. The programme has backed the sharing of experiences towards creating a community of practice on sustainable consumption and production.

- **The national action plan of Algeria on sustainable consumption and production is one of seven cross-cutting strategic axes of the National Strategy on the Environment and Sustainable Development.** The plan focuses on concrete, innovative actions based on technological advances and better scientific knowledge, emphasizing the energy transition through the promotion of energy efficiency and a zero-waste economy by 2030.
- **In Egypt, the national action plan on sustainable consumption and production is aligned with the national strategy for sustainable development, Vision 2030.** The plan promotes the efficient allocation and use of water and energy as well as sustainable agriculture and waste management, with a focus on waste reduction, recovery, reuse and recycling.[28] The plan stresses the regulatory framework and behavioural changes, emphasizing awareness-raising, capacity-building, multistakeholder collaboration and partnerships, and includes provisions for monitoring and evaluation. Implementation is ongoing through flagship projects, for instance, on reducing plastic bag consumption and mainstreaming sustainable public procurement.
- **Jordan developed the National Strategy and Action Plan 2016–2025 on sustainable consumption and production for the food production, transport and waste management sectors.** The Green Growth National Action Plan 2021–2025 mainstreams climate and green investments into six key sectors (agriculture, energy, tourism, transport, water and waste) and defines 86 priority policy actions and projects.

The Ministry of the Environment of **Jordan,** the EDAMA Association for Energy, Water and Environment, the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority and UNEP worked with hotels and restaurants in the seaside city of Aqaba to apply circular economy approaches. A detailed action plan was developed to modify solid waste collection fees so that producing less solid waste results in lower fees. Currently, hotels pay a fixed tax for waste collection based on their built-up area and not on the way they manage their waste. Local women's associations have participated in technical trainings about upcycling hotel material among new approaches to solid waste management that could cut the amount transferred to landfills.

Source: SwitchMed in Jordan.

- **In Lebanon, based on a multistakeholder consultation and a policy scoping study, the national action plan on sustainable consumption and production identified three operational objectives:** first, adopt the best available techniques to promote sustainable consumption and production in the industrial sector; second, introduce sustainable consumption and production approaches related to the industrial sector in policy and institutional frameworks; and third, conduct education and awareness-raising among consumers. The plan builds on a national strategy, Lebanon Industry 2025: The Integrated Vision of the Industrial Sector in Lebanon,[29] which promotes green industries and commits to promoting environmental management and sustainable consumption and production principles.
- **Morocco developed a national framework to promote sustainable consumption and production, a 10-year action plan for eco-construction and sustainable buildings, and a 10-year action plan for agriculture and agrifood.**[30] The last is complemented by Law No. 39.12 on the organic production of agricultural and aquatic products. It governs the creation of labels and the accreditation of certification and control bodies. Further, the Generation Green 2020-2030 agricultural strategy aims to extend organic production to 100,000 hectares of cultivated land by 2030.


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- **Tunisia developed two 2016–2025 national action plans on sustainable consumption and production for the tourism and agrifood sectors.** The latter complements the National Strategy for Organic Agriculture. The National Strategy for Sustainable Development has identified sustainable consumption and production and the sustainable management of natural resources as major challenges. The National Strategy on the Green Economy addresses sustainable agriculture, integrated waste management, promotion of sustainable tourism, energy efficiency and renewable energies.

◆ **Sustainable public procurement has progressed in several middle-income countries,**[31] including through partnerships with international counterparts to establish and adhere to standardized norms and guidelines. This has potential to stimulate market development through innovative processes (reuse and recycling, use of renewable resources, energy-saving measures, improved energy efficiency), the production of goods and services that meet environmental considerations, and new business models.

- **Sustainable public procurement** can play a crucial role in advancing sustainable development by guaranteeing that suppliers, contractors, and the goods and services purchased by public entities generate economic, social and environmental benefits.
- **Green procurement** refers to the purchase of products and services with reduced environmental and human health impacts.

- **In Egypt, several activities to promote sustainable public procurement include an assessment study, a national sustainable public procurement manual, and national sustainable public procurement round tables and trainings.** New measures include converting to natural gas for government vehicle procurement and the introduction of LED lamps in government buildings.[32]
- **In Morocco, a national Sustainable Procurement Strategy supports the establishment of an appropriate institutional framework (including verification mechanisms such as eco-labels) and a strengthened legal framework.** As part of the National Strategy on Sustainable Development, the Exemplary Pact of the Administration (*Pacte de l'Exemplarité de l'Administration*) has encouraged government institutions to lead by example through commitments on key objectives, such as being a responsible employer, mainstreaming environmental approaches in the management of public buildings, adopting sustainable waste management practices, and promoting sustainable public procurement and sustainable mobility.
- **In Tunisia, where a Public Procurement Agency was created, the National Sustainable Public Procurement Plan includes technical specifications for labelling, evaluation and implementation criteria, and product and service life cycles.** The Ministry of the Environment has prepared an annual plan outlining activities to promote sustainable public procurement, and provides general oversight of the programme.[33]

◆ **Several Maghreb countries have adopted policies to improve waste management.** The National Strategy for Integrated Waste Management by 2035 of **Algeria** targets the reduction of waste at source; "zero waste in nature by 2035" is one of the main expected outcomes.
In **Morocco**, the national waste recovery programme focuses on plastic waste, batteries, oils, tires, paper, construction waste and electronic equipment to prevent and reduce waste production and maximize reuse, recycling and environmentally friendly substitute materials.
Tunisia developed the Strategy for Integrated Management of Domestic and Assimilated Waste 2020–2035.

3. Arab least developed countries and countries in conflict

The Arab least developed countries and countries in conflict continue to be at a particular disadvantage in adopting and implementing sustainable consumption and production policies due to limited financial capacities, weak governance and fragile contexts. They need substantial technical support and financial assistance through regional and international cooperation to move towards clean, modern technologies and practices.

◆ **Some countries have made notable but fragmented efforts to address significant environmental challenges, such as land, water and air pollution, that disproportionately affect poor communities.**

There is very little information available on sustainable consumption and production policies for these groups of countries. Examples include:

- In **Palestine,** under the national action plan on sustainable consumption and production, the Government has implemented pilot initiatives to promote sustainable agriculture and ecotourism, aiming to influence the behaviour of businesses and consumers.

The **State of Palestine** introduced the "polluter pays" principle into environmental law, including penalties to rectify any damage caused by companies. "Green loans" support farmers and households in using sustainable technologies such as rainwater harvesting and solar energy, the expansion of recycling initiatives and gas collection from landfills. A green export policy framework provides a roadmap for three priority exports: sustainably grown agricultural products, with a focus on organic products; sustainable tourism services; and sustainably produced marble and stone.

- Vision 2035 of **Djibouti** and the nationally determined contributions of the **Comoros** and **Mauritania** integrate circular practices in the agricultural sector, such as agroforestry.
- In **Djibouti,** the strategic plan for the development and promotion of tourism was launched in 2019 through a law to integrate sites on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List into the international market.
- **Iraq, Somalia** and the **Sudan** are raising public awareness about circular processes and solutions.
- **Mauritania** reduced fossil fuel subsidies by 53 per cent from 1.86 per cent of GDP in 2012 to 0.92 per cent in 2018. A subsidy for butane gas, used for household cooking, has been maintained for social reasons but its level was halved from 2015 to 2018.
- **Libya** has developed plans to expand wastewater reuse and improve energy efficiency.
- The nationally determined contribution of the **Syrian Arab Republic** refers to the circular economy, including solutions in the waste, agriculture, transport and energy sectors.
- The waste-to-energy plant in the Lahij Governorate of **Yemen** is expected to reduce waste going to the landfill by 70 per cent and generate affordable electricity at 16 cents per kilowatt hour, compared to 160 cents per kilowatt hour for fossil fuel.[34]

D. Policies to leave no one behind

Poor communities in informal settlements across the region continue to bear the brunt of pollution from waste and landfill sites, and in water and air. Since conventional, modern, technological solutions to solve such problems are typically centralized, capital-intensive and top-down, they often do not consider the needs of informal workers and inhabitants of informal settlements. Examples of current efforts to leave no one behind include the fertilizer station of Mafraq in **Jordan**. It enhances the management and treatment of solid waste, generates income for refugees and their host communities, and improves conditions for treating organic animal waste from livestock farms. In **Morocco**, the third phase of the national plan on domestic waste stresses the creation of sorting and recycling centres and waste recovery, ensuring additional financing and the integration of scavengers.

Many informal workers in waste collection and recycling continue to be **women and children**, who are further exposed to several health risks.

Despite successful initiatives to include waste scavengers, most recycling is carried out by the informal sector with no proper regulations. Morocco is an exception. Through the National Household Waste Collection Programme, 90 per cent of workers in the waste sector are now professional; 62 per cent of household waste goes to controlled landfill or waste recovery centres, up from 10 per cent in 2008. A special focus of national integrated waste management has been bringing informal waste pickers into the formal system through cooperatives or contractual obligations. In the future, additional measures may include establishing systems for sorting at the source, awareness-raising and behavioural changes aimed at recycling by households and individuals, and various value chains built under the environmental producer responsibility approach.[35]

Efforts to address the social and health impacts of environmental damage have to be linked to broader efforts to reduce poverty and inequalities (SDGs 1, 8, 10 and 11). They cannot be seen primarily within the framework of SDG 12. The region has yet to roll out holistic policies that embed a focus on the social and economic impacts of environmental degradation.

E. The financing landscape: a focus on the rationalization of fossil fuel subsidies

Harnessing and reorienting environmentally harmful subsidies, including fossil fuel subsidies, could help propel achievement of the SDGs. The funds reallocated from subsidies could be used to address poverty and inequality, service the national debt, reduce inefficiencies along supply chains, invest in regenerative and climate-smart agriculture, support the development of renewable energy, reduce waste and promote recycling, and support ecosystem restoration while cutting carbon emissions, among other possibilities.

Phasing out environmentally harmful subsidies would also have indirect impacts, such as halting the exploitation of non-renewable aquifers, expanding the use of more efficient production methods and diminishing overconsumption, especially if remaining subsidies are linked to adopting non-degrading practices, including land restoration.

Fuel subsidies harm the environment and tend to benefit the well-off more than those in need, thereby creating special interest groups and individuals who consider them an entitlement. Such subsidies reinforce privileged positions, rendering reforms difficult and broadly unpopular. Yet non-targeted subsidies waste public money and perpetuate unsustainable consumption and production.

Resources “saved” from the rationalization of fossil fuel subsidies cannot achieve desired effects without measures addressing inefficiencies, corruption and mismanagement. In addition, universal and rights-based social protection policies must ensure that the poor and those just above the poverty line are not disproportionately harmed by rationalization.



Successfully reforming fuel subsidies requires three steps. The first is to phase out consumption subsidies that do not benefit the poorest (bottom half of the population) and small producers (e.g., small farmers). A second step is to target and reach the poorest to ensure that price hikes do not negatively affect them. This could include facilitating access to energy services and providing other compensatory mechanisms. A third prong is to reinvest savings into renewable energy and enhanced efficiency.[36]



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Table 12.2
Fossil-fuel subsidies (consumption and production) in the region, 2022

	Per capita (nominal dollars)	Billions of nominal dollars	Percentage of total GDP
Kuwait	4,939	21.08	18.4
United Arab Emirates	3,923	37.03	8.6
Qatar	3,762	10.14	5.9
Bahrain	2,796	4.12	11.5
Saudi Arabia	2,113	76.94	10.0
Libya	1,784	12.15	27.1
Algeria	1,110	49.84	27.8
Egypt	597	66.21	14.4
Iraq	492	21.87	11.3
Lebanon	419	2.30	7.4
Tunisia	285	3.52	7.0
Mauritania	78	0.37	4.7
Sudan	78	3.66	4.2
Oman	53	0.24	0.3
Djibouti	47	0.05	1.6
Jordan	43	0.49	1.1
Morocco	38	1.42	1.0
Comoros	14	0.01	1.0
Yemen	0.71	0.02	0.1
Arab region	**741.80**	**311.5**	**10.9**
World	**192**	**1,529.41**	**1.7**

- **The region spent about $311.5 billion on fossil fuel subsidies in 2022, amounting to 10.9 per cent of GDP. This represents more than 20 per cent of the global total for 5.8 per cent of the global population.**
- Seven countries spend more than 10 per cent of GDP on fossil fuel subsidies, compared to a global average of 1.7 per cent.
- Worldwide, by comparison, net official development assistance amounted to about $253.3 billion in 2022.[a]

Source: See the United Nations SDG Indicators Database

Note: All information in this table derives from the United Nations SDG Indicators Database and may differ slightly from data used elsewhere in the report. Data are not available for the State of Palestine, Somalia and the Syrian Arab Republic.

[a] Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions [DAC2a]. See OECD Stat DAC2a.

In Morocco, the fossil fuel subsidies reform plan sought to ensure energy security, enhance the national budget, and comply with international commitments to reduce fossil fuel use and emissions. In 2012, before the reform, fuel subsidies accounted for 5 per cent of national GDP, with the country spending upwards of $6.5 billion a year. By 2016, Morocco had reduced this amount to $1.1 billion, slightly less than 1 per cent of GDP. Part of the savings was reinvested in the development of renewable energy. By 2019, Morocco had 2,696 megawatts of renewable electricity, 34 per cent of its total installed capacity. The sector created 26,000 jobs by 2020, a figure expected to reach half a million by 2040.[a]

[a] World Resources Institute, 2021.



F. Regional dimension: the Middle East Green Initiative

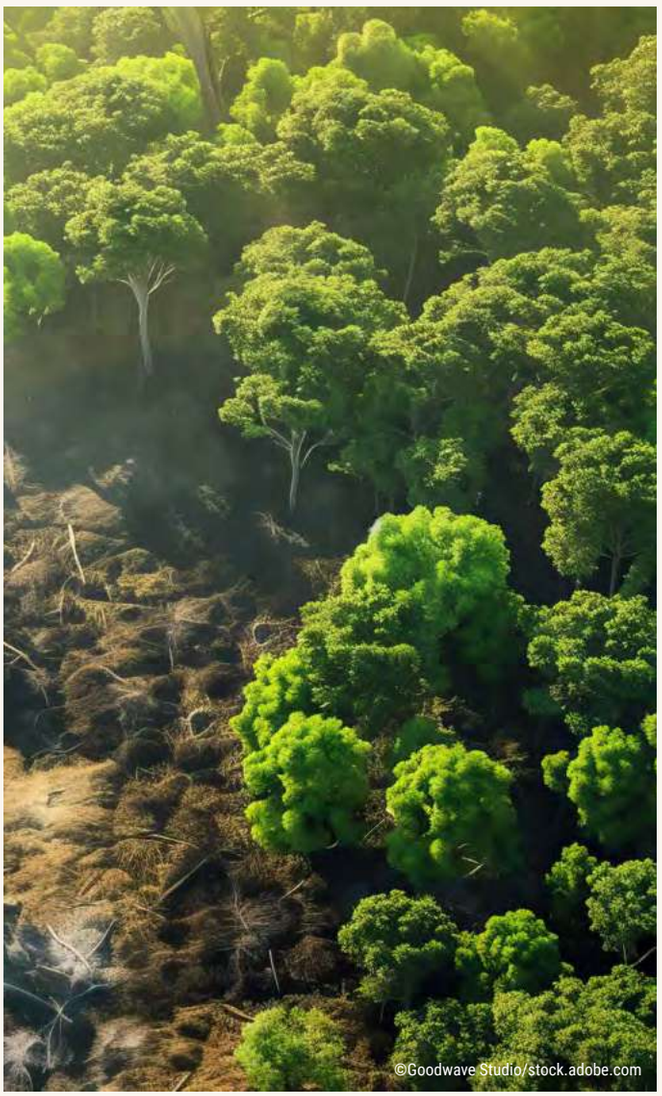
Launched by **Saudi Arabia** in 2021 as a first-of-its-kind regional alliance, the Middle East Green Initiative mobilizes regional and international partners to achieve a significant global reduction in carbon emissions and deliver an ambitious reforestation programme.

Its first objective is to cut carbon emissions through several efforts, including a 60 per cent cut in emissions from hydrocarbon production. A second objective is to plant 50 billion trees across the region, including 10 billion in Saudi Arabia, equivalent to 5 per cent of the global afforestation target. This will restore land and counter desertification.

The Green Initiative Foundation was established as a non-profit organization to support the objectives of the Middle East Green Initiative and its national counterpart, the Saudi Green Initiative. In November 2022, Saudi Arabia announced the creation of a secretariat and the allocation of $2.5 billion to support projects and administration. To date, 28 countries have endorsed the Middle East Green Initiative, including 15 Arab countries.[a] Its first summit was held in Riyadh in October 2021. A 2022 summit took place back-to-back with global climate talks in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt.

Sources: The Middle East Green Initiative and the 2022 summit.

[a] **Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Kuwait, Libya, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia**, the **State of Palestine, Tunisia,** the **United Arab Emirates** and **Yemen.**



Endnotes

1. The environmental producer responsibility approach holds producers responsible for the end-of-life consequences of the goods they produce. It enables proper collection and disposal of items after use and assures responsible manufacturing methods, encouraging waste reduction. The approach adds all estimated environmental costs associated with a product throughout its life cycle to its market price. See: https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/earth-and-planetary-sciences/extended-producer-responsibility.
2. One Planet Network, 2009.
3. ESCWA, 2017b.
4. See the SwitchMed and Arab Sustainable Consumption and Production Round Table.
5. The Regional Action Plan on Sustainable Consumption and Production in the Mediterranean is an integral part of the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development, which is a strategic framework to support the translation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs at the regional, Mediterranean level.
6. See more on the SwitchMed initiative.
7. See the African Circular Economy Network.
8. The Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade.
9. The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal.
10. The Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants.
11. The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer.
12. ESCWA, 2019.
13. The Egyptian integrated waste management law covers extended responsibility for producers, energy production from waste, plastic bag distribution and use, and the safe collection, transfer, treatment and disposal of waste.
14. Jordan's Waste Management Framework Law covers waste recycling, treatment and safe disposal.
15. ESCWA, 2023.
16. See Qatar, Voluntary National Review 2021.
17. See Tunisia's first nationally determined contribution (updated submission).
18. See the State of Palestine's first nationally determined contribution (updated submission).
19. The 11 countries are as follows, with those in bold having specific actions and measures: **Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait**, Mauritania, **Oman**, Qatar, Somalia, the **Sudan**, the **United Arab Emirates** and **Yemen**. See the United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub, Member State Dialogue Convenors and Pathways. See also United Nations, 2021.
20. UNEP, 2021b.
21. United Nations, Jordan, 2023.
22. Arab News, 2022. See the Savola Group on key CSR initiatives.
23. See more on Ne'ma, the National Food Loss and Waste Initiative.
24. Iattoni and others, 2021.
25. Invest Qatar, n.d.
26. UNEP, 2019.
27. ESCWA, 2023.
28. UNEP, 2023b.
29. See Lebanon Industry 2025: The Integrated Vision for Lebanese Industrial Sector.
30. UNEP, 2023d.
31. See more on the SwitchMed initiative.
32. See more on SwitchMed in Egypt.
33. UNEP, 2023a.
34. UN-Habitat, 2023.
35. World Bank, 2022.
36. IISD and GSI, 2018.

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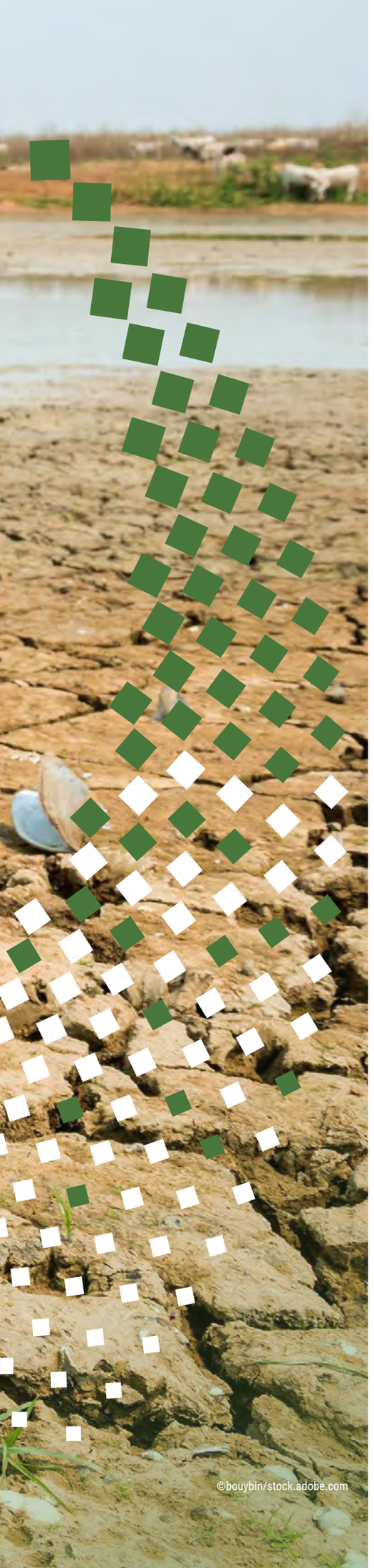


13 CLIMATE ACTION

SDG 13

Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

A. Introduction

The Arab region remains highly vulnerable to climate change, facing heightened exposure and sensitivity to its impacts. This is further compounded by limited adaptive capacity in many countries. An increasing share of the region's population lives in countries facing water scarcity, severe droughts and desertification, making adaptation a priority for climate action. While the region has a low absolute greenhouse gas footprint compared to other regions, emissions have increased twice as fast as the global rate in recent decades. Renewable energy adoption and energy efficiency remain low in most countries. The region's journey towards achieving SDG 13 faces considerable obstacles, including inadequate policies, insufficient attention to vulnerable groups and limited access to technology and financial resources. Current climate finance falls far short of needs; improvements to both the quantity and quality of finance are required.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).

Vulnerability to climate change is moderate to high across all subregions, particularly in the water and agriculture sectors, with a general upward trend over time.[1]

A staggering 90 per cent of the Arab population, totalling 400 million people, lives in countries grappling with **water scarcity**.[2] Vast numbers of people confront escalating droughts and other disasters, which fuel food insecurity and displacement.

The number of new **internal displacements** associated with disasters fluctuated from 2018 to 2021, with a peak of 1.8 million in 2020 and a low of 568,000 in 2021.

Between 2000 and 2020, **greenhouse gas emissions** increased by 68 per cent, twice as fast as the global average. As a result, the region's share of global emissions rose from 4.7 to 5.8 per cent.[3] The region is home to some of the world's top per capita carbon-emitting States.

Renewable energy accounted for only 5.1 per cent of the Arab region's total final energy consumption in 2020, significantly below the world average of 19.1 per cent.

Arab States received $34.5 billion in core public international **climate finance** from 2010 to 2020. This was heavily focused on mitigation (72 per cent), directed primarily to middle-income countries (93 per cent), and provided mainly as loans (87 per cent), most of which were non-concessional. Notably, this funding represented only 6 per cent of the $570 billion needed to fulfil the goals of the nationally determined contributions of the 11 Arab countries that have costed their climate finance requirements until 2030.[4]

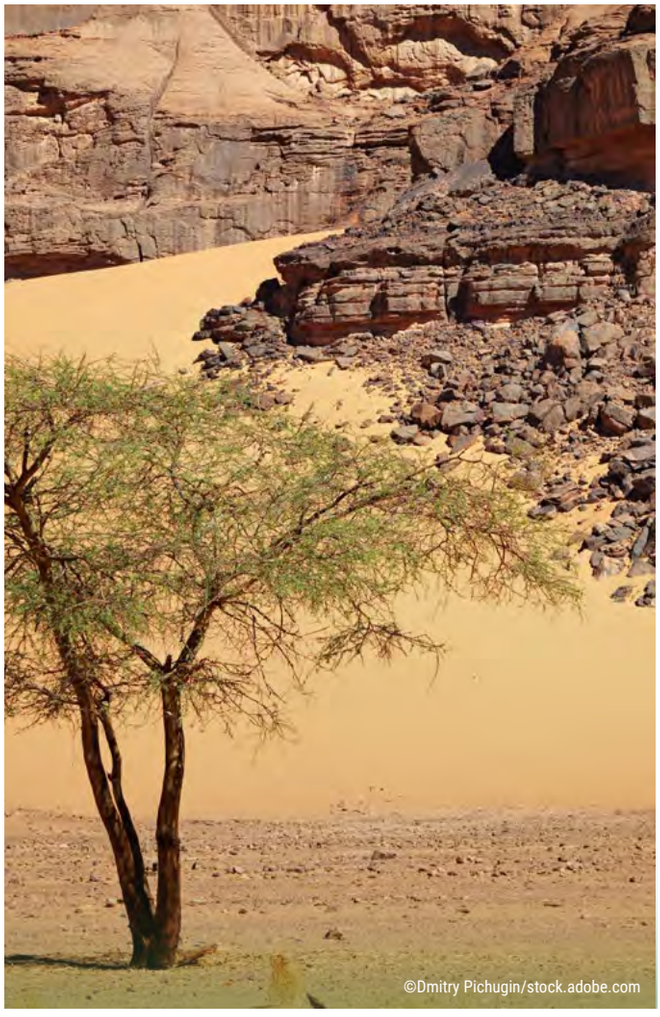
Data availability for SDG 13 in the region remains limited.

For an up-to-date view of SDG 13 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

The impact of the polycrisis on SDG 13

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a temporary reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in the Arab region, as many countries implemented restrictions on mobility and economic activities. The global economic deceleration also depressed demand for hydrocarbons, a notable source of emissions in many Arab countries. Nonetheless, this decline was transient, dissipating as economic activities gradually rebounded.

The pandemic and the war in Ukraine have further limited fiscal space for climate action, especially given high debt burdens in many countries. Ongoing conflicts in the region may aggravate climate change challenges as they destroy natural habitats, ecosystems, biodiversity and infrastructure, and divert policy attention and resources away from climate action.



On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 13

- National development plans and visions should incorporate specific climate-related targets, with stronger attention to adaptation targets.
- Coordination must increase at the highest institutional policy levels in most countries, including on climate action, climate data and monitoring.
- Robust policies and strategic investments are required to promote climate-resilient infrastructure and foster the adoption of nature-based solutions.
- Countries need to graduate from the adoption of renewable energy targets to the implementation of policies that regulate energy intensity and improve energy performance.
- Net-zero strategies must include details on the technical, institutional and financial aspects of achieving decarbonization. They need to be better aligned with national development plans and the allocation of resources in State budgets.
- Disaster risk reduction strategies should focus on comprehensive risk assessment rather than hazard assessment. They need to better integrate gender equality, social inclusion and human mobility considerations, and include financial estimates and action plans.
- Early warning systems require strong links with extension services to ensure that timely and actionable warning messages reach at-risk communities, coupled with effective guidance to facilitate preparedness and minimize potential harm.
- Mobilizing climate finance should focus on enhancing the share of grant or concessional financing, attracting additional financing from the private sector and implementing innovative financial instruments.
- Countries must build capacities to access climate finance, including through the accreditation of local entities, the costing of climate-related needs and the demonstration of the climate rationale of projects.

B. The policy landscape for SDG 13

Arab States have made strides in incorporating climate considerations into their national policies, strategies and plans. Most countries have identified adaptation priorities, established mitigation targets and taken steps to adopt national disaster risk reduction strategies. Further efforts are needed in developing comprehensive national adaptation plans, enhancing disaster preparedness, assessing and improving climate change education, and localizing climate action and disaster risk reduction initiatives.

The region's progress on SDG 13 is closely linked to water availability and efficient use (SDG 6), sustainable agriculture and food security (SDG 2), the energy transition (SDG 7), healthy ecosystems (SDGs 14 and 15), climate-induced migration (SDG 10), the built environment (SDG 11) and peace and security (SDG 16). Coherent policies to achieve SDG 13 must incorporate the water-energy-food-environment nexus and seek integrated solutions that align priorities across all SDGs.

Policy approaches to achieving SDG 13 vary among countries, reflecting unique national contexts and available resources. Several common trends are apparent, however, regardless of geographic location or income level.

◆ **Countries have made progress in integrating climate change considerations into policies, strategies and plans.** The majority of national development plans and visions since 2015 explicitly mention climate change, a notable contrast to those issued earlier, which generally did not.[5] Several countries – including **Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Oman**, the **State of Palestine, Qatar, Somalia, Tunisia** and the **United Arab Emirates** – have adopted dedicated national climate plans or strategies since 2015. Some countries have sectoral and local climate plans and strategies. Examples include the Climate Change Policy for a Resilient Water Sector in **Jordan**, the Climate Change Strategy for Urban Planning and Urban Development Sector in the State of **Qatar,** the National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy for the Tourism Sector in **Tunisia**, and the Sustainable Energy Access and Climate Action Plans developed by 61 cities in **Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine** and **Tunisia**.

- In **Egypt**, the National Climate Change Strategy 2050 (2022) charts a multisectoral approach to confronting the challenges of climate change and achieving low-emission development. It defines a roadmap with five interconnected goals: sustainable economic growth in key sectors; enhanced resilience through stronger infrastructure, early warning systems and community preparedness; effective governance via stronger institutions, policies and partnerships; robust financing through the mobilization of domestic and international resources; and knowledge and awareness through investments in research, technology transfer and education.
- The Sustainable Energy Access and Climate Action Plan developed by the city of Hurghada, in **Egypt**, outlines a framework with quantifiable objectives for 2030, based on an emissions reference inventory and a detailed assessment of energy consumption. The action plan highlights education and awareness-raising campaigns to deliver guidance and advice for citizens on saving water and energy.

While many national development plans and visions refer to climate change, not all incorporate specific climate-related targets. Among those that do, mitigation targets are more prevalent than adaptation targets, despite the region's emphasis on prioritizing adaptation.

In addition, insufficient coordination exists at the highest institutional policy levels in most countries, including on climate action, climate data and monitoring.



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◆ **Most States (20 out of 22)[6] have submitted at least one nationally determined contribution identifying adaptation needs and priorities, yet only three – Kuwait, the State of Palestine and the Sudan – have adopted a national adaptation plan.**[7] Nearly all countries put a strong emphasis on **water and agriculture** as the most critical sectors for adaptation. Priority adaptation measures in these sectors include improving water-use efficiency, reducing flood risks, developing non-conventional water resources, deploying drought- and heat-resistant crop and livestock varieties, conserving genetic resources and reducing food loss and waste. Additional priority sectors for adaptation are coastal zones and health (in most countries), biodiversity, fisheries and urban settlements (in several countries), and infrastructure, tourism and waste management (in some countries).

- In the **Sudan**, the national adaptation plan assesses future vulnerability to climate change in priority sectors (including agriculture, water, health and coastal zones), identifies vulnerable hotspots, and outlines adaptation strategies comprising policies, technologies, systematic observation programmes, climate proofing needs and required investments.

For more information on climate adaptation policies in the water and agricultural sectors, see the chapters on SDG 6 and SDG 2, respectively. For more information on policies on food loss and waste, see the chapter on SDG 12.

◆ **Most States (20 out of 22) have set greenhouse gas emissions mitigation targets, primarily contingent on international support.** Seventeen countries[8] have defined quantified emissions reduction targets. Three – **Bahrain, Iraq** and the **Syrian Arab Republic** – have committed to actions and projects with mitigation benefits but without specifying quantified targets. Most countries (17 out of 20)[9] have made some or all of their mitigation commitments conditional on international support, including finance, technology transfer and capacity-building. The level of mitigation ambition varies considerably. For instance, in countries that have set economy-wide emissions reduction targets relative to a business-as-usual scenario, the reduction coefficients range from 7 per cent in **Oman** to 92.4 per cent in **Mauritania**. Notably, eight countries[10] have enhanced emissions reduction targets since 2016. For example, **Jordan** has doubled its reduction coefficient from 15.5 per cent to 31 per cent of emissions relative to a business-as-usual scenario by 2030.

Energy is a critical sector for mitigation in every Arab State, with all countries setting specific targets on renewable energy and most on energy efficiency. Priority areas for mitigation include electricity, transport, industry, waste management and agriculture in most countries, and buildings, land use, land-use change and forestry in some countries.

- In **Morocco**, the national climate plan aims to facilitate an energy transition by promoting energy efficiency and targeting a 52 per cent penetration rate of renewable energies in installed electrical capacity by 2030. The plan also seeks to accelerate the development of efficient buildings, promote sustainable mobility and facilitate the renewal of the road transport fleet. It promotes an energy transition in the agricultural and industrial sectors, advocates for integrated waste management to establish a circular economy and underscores the crucial role of forests in carbon storage.

Libya and **Yemen** are among the three countries globally that have not ratified the Paris Agreement or submitted nationally determined contributions.

Across the region, adaptation commitments frequently lack indicators, targets and timelines, and are often not informed by the needs and priorities of vulnerable groups.

Investments in climate-resilient infrastructure and nature-based solutions are insufficient. Robust policies will be needed to promote these strategic investments.



Although most States have adopted renewable energy targets, many also aim to expand power generation from fossil fuels, notably natural gas.

Energy intensity remains high in the region. Policies addressing economy-wide energy conservation must be strengthened alongside efforts to build capacity and enhance awareness of energy efficiency through targeted education and training.

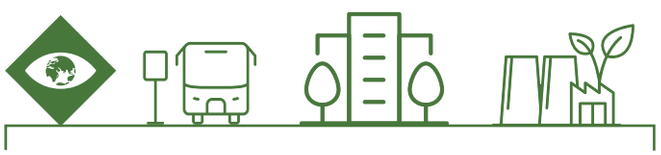
- In the **United Arab Emirates**, the climate plan seeks to mitigate the causes of climate change by advancing economic diversification through innovative solutions, all while managing greenhouse gas emissions and sustaining economic growth. Although the plan anticipates an increase in total emissions in line with projected economic and population growth, it aims to decouple emissions from economic growth. It intends to stimulate robust growth in critical emerging non-oil sectors by implementing resource-efficient innovations, generating high added value, fostering job creation in green businesses, and leveraging the symbiotic relationship between climate action and economic diversification.

For more information on climate mitigation policies in the energy sector, see the chapter on SDG 7.

◆ **Some countries have pledged to achieve net-zero emissions. Only a few – including Oman, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates – have taken the crucial step of translating these targets into comprehensive, economy-wide strategies** with integrated programmes and specific objectives for priority sectors, particularly energy. In **Oman**, the National Strategy for an Orderly Transition to Net Zero relies on six core technologies to achieve decarbonization by 2050: energy and resource efficiency, electrification and renewables, battery electric technology, sustainable hydrogen, carbon capture and storage, and negative-emission solutions. Successful implementation requires maturing these technologies, investing in infrastructure, establishing carbon pricing mechanisms, and introducing policies and legislation to incentivize behavioural changes. Other countries, including **Bahrain, Kuwait** and **Saudi Arabia**, have also set targets to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 or 2060 but have not outlined how they intend to accomplish them.

Net-zero strategies lack details on the technical, institutional and financial aspects of achieving decarbonization. Furthermore, they are not aligned with national development plans and resource allocations in State budgets.

For more information on energy policies to achieve net-zero targets, see the chapter on SDG 7.



◆ **States have made progress in adopting national disaster risk reduction strategies yet localization remains a challenge.** Thirteen countries have either ratified or developed national strategies, five have initiated the strategy development process, and four have yet to commence it.[11] While some countries, including **Algeria, Morocco**, the **State of Palestine** and **Tunisia**, have established local bodies to facilitate decentralization in disaster risk governance, only 32 cities across 10 countries[12] have developed local disaster risk reduction strategies and action plans.

Disaster risk reduction strategies tend to focus on hazard assessment rather than a comprehensive risk assessment. They often do not sufficiently integrate gender equality, social inclusion and human mobility considerations, and frequently lack financial estimates and action plans.

Progress has been made in understanding disaster risk through data collection and dissemination; 15 out of 22 countries[13] have developed or initiated **national disaster loss databases**. However, most data are not sufficiently disaggregated to properly inform decision-making, however. Advances in disaster preparedness, including the effective implementation of early warning systems, continue to move slowly. Despite the adoption of **multi-hazard early warning systems** in at least 11 countries,[14] these systems frequently grapple with insufficient hazard coverage and the lack of a people-centred approach. They struggle to fully integrate prediction, forecasting, message development, dissemination and response planning. The region also has a siloed approach to risk governance that impedes the effective management of systemic risks demanding cross-border collaboration, particularly those related to water resources and sandstorms.

- **Jordan** was one of the first Arab countries to ratify a national disaster risk reduction strategy, which is now in its second edition. Together with **Morocco** and **Tunisia**, it stands out as among the few countries globally that have backed national strategies with well-defined financing plans. The National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy (2023–2030) of Jordan seeks to integrate disaster risk reduction concepts within relevant national strategies; improve the legal and institutional basis for disaster risk reduction; raise awareness through information-sharing, education and training; support disaster-related scientific research; and promote collaboration among stakeholders. It calls for integrating nature-based solutions, such as through the use of check dams, terracing, reforestation

and forest conservation to promote watershed management and reduce the risks of floods, landslides and other natural disasters.

- In **Somalia**, the establishment of the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management, the region's first ministry devoted to disaster risk reduction, has bolstered attention to this topic in national policymaking and programming. An updated nationally determined contribution contemplates several disaster preparedness and management actions, including early warning systems, disaster risk management policies, meteorological networks, and the increased resilience of communities, infrastructure and ecosystems to droughts and floods.

◆ **Several countries have committed to integrating climate change and disaster risk reduction within educational curricula yet assessing progress remains challenging due to limited data availability.** As part of their national statements of commitment at the Transforming Education Summit in 2022, 11 countries – **Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania**, the **State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia**, the **Syrian Arab Republic** and the **United Arab Emirates** – pledged to incorporate climate change into curricula.[15] Information on the effective implementation of these commitments is not readily available, however. Little progress has been observed in mainstreaming disaster risk reduction into primary and secondary school curricula, although some headway is evident in individual universities in some countries, including the **Comoros, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco**, the **State of Palestine, Somalia** and the **Syrian Arab Republic**.[16]

Eleven Arab countries – **Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia**, the **Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia** and the **United Arab Emirates** – have incorporated global citizenship and sustainable development concepts into their education policies and curricula.[a] Yet the extent to which schooling covers climate change and disaster risk reduction remains unclear.

[a] UNESCO, 2022a.

- In **Egypt**, education-specific strategies and plans, such as the National Education Strategic Plan 2007–2012, the National Strategy to Reform the Vocational and Technical Training System 2012–2017 and the Strategic Plan of Pre-University Education 2014–2030, do not specifically address climate change education. Various climate and development strategies, however, underscore the importance of integrating climate change education into the educational framework. The National Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction (2011), the Sustainable Development Strategy: Egypt Vision 2030 (2016) and the Egypt National Climate Change Strategy 2050 (2022) all advocate for incorporating climate change education into curricula at various levels. The climate change strategy also emphasizes preparing educational materials on climate change and encouraging their adoption in schools.
- **Lebanon** incorporated climate change education into its National Curriculum Framework for Pre-university General Education in 2022.[17] This framework significantly emphasizes education for sustainable development, underscoring the importance of sustainability competencies across academic disciplines and extracurricular activities. A dedicated committee for climate change education is poised to integrate climate-related issues as cross-cutting concerns in subject curricula. Moreover, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education has established a multistakeholder national committee tasked with developing a policy paper and strategy on climate change education. In collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Ministry is piloting a Greening Education initiative to equip school principals, teachers and young people with knowledge and skills to foster sustainable practices and environmental stewardship. The initiative has been rolled out in selected public and private schools attended by both Lebanese and refugee students.[18]



C. Policy trends by subregion

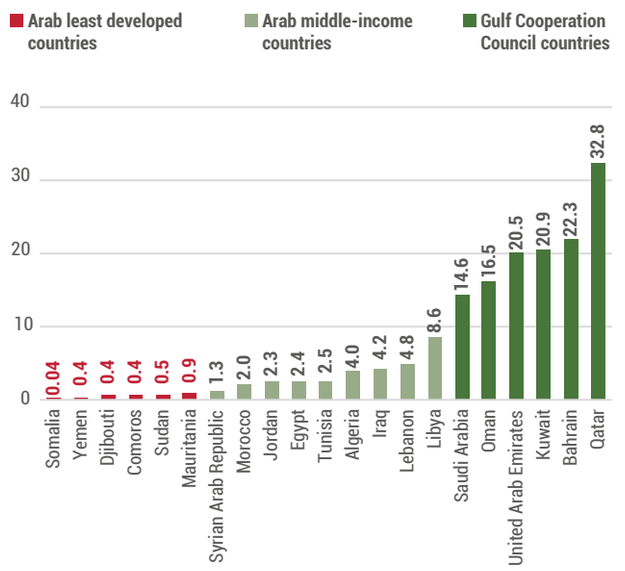
1. Arab least developed countries

The Arab least developed countries have little historical or current responsibility for climate change but are highly vulnerable to its effects (see figures 13.1 and 13.2). They are severely impacted by extreme weather events, which often fuel food insecurity, displacement and, in some countries, conflict. The majority of these countries, except **Yemen,** derive a large share of total energy consumption from renewables, mostly from traditional sources such as biomass and hydropower. Their average renewable energy share in total final energy consumption is three times higher than the global average. Yet a high proportion of their populations relies primarily on polluting fuels and technologies for cooking, heating and lighting.

◆ At least half the least developed countries, including the **Comoros, Mauritania** and **Somalia**, have **gender- and child-sensitive nationally determined contributions.**[19] The updated national determined contribution of the **Comoros** dedicates a chapter to gender considerations, including the involvement of women in the development process, the vulnerability of women to the impacts of climate change and initiatives to empower women in climate action. The Government commits to enhancing the participation of women and other vulnerable groups in planning, decision-making, capacity-building and access to technologies, as well as to conducting gender-specific analyses and collecting data disaggregated by sex and age.[20]

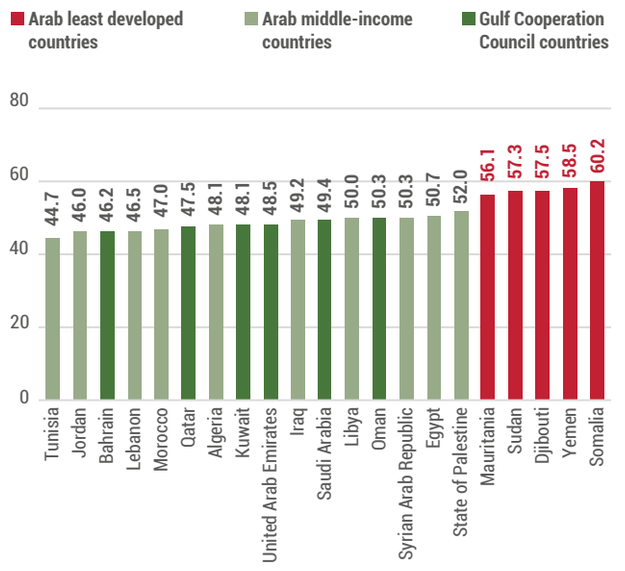
◆ The nationally determined contributions of nearly all least developed countries, including the **Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia** and the **Sudan**, feature measures aimed at replacing inefficient and environmentally harmful cooking systems with **clean fuels and advanced technologies.** For instance, the updated nationally determined contribution of the **Sudan** articulates the goal of replacing traditional inefficient wood stoves with improved cookstoves, targeting 20 per cent of the rural population. This transition, coupled with associated biomass savings,

Figure 13.1
Carbon dioxide emissions per capita, 2019 (metric tons)



Source: World Resources Institute, Climate Watch (accessed on 31 May 2023).
Note: Data are not available for the State of Palestine.

Figure 13.2
RICCAR climate change vulnerability index



Source: ESCWA and others, 2017.
Notes: Based on end-century projected data and a business-as-usual RCP8.5 scenario. Data are not available for the Comoros. RICCAR refers to the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region.

is expected to result in a reduction of 2.6 million tons of carbon dioxide-equivalent emissions by 2030.[21] The proportion of the population that relies primarily on clean fuels and technologies in the least developed countries has more than doubled over the past two decades, rising from 23 per cent in 2001 to 37 per cent in 2011 and reaching 51 per cent in 2021. Nevertheless, the average for these countries still lags significantly behind the regional average (88 per cent) and the global average (71 per cent). Substantial progress is essential to bridge this gap.[22]

◆ The nationally determined contribution of every least developed country prioritizes the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from **forests and land-use changes**, including by reducing deforestation or expanding afforestation and reforestation. For example, **Mauritania** in its updated nationally determined contribution emphasizes commitments to assisted forest regeneration, pasture restoration and combating desertification. It is participating in the Great Green Wall initiative of the African Union in partnership with 20 African countries, including two other Arab least developed countries, **Djibouti** and the **Sudan**.[23]

◆ Some least developed countries, such as **Somalia** and **Yemen**, have national policies to address **displacement related to climate change or natural disasters.** The National Policy on Refugee-Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons of **Somalia** commits the Government to protect people from climate-induced displacement, implement disaster risk reduction measures in disaster-prone areas, develop and activate early warning systems before any future displacement, and facilitate the voluntary return, relocation and local reintegration of refugee-returnees and internally displaced people.[24]

2. Arab middle-income countries

Climate change is exacerbating the exposure of Arab middle-income countries to water scarcity and food insecurity. These countries have low to moderate greenhouse gas emissions per capita, although levels in **Algeria** and **Lebanon** are nearly twice as high as in other Arab middle-income countries (see figure 13.1). All Arab middle-income countries, except oil-rich Algeria, derive a moderate share of total energy consumption from renewables (see figure 7.2 in the chapter on SDG 7).

◆ Some countries have established **national public funds** to promote climate adaptation and mitigation projects, such as the Fund for the Fight against the Effects of Natural Disasters in **Morocco**, the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Fund in **Jordan**, and the Energy Transition Fund in **Tunisia**.

◆ Alongside water, agriculture, coastal zones and health, which are priority adaptation sectors in most Arab countries, irrespective of income level, **tourism** and **urban settlements** are priority sectors in a number of middle-income countries, including **Egypt** and **Jordan**.[25]

◆ All middle-income countries have set **renewable energy targets**, and four (**Egypt, Jordan, Morocco** and **Tunisia**) have made substantial leaps in renewable energy installed capacity since 2015. The Noor Solar Complex of **Morocco** and the Benban Solar Park of **Egypt** demonstrate a focus on large-scale renewable energy projects to reduce emissions and promote energy sustainability. Nevertheless, the share of renewables in total final energy consumption has remained largely unchanged in most Arab middle-income countries, except **Jordan**, where it increased from 3 per cent in 2015 to 11 per cent in 2020.

◆ All middle-income countries have used **public competitive bidding** to mitigate risks associated with the deployment of renewable energy projects. Most have also used **net metering**, an electricity billing mechanism that allows customers who generate some or all of their own electricity from solar panels or other renewable sources to sell excess electricity back to the utility grid.

◆ Most middle-income countries (**Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco** and **Tunisia**) have developed or updated **national and local disaster risk reduction strategies** since 2015.[26]

3. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

Gulf Cooperation Council countries have the highest per capita greenhouse gas emissions globally. Their exports and public revenues rely heavily on hydrocarbons (see figure 7.1 in the chapter on SDG 7), a key source of their emissions. They have a higher adaptive capacity compared to other Arab countries, including to respond to climate change, moderate potential damages, harness opportunities and cope with the consequences. While renewables constitute a small fraction of their total final energy consumption (see figure 7.2 in the chapter on SDG 7), these countries host some of the world's lowest-cost utility-scale solar photovoltaic systems. With substantial financial means to invest in climate action, they can contribute to international climate finance and support initiatives to address climate change globally.

◆ All Gulf Cooperation Council countries have adopted **economic diversification** strategies with mitigation benefits. For instance, Vision 2040 of **Oman** seeks to reduce the

share of the oil sector in GDP from 39 per cent in 2017 to 16 per cent by 2030 and 8.4 per cent by 2040.

◆ Since 2018, the majority of countries, including **Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates**, have implemented **excise and value-added taxes** to reduce their dependency on hydrocarbon revenues. **Qatar** has introduced excise taxes but has not yet implemented value-added taxes.

◆ Most countries, including **Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates**, have pledged to reach **net-zero emission targets** by either 2050 or 2060.

◆ Some countries are exploring **carbon market mechanisms**. For example, the Regional Voluntary Carbon Market Company, jointly owned by the Public Investment Fund of **Saudi Arabia** and the Saudi Tadawul Group, conducted the region's first **carbon offset auction** in 2022 and plans to launch a carbon credit trading exchange in early 2024.[27] In the **United Arab Emirates**, the Ministry of Climate Change and Environment is seeking to establish a national system for carbon credits using blockchain technology.

◆ All countries have adopted policies to enhance **water-use efficiency in agriculture**, such as through the promotion of precision irrigation or the adoption of water-efficient cropping systems.

◆ While most countries have set **renewable energy targets**, many are also seeking to **expand fossil fuel production** and promote downstream industries. In **Bahrain**, the National Development Strategy (2015–2018) emphasizes the assessment and further development of hydrocarbon assets to maximize economic benefits over their lifespan. This entails employing enhanced recovery techniques for existing reserves and conducting exploratory drilling to identify new supplies.

◆ Most countries, including **Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates**, are planning or implementing **green and blue hydrogen** projects, including one of the world's largest green hydrogen projects in Neom, **Saudi Arabia**, costed at $8.5 billion. The **United Arab Emirates** launched a National Hydrogen Strategy in July 2023, aimed at accelerating industry adoption of low-carbon hydrogen, cultivating a supply chain, enabling infrastructure and reaching a target annual production capacity of 1.4 million tons of low-carbon hydrogen by 2031.

◆ Several countries, including **Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates**, have incorporated **carbon capture and storage** measures in their nationally determined contributions. **Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates** have followed a proactive government-led approach, emphasizing State ownership of facilities, particularly in the initial deployment phases.[28] The recent launch of the National Hydrogen Strategy in the **United Arab Emirates** has corroborated the Government's commitment to carbon capture and storage. The strategy aims to achieve environmental benefits and leverage economic opportunities within the framework of the circular carbon economy by promoting the reuse of carbon dioxide across various industries.

4. Arab countries in conflict

The nexus between climate change, peace and security in the Arab region is important. Climate change does not create conflict on its own but may exacerbate challenges where the social contract is weak or broken due to conflict. Climate impacts can affect drivers of conflict, such as the loss of livelihoods, food insecurity, competition for resources and migration. Conversely, ongoing conflicts may aggravate climate challenges as they destroy ecosystems and biodiversity, with the extent of such destruction dependant on the type of ordnance used. For example, chemical weapons or phosphorous shells have been used in conflict-affected countries in the Arab region with deleterious impacts on natural resources that are also subject to climate pressures.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Conflict can also hamper the ability to build adaptive capacity as climate is usually deprioritized compared to more immediate socioeconomic and humanitarian needs. Besides limiting resources for climate action, conflict may pause discussions on resource mobilization, cooperation and partnerships.

Conflict is a leading cause of displacement in the Arab region, which has 4 of the top 10 countries globally in terms of the highest numbers of internally displaced people (**Somalia**, the **Sudan**, the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Yemen**). Climate change intensifies the challenges of internal displacement caused by conflict as displaced populations are less equipped to manage climate-induced natural disasters. Conflict and natural disasters, compounded with other vulnerabilities for internally displaced persons, disproportionately impact women, children and persons with disabilities.

Conflict-affected countries need targeted international support for climate-related interventions. This should encompass not only financial resources and technology but also capacity-building to enhance national and local abilities to access and effectively use climate finance.

◆ Some countries have **relegated climate action** to focus on immediate needs rather than long-term goals. For instance, **Yemen** submitted an intended nationally determined contribution but has not ratified the Paris Agreement.

◆ Despite significant challenges in formulating climate policies due to ongoing conflict, some conflict-affected countries have made efforts to **integrate climate change considerations into plans and policies**. For example, **Yemen** is promoting climate resilience in water resources, agriculture and infrastructure.

◆ Two of the three Arab States that have submitted **national adaptation plans** are conflict-affected countries (the **State of Palestine** and the **Sudan**). Four other conflict-affected countries are developing national adaptation plans (**Iraq, Somalia,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Yemen**).

◆ **Iraq, Somalia** and **Yemen** have adopted national policies or frameworks to address **displacement in the context of natural hazards**.[29]

◆ The updated nationally determined contribution of the **State of Palestine** and the intended nationally determined contribution of **Yemen** include **loss and damage** considerations related to mobilizing financial resources to deliver ambitious climate actions, with a strong focus on adaptation.

D. Policies to leave no one behind

Climate-related challenges in the Arab region disproportionately affect a number of vulnerable groups, including individuals with lower incomes, rural populations, women, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, internally displaced people, refugees, migrants and residents of low-lying coastal areas. These communities often bear the brunt of severe climate change impacts yet encounter significant obstacles to accessing essential resources, technology and infrastructure for effectively adapting to evolving environmental conditions. Despite their heightened vulnerability, these groups also serve as pivotal agents for driving positive change in climate-related initiatives.

Achieving SDG 13 demands the implementation of comprehensive, inclusive policies that specifically address climate change impacts on marginalized populations, ensuring that no one is left behind. Below are examples of existing measures that countries are deploying to address climate fallout on vulnerable groups.

Table 13.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

Individuals with lower incomes are severely affected by global warming and disasters as they lack resources to adapt to changes or cope with shocks. The rural poor are especially vulnerable due to their reliance on climate-sensitive farming and pastoralism for their livelihoods.	The **Sudan** has introduced drought-resistant crop and animal varieties and developed new agricultural extension products and services focused on drought-resistance and sustainable farming methods.[a] **Djibouti** has developed agropastoral shade gardens to improve the resilience of poor rural communities and adaptation to recurrent climate change-induced droughts.[b] **Somalia** has advanced ecosystem-based flood preparedness through the establishment of climate monitoring and early warning centres and the promotion of small-scale community water capture infrastructure.[c]

Table 13.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

 **Women and girls** are more likely to suffer losses due to climate change and disasters, including through increased maternal mortality, the disruption of livelihoods and social networks, displacement, higher schooling dropout rates, and gender-based violence in the aftermath of disaster or conflicts.	In **Egypt,** the National Strategy for Mainstreaming Gender in Climate Change (2011) seeks to integrate gender perspectives into climate policies. It promotes the equal participation of men and women in shaping effective adaptation and mitigation measures, towards ensuring that everyone can benefit from climate action programmes and funds. The National Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction (2011) recognizes gender as a cross-cutting issue and emphasizes women's participation and leadership. The National Strategy for Women in **Lebanon** (2011–2021) addresses climate change under two of its key objectives: enhancing the contribution of women to environmental protection, and protecting girls and women in situations of emergency, armed conflict, war and natural disaster. Additionally, the strategy emphasizes the role of women in educating children about eco-friendly behaviours. In **Mauritania,** the nationally determined contribution requires any project or programme developed within its framework to reserve 10 per cent of its budget to integrate gender, youth and human rights dimensions.[d] In **Tunisia,** gender was mainstreamed as a cross-cutting concern within the updated nationally determined contribution, including in the identification of priority areas and measures for advancing gender equality in climate action. Examples include adopting gender-just water and agricultural policies, and ensuring women's transformative participation in the development and implementation of disaster risk reduction strategies and policies.[e]
 **Children and young people** bear disproportionate impacts from climate change and disasters; moreover, young and future generations will inherit an environment with diminishing resources and higher risks to lives and livelihoods.	At least eight Arab countries (the **Comoros, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania,** the **State of Palestine**, **Somalia, Tunisia** and the **United Arab Emirates**) have submitted child-sensitive nationally determined contributions.[f] These policy documents not only acknowledge children and young people as rights-holders, but also emphasize their pivotal role in shaping climate action policies. Specific child-sensitive commitments span various sectors, with a notable emphasis on education, energy, social protection and water. In the **United Arab Emirates,** the Emirates Youth Climate Strategy (2018) seeks to build youth capacities to meet the challenges of climate change and promote youth participation in climate action and domestic decision-making. Youth councils have been established for consultations on policies and legislation, including the National Climate Change Plan and the nationally determined contribution.[g]
 **Persons with disabilities** are particularly vulnerable during natural disasters and extreme climate events, which exacerbate barriers to their full participation in society, including the inaccessibility of the physical environment.	The nationally determined contribution of **Jordan** calls for the inclusion of disability-friendly options in the development of green infrastructure in urban areas and the creation of new green skilled labour opportunities for the disabled through learning, awareness and career path management.[h] The National Climate Change Policy highlights the critical importance of inclusivity and the participation of people with disabilities in climate change adaptation and mitigation. In **Qatar,** the National Command Centre has developed an emergency distress service (Aounak) that enables persons with disabilities, persons with chronic diseases and the elderly to easily contact the emergency service.[i]
 **Internally displaced people, refugees and migrants** are frequently subjected to displacement caused by disasters and the repercussions of climate change, which undermine security and well-being. The convergence of conflict and environmental disasters often results in multiple displacements for these individuals, compounding and extending their vulnerability.	The Policy Framework on Displacement within **Somalia** mandates authorities and other stakeholders to assist and protect internally displaced people in emergency situations, including by ensuring safety from floods and other natural calamities. The National Policy on Refugee-Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons commits the Government to safeguard its population from climate-induced displacement and facilitate the voluntary return, relocation and local reintegration of refugee-returnees and internally displaced people.[j] The National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction 2030 in **Egypt** considers the nexus between disasters and displacement, including the risk of displacement associated with slow-onset processes, such as sea-level rise in the Nile delta.[k]

Table 13.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

Inhabitants of low-lying coastal areas are vulnerable to rising sea levels, erosion and saltwater intrusion into rivers and aquifers, particularly those living in informal settlements, which are often built in areas subject to high-intensity climate hazards.	At least **15 Arab countries** have committed to coastal zone management actions to adapt to the impacts of climate change in their nationally determined contributions. These include **Bahrain,** the **Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman,** the **State of Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Somalia,** the **Sudan** and **Tunisia.** **Egypt** and **Tunisia** have reinforced their capacities to implement integrated coastal zone management through ecosystem-centric approaches to building resilience.[l]

[a] UNDP, 2018.
[b] Ibid.
[c] Ibid.
[d] See Mauritania, Contribution déterminée nationale actualisée CDN 2021-2030.
[e] See Tunisia, Contribution déterminée au niveau national (CDN) actualisée.
[f] UNICEF, 2023. Data are not available for five Arab countries (Algeria, Djibouti, Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen).
[g] See the United Arab Emirates, A Bridge to Greater Climate Ambition: Updated Second Nationally Determined Contribution of the United Arab Emirates.
[h] See Jordan, Updated Submission of Jordan's First Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC).
[i] UNDRR, 2022.
[j] See Somalia, Policy Framework on Displacement within the National Policy on Refugee-Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).
[k] See Egypt, National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction 2030.
[l] UNDP, 2018.

E. The financing landscape

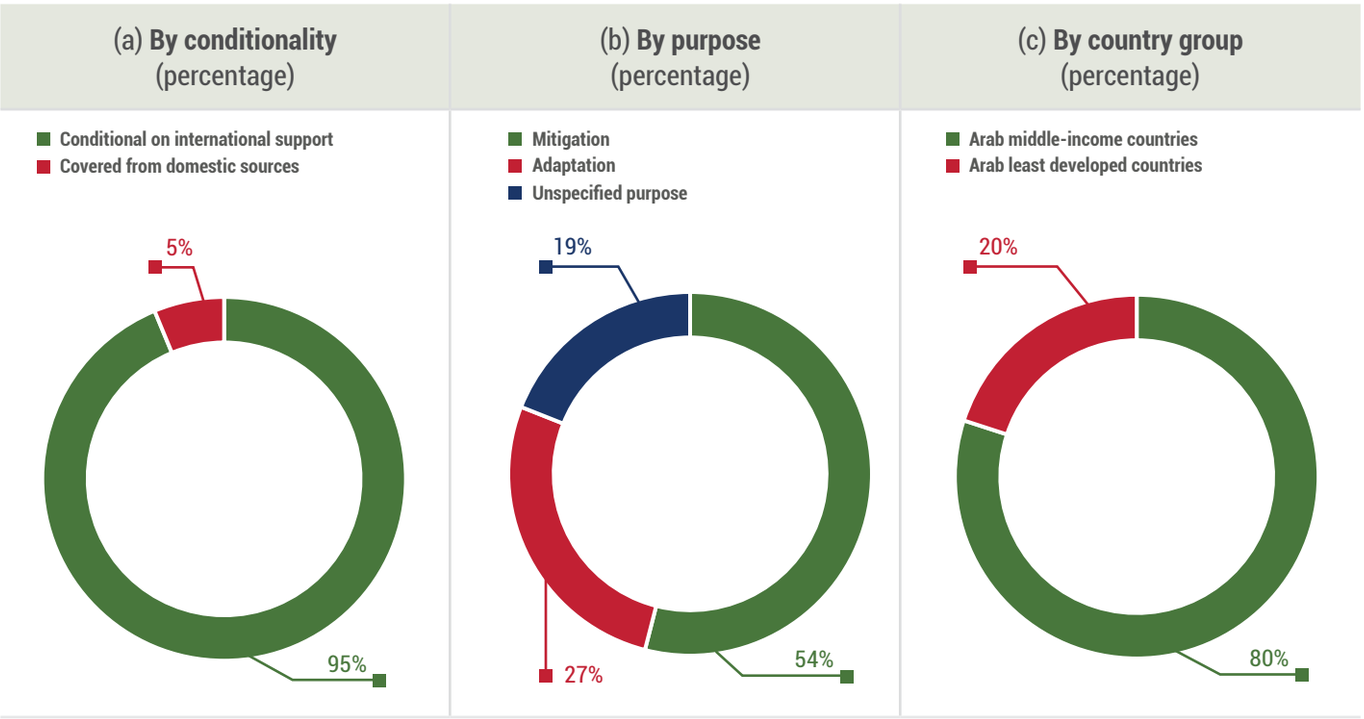
Costed climate finance needs in the region until 2030 are estimated to be $570 billion.[30] This estimate is based on assessments made by 11 Arab States, including most least developed, middle-income and conflict-affected countries, and excluding the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Costed needs are almost entirely conditional on international support (95 per cent) and concentrated on mitigation measures (at least 54 per cent) and middle-income countries (80 per cent). A significant proportion, approximately 75 per cent, is concentrated in just three countries: **Egypt, Iraq** and **Morocco**.

Core public international climate finance flows to the Arab region reached $34.5 billion from 2010 to 2020.[31] This funding went to 16 Arab States, encompassing all least developed, middle-income and conflict-affected countries, but excluding Gulf Cooperation Council countries. This estimate is a lower bound, as it considers only flows where climate was a principal objective and climate components reported by multilateral development banks.[32] Notably, core public international climate finance represented only 6 per cent of climate finance needs costed by the 11 States noted above. Funding was highly concentrated on mitigation (72 per cent) and a few sectors (49 per cent went to energy and transportation alone). Moreover, middle-income countries received 93 per cent of core public international climate finance, with **Egypt** and **Morocco** alone accounting for 60 per cent. Most funding entailed loans (87 per cent) that were largely non-concessional.

Given the tight budgetary constraints in many middle-income, least developed and conflict-affected countries, it is essential to **enhance the share of grant or concessional financing in public international climate finance** as well as to **attract additional financing from the private sector**.

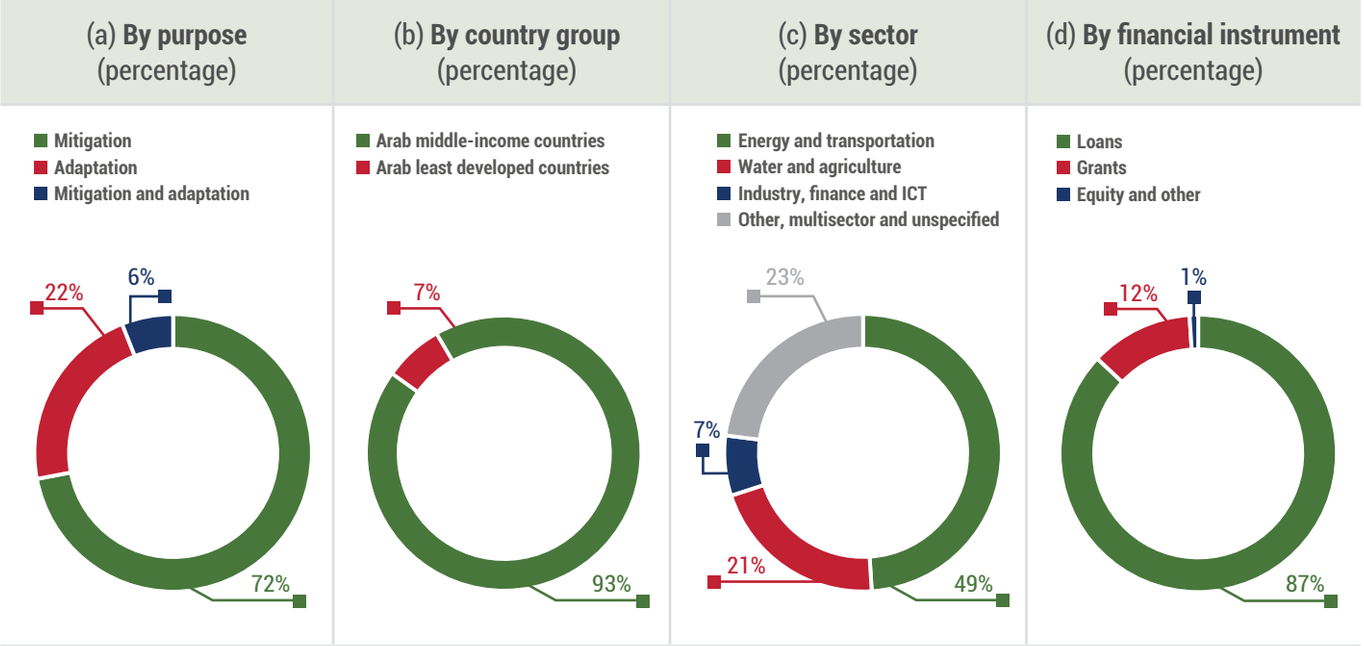
These measures should be accompanied by **capacity-building** on how to better cost climate finance needs, frame the climate rationale of projects, and communicate climate finance needs to donors and investors.

Figure 13.3
Costed climate finance needs in the Arab region to 2030



Source: ESCWA, 2022a.

Figure 13.4
Core public international climate finance flows to the Arab region, 2010 to 2020



Source: ESCWA, 2022a.

Data on climate-related finance flows from domestic sources in the Arab region are limited. Yet some notable trends and initiatives have emerged.

- **National public funds:** Some countries, including **Jordan, Morocco**, the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Tunisia**, have established national public funds dedicated to supporting climate-related projects within their respective countries, often with a focus on renewable energy and energy efficiency.
- **National tracking systems: Morocco** is exploring the development of a national tracking system to monitor domestic public expenditure related to climate action. **Egypt, Jordan** and **Lebanon** have formulated plans to introduce mechanisms tracking domestic and international finance as part of their climate measurement, reporting and verification systems.

A whole-of-government approach is needed in climate finance, as multiple entities need to be aware of climate policies and support their implementation, including ministries of planning and finance. Weak horizontal coordination may result in parallel strategies, policies and plans without required financing.

- **Green and sustainability bonds:** Six Arab countries (**Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates**) collectively raised $12.8 billion through green and mixed sustainability bonds between 2015 and June 2022.[33]
- **Sovereign green bonds: Egypt** issued the region's first sovereign green bond in 2020, raising $750 million. The proceeds were earmarked for water, sanitation and transportation projects.[34]
- **Sustainability-themed funds: Egypt** launched the region's first impact investing fund in 2022.[35] This type of fund focuses on investments with the potential to generate positive environmental and social impacts while also delivering financial returns.
- **Domestic banks** are increasingly involved in financing renewable energy projects. **Jordan** has emerged as a leader in this area, offering a favourable environment for securing finance for renewable energy initiatives.[36]
- **Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action:** Five Arab countries (**Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq** and **Morocco**) have joined this global coalition.

Countries have explored various innovative financial instruments to enhance access to climate finance and promote sustainable development. Some noteworthy examples include:

- **Blended climate finance:** The region mobilized $864 million through blended climate finance mechanisms between 2019 and 2021.[37] Blended finance typically combines public and private sector resources to support climate-related projects.
- **Climate debt swaps** involve restructuring a country's debt in exchange for commitments to allocate resources for climate priorities. Swaps offer a unique opportunity to alleviate debt burdens while channelling funds into critical climate initiatives.
- **Weather-indexed insurance: Egypt, Morocco** and **Tunisia** have introduced weather-indexed insurance schemes that protect farmers against drought, floods and other climate-related risks. Other countries are exploring similar schemes.



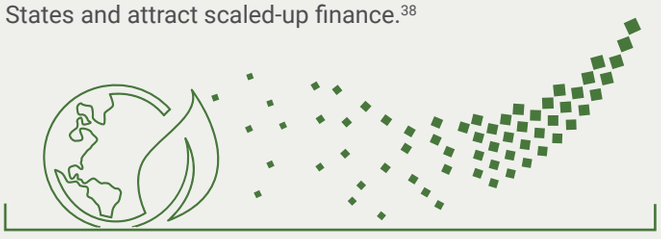
F. Regional dimensions

The region has important regional policy frameworks on climate change and disaster risk reduction, including the **Arab Framework Action Plan on Climate Change (2010–2030),** the **Arab Strategy for DRR 2030** and the **Prioritized Plan of Action for DRR (2021–2024).** Moreover, climate change is mainstreamed in regional strategies and action plans for key sectors, such as the Arab Strategy for Water Security in the Arab Region (2010–2030), the Pan-Arab Renewable Energy Strategy 2030, the Strategy for Sustainable Arab Agricultural Development for the Upcoming Two Decades (2005–2025) and the Arab Strategy for Housing and Sustainable Urban Development 2030.

The **Council for Arab Ministers Responsible for Environment,** under the umbrella of the League of Arab States, is the regional mechanism dedicated to supporting cooperation among Arab States on environmental matters, including the formulation of regional strategies on climate changed and disaster risk reduction. The Regional Center for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency, the Arab Water Council, the Arab Climate Outlook Forum, the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development and the Joint Ministerial Council of the Arab Ministers of Agriculture and Water are other regional entities that contribute to enhancing regional cooperation on climate action.

The **Arab Youth Council for Climate Change,** established under the League of Arab States, supports young people to take climate action and engages young Arabs in developing innovative and sustainable solutions to climate change. Other notable regional youth initiatives include the Arab Youth Climate Movement and the Arab Youth Sustainable Development Network.

Regional cooperation on climate and disaster risk reduction is vital to address transboundary issues, such as water and energy, and can help strengthen governance, bolster the science-policy interface, and enhance the mobilization of and access to finance (for more on transboundary water and energy issues, see the chapters on SDG 6 and SDG 7, respectively). In particular, multi-country and subregional approaches can improve access to finance for smaller States and attract scaled-up finance.[38]



Regional efforts to support collective understanding and climate action could include:

- **Strengthening the science-policy interface through regional initiatives to identify climate risks and propose solutions.** For example, climate-related data and analyses provided under the ESCWA Regional Initiative for the Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region (RICCAR)[39] can help identify geographic areas, economic sectors and parts of society that are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. It also assists in formulating clear climate rationales for projects.

- **Enhancing regional early warning systems for climate-related hazards and promoting collaboration among meteorological offices,** including through the exchange of experiences, joint research and capacity-building.

- **Strengthening and developing regional and subregional strategies and mechanisms for disaster risk reduction to address common and transboundary disaster risks,** including floods, flash floods, forest fires, droughts, sand and dust storms, plant pests and animal diseases. Mechanisms are already in place between **Algeria** and **Tunisia** and between **Jordan** and the **State of Palestine**.[40]

- **Developing regional and subregional response plans to prepare for and ensure rapid and effective disaster responses in situations that exceed national coping capacities.** While no regional response plans exist, coordinated approaches and operational mechanisms have been adopted.

- **Convening regional forums that link climate adaptation and mitigation project owners to potential donors and funds to increase access to adequate finance for climate action and achieve regional ambitions under the Paris Agreement.** For example, seven Arab States showcased 30 bankable projects to donors and financial institutions at the Arab Regional Forum on Climate Finance in 2022.

Endnotes

1. ESCWA and others, 2017.
2. ESCWA calculations based on FAO, 2023.
3. Calculations based on the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.
4. ESCWA, 2022a.
5. ESCWA, 2021.
6. All Arab countries, with the exception of Libya and Yemen, have ratified the Paris Agreement and submitted nationally determined contributions. Yemen has submitted an intended nationally determined contribution.
7. In addition, fourteen Arab countries have initiated the process to formulate national adaptation plans: Algeria, the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen (UNFCCC, 2022). Some countries, including Iraq, Jordan and Morocco, are more advanced in this process than others.
8. Algeria, the Comoros, Djibouti, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates have set economy-wide targets. Saudi Arabia has an annual absolute greenhouse gas emissions avoidance target. Egypt and the Sudan have sector-specific targets.
9. Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia. Three Arab countries have fully unconditional mitigation commitments: Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.
10. The Comoros, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.
11. Bahrain, the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, the Sudan, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates have ratified or developed national disaster risk reduction strategies (UNDRR, 2022). Algeria, Iraq, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the State of Palestine are in the development process, while Libya, Oman, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen have not initiated it (UNESCO, 2021).
12. Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates (UNDRR, 2022, 2023a).
13. Algeria, the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen (UNDRR, 2022).
14. Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan and the United Arab Emirates (African Union, 2022; UNDRR and WMO, 2022).
15. UNESCO, 2022b.
16. UNDRR, 2022.
17. See Lebanon, National Curriculum Framework for Pre-university General Education (Arabic).
18. UNESCO, 2023.
19. UNICEF, 2023. Data are not available for Djibouti and Yemen.
20. See the Comoros, Contribution déterminée au niveau national (CDN actualisée): Rapport de synthèse.
21. See the Sudan, First Nationally Determined Contribution Under the Paris Agreement: Updated 2021.
22. See the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.
23. See Mauritania, Contribution déterminée nationale actualisée CDN 2021-2030.
24. See Somalia, National Policy on Refugee-Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).
25. Tourism is a priority adaptation sector in Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia, as are urban settlements in Egypt, Jordan and Morocco.
26. UNDRR, 2022, 2023b.
27. Benny, 2023.
28. Global CCS Institute, 2018.
29. IDMC, 2021.
30. ESCWA, 2022a.
31. Ibid.
32. A broader estimate of public international climate finance flows to the region, incorporating flows with climate tagged as a significant objective and funding from global climate funds, would reach $62 billion from 2010 to 2020, equivalent to 11 per cent of costed climate finance needs of the 11 States (ESCWA, 2022a).

33. ESCWA, 2023a.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. BloombergNEF, 2023.

37. Ibid.

38. UNFCCC, League of Arab states and ESCWA, 2022.

39. ESCWA, 2023b.

40. UNDRR, 2022.

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14 LIFE BELOW WATER

SDG 14

Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

A. Introduction

The Arab region is falling behind on several SDG 14 targets, notably those related to the protection of marine ecosystems from pollution and the regulation of fishing activity. Sustainable aquaculture remains in its infancy in most of the region, unable to fulfil the growing demand for fish. While good progress has been achieved in some places in designating marine protected areas, protection activities have not been enough to halt degradation.

Assessing the Arab region's progress on SDG 14 is difficult due to particularly low data availability. Data gaps persist for critical issues such as the sustainability of fish stocks, the use of ecosystem-based approaches and ocean acidification.

The region is surrounded by five oceans and seas[1] that provide income for millions of people and offer unique marine environments and biodiversity.[2] Advancing towards SDG 14 depends on tackling land-based sources of marine pollution, including municipal and hazardous solid waste (SDGs 11 and 12) and untreated sewage (SDG 6). Progress on climate change adaptation (SDG 13) is important to protect coastal areas and marine ecosystems against sea-level rise, warming sea temperatures and ocean acidification. Structural issues of governance (SDG 16) and partnerships (SDG 17) are critical for the enforcement of ocean-related national, regional and global laws and agreements.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).



One of the highest levels of coastal eutrophication globally is in the Arabian Sea.[3] In 2022, marine and coastal waters around the least developed countries exhibited particularly high algae growth levels in the region (chlorophyll-a deviations from 2000–2004 baseline of 2.1 per cent; however, this remains below the world average of 3.2 per cent).



In 2021, 80 per cent of the litter from land-based sources ended up on beaches, more than the global average of 66 per cent. This issue most affected the Gulf Cooperation Council countries at 93 per cent. In the same year, 20 per cent of land-based litter ended up in the ocean, compared to 35 per cent globally. The rate in the region was highest in the Maghreb at 32 per cent.



Some 35.8 per cent of marine key biodiversity areas were covered by protected areas in 2022. Middle-income countries are ahead of other country groups in the region and the global average with 64.1 per cent of key biodiversity areas covered by protected areas. This compares to a global average of 45.6 per cent. Marine key biodiversity area coverage is particularly low for countries in conflict, at 19.5 per cent.



Countries have not improved in terms of implementing international instruments to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, remaining in 2022 at a mid-level score of 3 out of 5, below the global score of 4.

Sustainable fisheries constitute an insignificant proportion of GDP in the region, well below the global average.

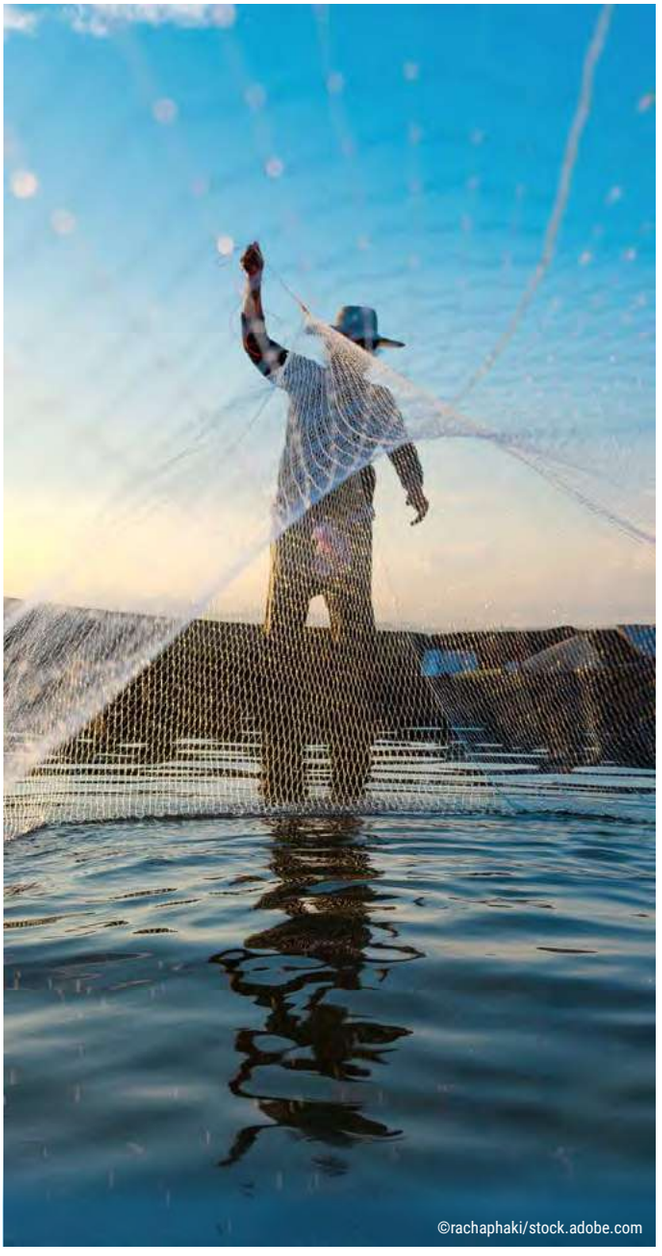
In applying a legal, regulatory, policy or institutional framework that recognizes and protects access rights for small-scale fisheries, 10 countries with available data in 2018–2022 score 3 out of 5 or higher.

For an up-to-date view of SDG 14 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.



On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 14

- Invest in capacities to monitor and control marine pollution and fishing activity.
- Adopt harmonized indicator frameworks across the region to enable effective collaboration.
- Develop management plans for marine protected areas with the participation of local communities and stakeholders, and secure sustainable resources for implementation.
- Develop and enforce laws that protect coastal zones from the impact of urban development, and strengthen coordination between national and local authorities that oversee the marine and land components of coastal zones to ensure integrated management.
- Adopt and implement policies against the open dumping of municipal waste and the discharge of untreated wastewater at sea.
- Extend social security benefits to small-scale and artisanal fishers, upgrade the port infrastructure they depend on, and support the commercialization of their products to promote decent livelihood opportunities for all, including women and youth.
- Introduce or enhance regulatory frameworks for marine aquaculture and develop post-harvest handling and marketing systems to enable participation in the global aquaculture trade.
- Establish blue bonds to attract public and private investments and generate decent jobs in multiple sectors, while meeting ocean protection and conservation objectives.



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B. The policy landscape for SDG 14

Overall, the SDG 14 policy landscape in Arab countries is well developed, **driven in large part by global and regional ocean and biodiversity-related laws, agreements and instruments.**

All countries except the **Syrian Arab Republic** are parties to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,[4] which governs the use and protection of oceans and seas, and defines the rights and responsibilities of nations. SDG target 14.c calls on countries to implement international law as reflected in the Convention.[5]

Regional seas conventions and associated protocols have helped to shape and harmonize policies related to marine pollution, the conservation of marine living resources and the restoration of critical marine habitats. Notable examples include the Barcelona Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean, adopted under the framework of the Mediterranean Action Plan;[6] the Jeddah Convention for the Conservation of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden;[7] the Kuwait Convention for Cooperation on the Protection of the Marine Environment from Pollution;[8] and the Nairobi Convention for the Protection, Management and Development of Coastal and Marine Environment of the Western Indian Ocean.[9]

Regional fishery management organizations issue decisions that are binding to their members, thus contributing to harmonized national policies and legislation on fisheries management and aquaculture development. Notable examples include the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean[10] and the Regional Commission for Fisheries.[11]

SDG 14 policies exhibit **more commonalities than differences**, although national contexts affect priorities and means of implementation. Common trends, which transcend income and geographic subgroupings, are highlighted below.

1. Prevention of marine pollution

◆ **Most countries have integrated the prevention of marine pollution within the overall framework of their environmental law** and typically use environmental impact assessments in coastal planning and management. Recent examples of legislative gains include the General Order for Environment of **Saudi Arabia**, adopted in July 2020, and its executive bylaws, which cover marine pollution.[12] The framework Law No. 7 of 2022 on the Environment of **Bahrain** introduced changes to better address new environmental challenges, including those related to marine pollution.[13] Few Arab countries have a dedicated framework law on marine pollution; these are in place in **Oman** (1974), the **Syrian Arab Republic** (2006) and **Yemen** (2004).[14]

◆ **Few countries have taken measures to control marine dumping**. Only eight countries are contracting parties to the Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter (the London Convention, 1972) and four are parties to its protocol (the London Protocol, 1996).[15] Since the early 2000s, **Egypt, Jordan** and **Oman** have issued laws regulating the discharge of waste into the marine environment.[16]

As is the case for overall environmental policy, the prevention of marine pollution in the region faces implementation hurdles, notably in connection with inadequate law enforcement, the limited availability of trained and capacitated human resources (for example, to conduct adequate environmental impact assessments) and low penalties for infractions. Moreover, the value of ecosystems services is not adequately considered in the design and implementation of coastal development projects. Associated land reclamation and dredging activities are still destroying important coastal habitats.

Source: UNEP, 2016.



◆ **Countries endeavour to prevent marine pollution from ships and enforce compliance with related international maritime standards.** All countries except the **State of Palestine** and **Yemen** are contracting parties to the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships[17] and have adopted related regulatory frameworks. Ten countries are parties to the International Convention for the Control and Management of Ships' Ballast Water and Sediments, which requires them to take measures to limit or eliminate the transfer of harmful aquatic organisms and pathogens.[18] Through the Riyadh Memorandum of Understanding on Port State Control, maritime authorities in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have committed to prevent pollution from ships. In 2021, they performed more than 2,500 ship inspections and identified deficiencies related to pollution.[19] Similar inspections were conducted by the six countries that are parties to the Memorandum of Understanding on Port State Control in the Mediterranean Region[20] and the four parties to the Indian Ocean Memorandum of Understanding on Port State Control.[21]

Effective inspection of ships requires a high level of human capacity and physical infrastructure that is often beyond the capacity of the least developed countries.

Inadequate ballast water management due in some cases to the lack of facilities receiving ballast water in ports is a major impediment in some countries, including **Oman**.[a] This raises the risk that invasive aquatic species and microbes harmful to human health will spread.

[a] Oman, See Voluntary National Review 2019.

◆ **Action against marine debris and plastic pollution is weak but gaining traction, including efforts to assess and understand the dimensions of the problem**.[22] **Morocco** and **Tunisia** undertook technical studies to measure marine plastic pollution along their coasts and identify plastic pollution hotspots. They are presently devising national strategies for coastlines without plastic.[23] The **United Arab Emirates** launched an integrated programme to monitor plastic waste in the marine and coastal environment.[24] For a detailed analysis of waste management policies, see the chapter on SDG 12.

Many countries still practice open dumping of municipal waste, irrespective of their level of income and despite high solid waste collection rates. This reflects either a lack of political will and/or a lack of technical infrastructure to manage waste properly. Thirteen Arab countries deposit from 20 to 100 per cent of municipal solid waste in open dumps, totalling 50 million tons yearly,[a] despite the risk that it could enter oceans and seas. A few countries lack a solid waste management policy, as is the case in the Comoros.[b]

[a] See the World Bank, What A Waste Global Database, country level dataset, last updated on 4 March 2019.

[b] See the Comoros, Voluntary National Review 2023.

◆ **Several Arab countries enforce standards on effluents that can be discharged in the marine environment.** Examples include the Ministerial Decision No. 8/1 of 2001 of **Lebanon**[25] and the Ministerial Decision No. 159 of 2005 of **Oman**.[26] In Oman, facilities need to obtain a prior license, and fees are applied depending on discharge volume. **Bahrain** has established a legislative framework to protect the health of its coral reefs by preventing pollutants from altering the pH level of its waters.[27] The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have given special consideration to the discharge of brine from desalination activity; see the subregional trends section of this chapter for more details.

Rates of wastewater treatment range from 11 to 100 per cent for 15 countries with available data.[a] Wastewater treatment is inadequate in the least developed and some middle-income countries, especially conflict-affected countries, contributing to marine pollution. For a detailed analysis of wastewater treatment policies, see the chapter on SDG 6.

[a] See UN Water on Progress on Wastewater Treatment (SDG target 6.3).

2. Marine protected areas

◆ **Most countries have taken steps to expand marine protected areas but several remain behind global targets.** A recent positive example is the **Comoros**, which designated 11 more marine protected areas in 2021, raising the national total to 15. The region counts 122 marine protected areas in 19 countries, with 37 others proposed.[28] While marine protected areas represented only 3.6 per cent of the region's territorial waters in 2020, they covered 35.8 per cent of marine key biodiversity areas in 2022. The average proportion of key biodiversity areas covered by marine protected areas for the 14 countries with available data ranged from 11 per cent in **Lebanon** to 74 per cent in **Algeria**. Key biodiversity areas coverage has increased substantially between 2015 and 2022 in some countries, such as in **Kuwait** (from 13 to 32 per cent) and **Morocco** (from



42 to 58 per cent). All 14 countries have covered at least 10 per cent of their key biodiversity areas, thereby achieving Aichi target 11.[29] Of the 14 countries, 10 have already reached the more ambitious target of covering 30 per cent of key biodiversity areas, as stipulated under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (target 3).[30]

◆ **In addition to ecotourism and recreational fishing options, some countries are financially sustaining their marine protected areas by combining them with aquaculture.** For example, an aquaculture zone was integrated into the Kuriat Islands protected area in **Tunisia**, resulting in synergies between marine conservation and job creation, and raising awareness among aquaculture producers.[31] Participatory governance approaches are essential for such endeavours to succeed. Decisions to allow commercial activities within and around protected areas must always be taken on a case-by-case basis while using a precautionary approach to reduce risks to biodiversity and habitats.

Few marine protected areas have a management plan in place. Six countries have plans for some areas, and one country is developing such plans.[a] In the Mediterranean region, most areas are considered "paper parks"; only 2.48 per cent of the Mediterranean Sea is covered by protected areas with a management plan, 1.27 per cent by areas that effectively implement their management plan, and 0.03 per cent by fully protected areas.[b]

Where they exist, management plans are typically prepared with the support of development partners, are rarely evidence-based due to a lack of monitoring data and do not necessarily account for climate change impacts. National capacities to develop management plans and regularly update them continue to lag, especially in the least developed countries. In such contexts, a simplified monitoring system could initially be put in place and gradually expanded as local capacity is built.

Protected areas are typically governed by the federal or national government; collaborative and local management delegation can be found in a few countries, such as the **Comoros** and **Morocco**.

[a] See the Protected Planet database, accessed on 15 June 2023.

[b] Gomei and others, 2019. Full protection refers here to the ecological coherence and connectivity of marine protected areas.

3. Marine science

◆ **Most countries have established national marine research institutes and academic marine research programmes and contribute, albeit in a limited way, to regional and global scientific collaboration.** The Red Sea Research Center at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in **Saudi Arabia** has several collaborative and interdisciplinary research programmes aiming to develop a predictive ocean model.[32] The National Institute of Marine Sciences and Technologies in **Tunisia** conducts research on aquaculture and marine biotechnology.[33] The Institute for Oceanographic Research and Fisheries in **Mauritania** monitors and carries out research on the marine environment.[34] The **Bahrain** Institute for Pearls and Gemstones researches the sustainability of pearl oyster beds.[35] Almost all Arab countries are members of the Global Ocean Observing System and provide data that facilitates research on ocean health.[36]


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The quality of marine science higher education programmes is generally weak. Arab countries contribute in a limited way to scientific collaborations in the field of marine protection. In the Mediterranean basin, 90 per cent of studies related to ocean acidification have been performed by North Mediterranean scientists.[a] Ocean acidity levels have been recorded for just two Arab countries, **Kuwait** and **Oman**.[b]

[a] Hassoun and others, 2022.

[b] According to data on SDG indicator 14.3.1. See the UN Global SDG Database, accessed on 8 December 2023.

4. Fisheries management

◆ **Almost all countries have a framework law governing the sustainable management of fish stocks.** Through numerous implementation decrees, they regulate fishing activity, including permitted fleets and gear, fishing areas and seasons, and catch limits and quotas.[37] Good practices include bans on bottom trawling **(Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar** and the **United Arab Emirates)**; application of the precautionary principle **(Oman)**; integration of ecosystem conservation within fisheries management (the **Comoros, Kuwait** and **Somalia**); and transparent reporting (**Mauritania**, the only candidate from the region in the Fisheries Transparency Initiative).[38] Responsibilities typically lie with the central government while local responsibilities are limited to the prevention of illegal fishing (such as in **Jordan**)[39] and the provision of information and training (as in **Egypt**).[40]

◆ **Increasing efforts are being exerted across the region to monitor and assess the status of important fish stocks.** The results of these assessments, however, seldom translate into policy. The **United Arab Emirates** conducted a comprehensive Fisheries Resources Assessment Survey in 2016–2017 that informed its National Framework Statement for Fisheries and Aquaculture 2019–2030.[41] Findings were corroborated by several socioeconomic studies, and actions established accordingly to reduce pressure on fisheries, rehabilitate fishery habitats and enhance fish stocks. Countries on the Mediterranean Sea undertake regular stock assessments, on their own and in collaboration with neighbouring countries under the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean, to evaluate the current status and health of commercial stocks and fisheries.[42]

Some countries, such as **Lebanon**[a] and the **Sudan**,[b] have yet to formulate a framework law on fisheries. Where they exist, such laws are typically outdated, having been promulgated between the 1950s and 1980s, and can be inconsistent with international law, as in **Somalia**.[c]

The main shortcomings preventing effective fisheries management in the region include:

- Loose fishery reporting requirements and a lack of transparent sharing of catch information.
- Weak implementation of an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management.
- Insufficient use of voluntary multistakeholder approaches to achieve sustainable fishery certifications. For example, fishery improvement projects to obtain certification by the Marine Stewardship Council and benefit from the application of the blue fish eco-label[d] are in progress only in the **Comoros, Mauritania** and **Morocco**.[e]

[a] See Lebanon, Voluntary National Review 2018.
[b] See the Sudan, Voluntary National Review 2022.
[c] See Somalia, Voluntary National Review 2022.
[d] See the Marine Stewardship Council.
[e] See the FIP Directory.


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The effectiveness of fisheries stock assessments and monitoring programmes varies from country to country but common shortcomings include:

- The limited availability of accurate and comprehensive data on fishing activity, including catches, by-catches and discards, and the collaborative sharing of such data.
- The insufficient development of scientific capacity through the training and retraining of scientists.
- The lack of sufficient financial resources to secure research infrastructure.
- The inadequate application of adaptive fisheries management that incorporates knowledge from regularly updated stock assessments and considers uncertainty due to changing conditions.

◆ **Several countries are adopting regulations against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and investing in coastal surveillance systems and capacities,** including as part of international and regional surveillance efforts. **Djibouti, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Somalia** and the **Sudan** are parties to the 2009 Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing;[43] **Saudi Arabia** is in the process of accession.[44] **Morocco** and **Oman** have taken additional measures, including updating relevant legislation to enable implementation of the agreement. Members of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean[45] engage in measures to ensure their flag, port and coastal State responsibilities are in line with relevant international instruments. Parties to the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission[46] and the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas[47] are also required to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. The **Comoros** and **Somalia** are part of FISH-i Africa, a regional cooperation project to better combat such fishing.[48]

◆ **Many countries support small-scale fishers, deploying policies and programmes to reduce their vulnerability. Morocco** over several decades has progressively extended social security benefits and health coverage explicitly to smaller-scale fishers, amending social security legislation to better account for the seasonality of small-scale fishing activities. In 2012, benefits were extended to non-salaried small-scale fishers. Moreover, Morocco offers specific subsidies for small-scale fisheries, including tax-free fuel at 70 per cent of the market price. The subsidies are managed by small-scale fishers' cooperatives (see section E for an elaboration on subsidies). Success in Morocco is attributed to policy coherence and close cooperation among government institutions governing social security, fisheries management and port infrastructure.[49] The traditional Sunan al Bahr committees in **Oman** are a sort of fishery councils permitting a participatory and transparent dialogue among different actors.[50] **Algeria** regulates artisanal fisheries and supports the commercialization of their products.[51]



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Progress on legislation to prevent, deter and eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing is slower in the region compared to other parts of the world. Legislation is not always aligned with international standards, especially in terms of robust vessel registration and licensing systems and catch documentation. Further, laws continue to be poorly enforced due to weak monitoring, control and surveillance capacities. Penalties are often low or not upheld. The lack of progress seems to be independent of the level of development: **Bahrain**, the **United Arab Emirates** and **Yemen** ranked among the 10 least-performing countries on a 2021 index of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.[a] Engaging stakeholders in decision-making, promoting awareness and education on the negative impacts, and providing alternative livelihood opportunities are effective yet underexplored alternatives to foster responsible fishing practices.

[a] Macfadyen and Hosch, 2021.

Some countries have yet to elaborate a policy for small-scale fisheries (for example, **Djibouti**).[a] Where such policies exist, shortcomings include:

- Social protection schemes for small-scale fishers have not always succeeded in reducing their vulnerability to poverty due to the lack of formalization in the sector.
- The lack of up-to-date small-scale fleet registers and accurate catch and gender-disaggregated socioeconomic data[b] limits analysis of the impact of subsidies and other supports to guide reform.
- Opportunities for small-scale fishers, especially women, to engage in fisheries-related policymaking and co-management are weak.
- Few countries have taken measures to ensure fishers have decent work conditions on fishing vessels. To date, **Morocco** is the only Arab country to have ratified the ILO Work in Fishing Convention. It entered into force in 2017 and sets basic decent work standards for the fishing industry.[c]
- Little attention has been given to developing complementary sectors that can help reduce the variability of small fishers' income, such as fishing tourism and net weaving.

[a] See Djibouti, Voluntary National Review 2022.

[b] For example, Libya does not have a register of small-scale fishers (FAO, 2022).

[c] See Ratifications of C188 – Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188).

◆ **Countries are stepping up support to facilitate trade, and developing and shortening value chains to improve fishers' livelihoods.** The Behar electronic fish trading market developed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in **Oman** during COVID-19 lockdowns has had a positive impact in facilitating the seafood trade. **Tunisia** developed a national strategy (2018–2020) to promote an export-oriented value chain for blue crab, an invasive alien species in the gulf of Gabes.[52]

There is limited overall knowledge of value chains in Arab countries, especially as they pertain to small-scale fishers. Few training opportunities or other forms of assistance are provided to small-scale fishers on catch handling and preservation.

◆ **About half of countries have elaborated a legislative framework to regulate and promote aquaculture activities,** often for improved food self-sufficiency and as an income-generating sector. **Egypt** has been a regional leader on aquaculture since the 1980s. Other countries, including **Bahrain, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates**, have more recently dedicated aquaculture development zones.[53] Through its 2018 National Aquaculture Policies and Practices,[54] **Saudi Arabia** is developing aquaculture to be the primary source of seafood supply, aiming to attract $4 billion in foreign and local investments into this field.[55] **Morocco** is taking measures to combat aquaculture fish diseases[56] and is developing an early warning system for harmful algal blooms to warn shellfish farmers and guarantee aquaculture product safety.[57]



Aquaculture is still underdeveloped or non-existent in half of Arab countries. It contributes under 6 per cent of total fish production in **Algeria, Bahrain,** the **Comoros, Djibouti, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Somalia** and **Yemen**. Policy shortcomings include:

- Outdated and incomplete legal frameworks regulating aquaculture in some countries.
- Insufficient attention to environmental management and the climate resilience of aquaculture.
- A lack of post-harvest handling and marketing systems, which prevents several countries from participating effectively in the global aquaculture trade.
- A paucity of academic colleges specific to aquaculture, which is pushing some countries, such as **Saudi Arabia**, to support students wishing to study aquaculture abroad.[a]

[a] Arab News, 2019.

C. Policy trends by subregion

In addition to the common policy trends at the regional level, a few policy directions stand out in different Arab subregions.

1. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

Oil export activity in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries results in a high volume of traffic by oil tankers in major shipping routes, making marine pollution by oil and other substances an important risk. In addition, these countries have around 50 per cent of global desalination capacity.[58] Large-scale desalination poses particular threats to the marine environment due to the discharge of highly saline brine.

◆ **Most countries have advanced policies to deal with oil spills,** and the rest are catching up. In recent years, **Saudi Arabia** has conducted intensive environmental disaster simulations and trained about 4,000 individuals, achieving the region's peak oil spill response capacity of approximately 75,000 barrels.[59] The National Contingency Plan of the **United Arab Emirates** is currently under development. **Among oil-exporting middle-income countries,** in response to recurrent oil spills (15 over the past 10 years), **Algeria** has instituted the Tel Bahr mechanism to combat marine pollution from spills and since 2005 has been part of an agreement with **Morocco** and **Tunisia** establishing a subregional emergency plan to tackle accidents in Mediterranean waters.[60]

◆ **Most countries regulate the discharge of desalination brine,** monitor water quality and support research aimed at limiting the impact of desalination on the marine environment. Upper limits on discharged brine salinity are specified in **Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates**. The lack of monitoring capacity in some desalination plants, however, affects compliance with discharge standards.[61]

2. Countries on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden and in the area under the Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment

Warm waters around tropical and subtropical countries have significant coral reefs and mangrove forest areas.

◆ **These countries have programmes to conserve and expand mangrove forests, including projects applying nature-based solutions to climate change. Bahrain** committed to quadrupling mangrove coverage across coastal areas by 2035, part of its plan to achieve net-zero by 2060. It has signed memorandums of understanding with government and private sector companies to conserve the mangroves.[62] In 2016, **Djibouti** cleaned 40 hectares of mangroves and planted 125,000 mangroves over an area of 114 hectares. A mangrove nursery was established in 2018.[63] The **United Arab Emirates** has led global efforts to conserve and restore mangrove ecosystems. It recently endorsed the Mangrove Breakthrough and launched the Mangrove Alliance for Climate.[64]

◆ **Tropical and subtropical countries are investing in artificial reefs and coral farming to help restore and rehabilitate degraded coastal and marine ecosystems. Bahrain** launched the national artificial reef project in 2023 to introduce new artificial habitats to bolster the growth of marine organisms, support biodiversity and rehabilitate damaged coral reefs.[65] **Saudi Arabia** is deploying advanced coral reef restoration technologies that enhance thermal resilience and is bringing together national stakeholders to scale up reef restoration through cost-effective options.[66] The Marine Environment Research Centre of the **United Arab Emirates** has a recent focus on super corals.[67] **Jordan** undertook several coral farming operations, with a good success rate.[68] **Egypt** plans to install coral nurseries off the coast of Hurghada to grow corals that can be replanted in damaged reef areas.[69] The use of structures made of organic material prevents them from becoming a source of marine pollution.

3. Mediterranean coastal countries

Mediterranean-level action under the Barcelona Convention and its protocols has stimulated policies and actions by coastal States to manage their marine and coastal activities in an integrated way. This helps to maximize the potential of the blue economy while preserving the integrity of their ecosystems. Nevertheless, coastal ecosystems remain under increasing and multiple pressures, notably from uncontrolled land development.

◆ **Some countries have adopted integrated coastal zone management strategies but are still in the early phases of implementation. Algeria** in 2002 enacted a coastal law that, among other provisions, limits construction along the coast.[70] In 2015, Algeria developed its First National Integrated Coastal Zone Management Strategy, which laid the foundations of its 2022 National Blue Economy Strategy 2030.[71] There are few evaluations of the success of coast zone management implementation in the country, however, with some indications of challenges related to coastal monitoring, coordination and the participation of stakeholders.[72]

Morocco in 2015 promulgated Law No. 81.12 related to the coastline, which aims to protect all vulnerable areas that may be affected by possible coastal development projects. The National Integrated Coastal Zone Management Strategy is now in its third phase of development; it defines a prospective policy and shared vision by defining issues, objectives, appropriate modes of governance and development priorities, while seeking a fair balance between economic and environmental aspects.[73]

Lebanon in 2015 issued a draft law on integrated coastal zone management that has yet to be passed.[74] It includes an article to create a national council for integrated coastal zone management, and emphasizes the inclusion of all economic, social and environmental sectors, at the private and public levels, in the preparation, approval and subsequent implementation of an integrated coastal zone management strategy.

◆ As contracting parties to the Barcelona Convention, **countries along the Mediterranean have committed to curbing harmful air pollutants emitted from ships.** In late 2022, the Mediterranean Sea was designated an emissions control area for sulfur oxides and particulate matter. It is the first marine area in the Arab region to have such a designation and the fifth area worldwide.[75] Starting in May 2025, ships travelling through the Mediterranean will need to cut sulfur content in fuel oil by four fifths. This will significantly reduce sulfur oxide emissions and help lower emissions of particulate matter. These measures are expected to benefit both aquatic and land ecosystems, including by preventing acidification.

4. Arab least developed countries and countries in conflict

The Arab least developed countries are heavily dependent on fisheries for livelihoods. Poverty is high among artisanal fishers. Along with countries in conflict, the least developed countries tend to have limited capabilities to manage coastal areas and marine reserves, and enforce laws against uncontrolled and illegal fishing. Weak wastewater and solid waste management infrastructure exacerbates coastal pollution. Information on the marine environment is often lacking.

◆ **The least developed countries are engaging civil society organizations and local communities in the everyday management of marine protected areas,** with positive impacts in terms of mobilizing community support, fostering a sense of ownership and increasing compliance with marine protected area regulations. The national legal framework governing marine protected areas, however, should permit such co-management practices or otherwise be reviewed to do so. More could be gained if participatory, community-based monitoring systems were also strengthened. In the **Comoros**, 79 co-management agreements with village communities were signed between 2015 and 2022. Three of these agreements are with groups of women fishers.[76]

◆ **Fisheries management policies in the least developed countries reflect a clear link to job creation and food security objectives.** In **Mauritania**, the National Responsible Management Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Fisheries and the Maritime Economy 2015–2019 gave priority to the development of essential infrastructure, value-added industries and services, training on sea trades, and the promotion of health control and the quality of fishing products.[77] The **Comoros** in 2018 elaborated a strategic framework for a national blue economy policy to stir public and private investments in fisheries and other sectors.[78]

◆ **Some countries in conflict are seeking to curb marine pollution by improving wastewater and solid waste management and bridging information gaps.** Before the 2023 Gaza war, enhancing wastewater management, treatment and reuse had been key targets of a national policy to clean up the coastline of Gaza. A series of assessments was underway to establish a monitoring and evaluation system to track the effects of climate change, pollution and unregulated construction along the Gaza coastline. Achieving maritime sustainability is now largely constrained by the Israeli occupation and restricted access to territorial waters in Gaza. Limiting fishing activity to shallow water is depleting fish stocks.[79]



D. Policies to leave no one behind

The degradation of coastal areas and fisheries affects the well-being of poor and vulnerable populations that depend on these resources for livelihoods. Without adequate policies, these communities may inadvertently contribute to further deterioration of resources.

Table 14.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

 **Small-scale and artisanal fishers** constitute a significant proportion of fishing activity in the region, yet are largely unprotected and lack access to financial and technical support services.	The 2019 Constitution of **Egypt** commits the State to protect and support fishers.[a] The *Barr Aman* initiative provides 42,000 fishers nationwide with environmentally friendly tools to support their work as well as low-interest micro-loans to support livelihoods during periods when fishing is limited. The initiative has an allocated budget of about EGP 50 million ($3.19 million).[b] Egypt included small-scale fishers in its nationally determined contribution to adapt to the impact of climate change.[c]
 **Women** involved in fishing and the processing and trade of fish and fishery products tend to work in harsh conditions and receive low pay. They are weakly represented in fisheries and marine area management and policymaking.	In the **Comoros,** co-management agreements were signed from 2020 to 2022 with women fishers to protect marine areas in Chidini, Malé and Oureveni.[d] The agreements were expected to ensure the engagement of fishing communities in decision-making an d the implementation of various protection actions, and to facilitate exchanges of knowledge and good practices while improving the income of workers at sea and their living conditions.[e]
 **Youth** are less attracted to the fishing sector due to low pay and appeal.	The economic vision 2040 of **Oman** calls for the fisheries sector to be increasingly managed and financed by Omanis and to employ young Omanis at competitive rates. One approach being pursued is to develop hygienic and digitally connected fish markets to encourage young, educated Omanis, both male and female, to get involved in the fishing sector across the value chain.[f]

[a] Egypt has the only constitution in the region that includes this provision as a State responsibility.
[b] See Egypt, Voluntary National Review 2021.
[c] FAO, 2022.
[d] See the Comoros, Voluntary National Review 2023.
[e] Africa Press, 2022.
[f] World Bank, 2017.

E. The financing landscape

Globally, SDG 14 is among the least funded of the global goals. In 2020, the global financing gap for achieving SDG 14 by 2030 was estimated at $175 billion per year.[80] No information exists on the resources needed to finance the goal in the Arab region.

1. SDG 14 spending trends

Despite the region's lack of comprehensive figures on SDG 14 spending, some trends are evident, as highlighted below.

- **Arab countries of various income levels tend to provide subsidies to fishers**. According to table 14.2, fishing subsidies regionally were estimated to exceed $1.3 billion in 2018. **Algeria**, **Morocco** and **Yemen** were the top three countries providing these subsidies. Seventy per cent were capacity-enhancing, which could lead to overfishing, especially if subsidies are not transparent and well targeted. SDG target 14.6 calls on countries to eliminate harmful subsidies and instead

deploy measures that enhance the economic viability and resilience of the fisheries sector.

In June 2022, WTO members adopted the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, which aims to phase out support to fishing on the high seas or in another country's waters. To date, the **United Arab Emirates** is the only Arab country to submit its acceptance of the agreement.[81]

Table 14.2
Fishing subsidies in Arab countries (Constant 2018 dollars, millions)

Country	Beneficial[a]	Capacity-enhancing[b]	Ambiguous[c]	Grand total
Algeria	13.0	6.7	208.4	228.1
Bahrain	1.1	13.6	11.2	25.9
Comoros	0.1	3.4	55.7	59.2
Djibouti	0.4	1.9	3.2	5.4
Egypt	0.0	25.1	48.4	73.6
Iraq	0.0	0.6	0.5	1.1
Jordan	0.0	0.1	Negligible	0.1
Kuwait	0.0	8.1	2.6	10.7
Lebanon	0.0	1.6	0.4	2.0
Libya	0.0	16.2	0.0	16.2
Mauritania	4.4	4.4	28.9	37.7
Morocco	10.3	78.0	208.4	296.8
Oman	6.2	61.9	84.6	152.7
Qatar	1.7	19.2	5.7	26.6
Saudi Arabia	3.8	39.4	17.7	61.0
Somalia	1.4	2.3	0.4	4.1
Sudan	Negligible	1.4	1.4	2.8
Syrian Arab Republic	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.6
Tunisia	0.0	1.6	86.7	88.3
United Arab Emirates	0.0	38.0	4.9	42.9
Yemen	0.0	38.4	142.4	180.8
Grand total	**42.5**	**362.7**	**911.4**	**1,316.6**

Source: Sumaila and others, 2019.
Notes: Data for the State of Palestine are not available. (a) Beneficial: fisheries management, fisheries research and development, and marine protected areas. (b) Capacity-enhancing: boat construction, renovation and modernization; fisheries development programmes; fishing port development; marketing and storage infrastructure; tax exemptions; fuel subsidies and fishing access agreements. (c) Ambiguous: fisher assistance, vessel buyback and rural fisher community development programmes.

- **A surge in aquaculture investments is evident across the region,** in particular in the Gulf Cooperation Council and North African countries. This includes R&D funding to increase fish farming. For example, the **Kuwait** Institute for Scientific Research launched a fish farming research programme focused on fish hatchery technologies and disease control, among others.[82] The National Agency for the Development of Aquaculture in **Morocco** supported 290 aquaculture projects in 2021, worth around $659 million.[83]
- **Spending on ocean-related R&D varies greatly across countries.** Recent data on indicator 14.a.1 (national ocean science expenditure as a share of the total R&D budget) for **Egypt** (0.17 per cent), **Kuwait** (0.97 per cent) and **Oman** (3.79 per cent)[84] reflect high divergence, with Kuwait nearing the global average from 2013 to 2021 of 1.1 per cent[85] and Oman exceeding it by far. Ocean science expenditures reported by UNESCO from 2013 to 2017 are provided in the table.

Table 14.3
Ocean science funding by country, 2013 to 2017 (Millions of dollars)

Country	2013	2017
Kuwait	NA	2.3
Mauritania	5.3	4.5
Morocco	7.3	6.7
Oman	14.3	16.9

Source: Dataset for the UNESCO IOC Global Ocean Science Report.

2. SDG 14 financing mechanisms

Multiple instruments and approaches are used to finance SDG 14.

- **Government revenues from domestic fishing activities are significant for several Arab countries** and can potentially be used to fund measures to achieve SDG 14. For example, the value of the domestic fisheries sector in **Somalia** was estimated at $135 million in 2015–2016, resulting in $4 million to $17 million in government revenues.[86] Annual revenue figures (2018–2020) for five Mediterranean Arab countries exceeded $900 million (table 14.4).

Conversely, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing not only affects the sustainability of fisheries but reduces government revenues to finance SDG 14. These forms of fishing imposed an estimated $306 million loss on **Somalia** in 2016, for example.[87]



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Table 14.4
Annual revenues from fishing in selected Mediterranean Arab countries

Country	Revenue (constant 2020 dollars, millions)	Percentage from small-scale fisheries
Tunisia	321	37
Egypt	263	16
Algeria	239	6
Morocco	66	32
Lebanon	14	56

Source: FAO, 2022, figure 33.
Note: Figures represent the value at the first sale, before value addition. Reference years are 2020 for Algeria and Morocco, and 2018 for Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia.

- **Trust funds are being established to secure long-term finance for marine protected areas.** In **Mauritania**, the BACoMaB endowment fund was created in 2009 to finance the conservation of the Banc d'Arguin National Park and other Mauritanian coastal and marine protected areas through an initial government allocation of €1.5 million, secured through a fisheries agreement with the European Union. European donors contributed additional amounts to the fund, which constitutes the first international system for payments for ecosystems services of its kind.[88] **Morocco** and **Tunisia** have benefited from financial support from the Trust Fund for Mediterranean Marine Protected Areas (MedFund), funded by France, Monaco, the Global Environment Facility and private donors.[89]

- **Fees for accessing marine protected areas charged to visitors, divers, researchers and fishers (where permitted)** could help secure the budget and staff capacity to carry out critical management activities. Fees must be retained with (or returned to) the protected area's management authority, however, and the use of access fees must be studied well. Imposing them on local visitors can be difficult in poorer areas, as has been the case of the Palm Islands Nature Reserve in **Lebanon**.[90]

- **Blue bonds** are emerging globally and offer opportunities similar to those of green bonds.[91] They were first piloted in the Seychelles in 2018, with promising results. Between 2018 and 2022, 26 blue bonds were issued, most by international financial institutions, with none specifically targeted at countries of the region.[92] They offer an important new avenue for unlocking SDG 14 financing, including through debt-for-nature swaps.

- **Official development assistance of $4.6 billion was committed to support the ocean economy in the region from 2010 to 2021.** Some 18 per cent was for the sustainable ocean economy[93] (table 14.5). **Morocco** has been a clear outlier as the largest recipient in the region. Among donors, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development was the largest donor (21 per cent of the total), followed by the **United Arab Emirates** (10 per cent). Official development assistance committed to Arab countries for the ocean economy has fluctuated over the years but overall has trended downwards since 2015 (figure 14.1).


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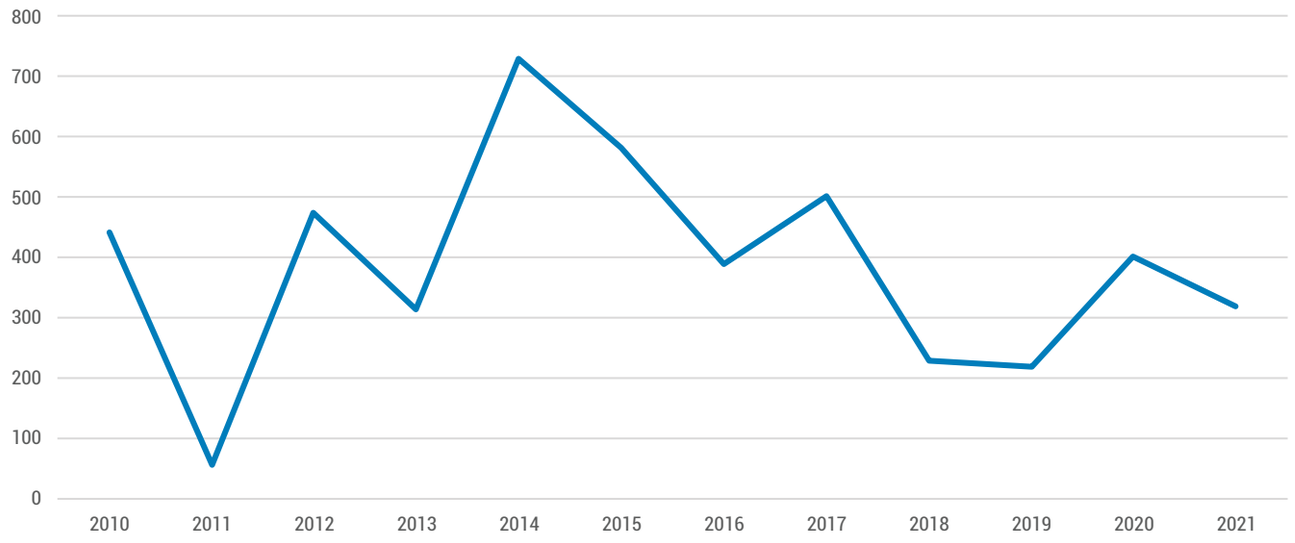
Table 14.5
Official development assistance for the ocean economy and sustainable ocean economy committed to Arab countries, 2010 to 2021

Country	Official development assistance for the ocean economy (committed, millions of dollars)	Official development assistance for the sustainable ocean economy (committed, millions of dollars)	Percentage sustainable (committed)
Morocco	2,118.54	220.69	10
Iraq	416.22	0.59	Negligible
Somalia	410.61	44.85	11
Egypt	314.56	17.34	6
Mauritania	291.99	201.04	69
Djibouti	245.22	14.06	6
Yemen	178.97	41.71	23
Tunisia	152.13	82.22	54
Libya	127.02	3.71	3
Lebanon	121.25	110.33	91
Jordan	119.35	4.40	4
Algeria	76.91	69.54	90
Comoros	28.02	19.71	70
Sudan	25.41	16.93	67
State of Palestine	18.07	10.39	57
Oman	3.89	0.15	4
Syrian Arab Republic	1.66	0.96	58
Region	4,649.80	858.61	18

Source: OECD Data Platform on Development Finance for the Sustainable Ocean Economy, accessed on 1 August 2023.
Note: The methodology is provided on the data platform.

- **Private investment in SDG 14** can be mobilized through various means and incentives, including through leveraging official development assistance. Between 2012 and 2021, **Egypt** and **Tunisia** were among the top 10 global recipients of private finance that targeted the ocean economy and was mobilized through official development assistance, at $280 million and $214 million, respectively.[94] **Saudi Arabia** adopted a National Fisheries Development Programme and plans to attract over $4 billion of foreign and local investment into its aquaculture industry as part of the national Vision 2030 scheme to diversify the economy.[95]

Figure 14.1
Official development assistance for the ocean economy committed to Arab countries, 2010 to 2021 (Millions of dollars)



Source: OECD Data Platform on Development Finance for the Sustainable Ocean Economy, accessed on 1 August 2023.
Note: The methodology is provided on the platform.



F. Regional dimensions

Subregional/sea area level cooperation is already fruitful in a number of SDG 14 policy areas, helping to harmonize policies, build technical and institutional capacity, share information and overcome limited resources, as illustrated below. More effective results require paying further attention to countries' uneven levels of engagement in cooperative arrangements.

Cooperation could advance in relation to newer approaches to fisheries management and the protection of marine environments, helping to support their uptake throughout the region. Potential areas of focus include ecosystem-based approaches, restoration, co-management, integrated coastal zone management and the blue economy. Regional collaboration could also be leveraged to boost investments and trade in fishery and aquaculture products.

- **Coordinated management of fisheries:** In the Gulf and Sea of Oman, two Regional Commission for Fisheries management measures, on minimum data reporting (2012) and the assessment of kingfish stocks (2018), have helped member countries to collectively track priority migratory species such as kingfish and coordinate protective actions, including a joint season where fishing is shut down. Similarly, the State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries reports, produced every two years by the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean, based on data from member countries and the latest findings of the Commission's scientific bodies, have become key policy guides for fisheries management in the Mediterranean.[96] These experiences could be emulated in other semi-enclosed sea areas such as the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, where efforts to establish a regional fishery body are ongoing.
- **Collaborative marine research programmes:** Joint marine research programmes, such as those under the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean, have improved the scientific basis for fisheries management. Examples where Arab countries have contributed include programmes focused on the blue crab, red coral and European eel.[97]
- **Collaborative action against illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing:** A range of joint measures have been undertaken under the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean, including catch documentation programmes, fleet registers, vessel lists and an awards scheme.[98] The Commission must be further empowered, however, to address serious or repeated non-compliance through effective investigations and appropriate follow-up actions.[99]
- **Combating accidental marine pollution:** The Marine Emergency Mutual Aid Centre,[100] established in 1982 under the framework of the Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment and based in Bahrain, has helped increase regional preparedness to deal with oil spills, and facilitated information exchanges, technological cooperation and training.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Endnotes

1. Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean (Western) and Atlantic Ocean (Eastern Central).
2. All Arab countries enjoy access to oceans or seas, with coastlines ranging from 27 kilometres (Jordan) to 3,330 kilometres (Somalia). See Somalia, Voluntary National Review 2022, see Jordan, Voluntary National Review 2022.
3. https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal14.
4. The Convention is the most notable and comprehensive legally binding ocean-related instrument. It was adopted in 1982 and entered into force in 1994. See the list of Contracting Parties.
5. Information on the implementation of the Convention (SDG indicator 14.c.1) by Arab countries is largely lacking, except for Iraq and Qatar (at 13 per cent and 80 per cent in 2021, respectively, reflecting high disparities).
6. Contracting parties include Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia.
7. All Contracting Parties to the Convention are Arab countries; they include Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen.
8. The Convention covers the area under the Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment. In addition to Iran, Member States from the Arab region include the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Iraq.
9. Contracting parties include the Comoros and Somalia.
10. Contracting parties include Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia.
11. In addition to Iran, member States from the Arab region include Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.
12. See Saudi Arabia, Voluntary National Review 2023.
13. See Bahrain, Voluntary National Review 2023.
14. See FAOLEX Database, accessed on 4 August 2023.
15. See IMO, Status of Conventions, accessed on 9 August 2023. Parties to the London Convention are: Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Oman, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates. Parties to the London Protocol are: Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.
16. See FAOLEX Database, accessed on 4 August 2023.
17. Including the Convention's Annexes I and II, related to pollution by oil, and noxious liquid substances carried in bulk, respectively. Of the 20 countries, 18 are also parties to Annexes III, IV and V related to harmful substances carried in packaged form, sewage and garbage, respectively. Seven are parties to Annex VI related to air pollution. See IMO, Status of Conventions. Accessed on 9 August 2023.
18. Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic and the United Arab Emirates. The Convention entered into force in 2017.
19. See the Riyadh Memorandum of Understanding on Port State Control.
20. Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia. See more on the agreement.
21. The Comoros, Oman, the Sudan and Yemen. See more on the agreement.
22. The United Nations Environment Assembly adopted a resolution in 2022 to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment, by 2024. The Jordanian Ministry of Environment is one of the 10 members of the Bureau. See more here.
23. World Bank, 2022.
24. Zawya, 2023.
25. See FAOLEX Database on Lebanon.
26. See FAOLEX Database on Oman.
27. See Bahrain, Voluntary National Review 2023.
28. See the Protected Planet database, accessed on 15 June 2023. Morocco tops the list, with 20 marine protected areas established and two more proposed. Djibouti, Iraq and the State of Palestine do not have designated marine protected areas (four are proposed for Djibouti).
29. See the Convention on Biological Diversity.
30. See target 3.
31. IUCN, 2021.
32. See more on the programmes of the Red Sea Research Center.
33. See more on the Institut National des Sciences et Technologies de la Mer.
34. See Mauritania, Voluntary National Review 2019.
35. DANAT, n.d.
36. See the Ocean Observing System Report Card 2023, accessed on 31 January 2023.
37. See FAOLEX Database, accessed on 4 August 2023.
38. See the Fisheries Transparency Initiative on Mauritania.
39. See the European Committee of the Regions on the Jordan Fisheries Policy.
40. See the European Committee of the Regions on the Egypt Fisheries Policy.
41. See the United Arab Emirates, National Framework Statement for Fisheries and Aquaculture 2019-2030.
42. See the stock assessment forms of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean.
43. See more on the agreement. No port state measures have been reported for any Arab party.
44. See Saudi Arabia, Voluntary National Review 2023.
45. Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia. Jordan and Saudi Arabia have recently joined as cooperating non-contracting parties. See more on the membership of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean.
46. The Comoros, Oman, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen. See more on the structure of the Commission.

47. Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia. See more on the Contracting Parties.
48. Wright and others, 2017.
49. FAO, 2019.
50. Al Balushi, 2023.
51. See Algeria, Voluntary National Review 2019.
52. See Tunisia, Voluntary National Review 2021.
53. Dickson, 2022.
54. See Saudi Arabia, National Aquaculture Policies and Practices.
55. The Fish Site, 2022.
56. See more on the Anda platform.
57. UNESCO IOC, 2022.
58. Hosseini and others, 2021.
59. See Saudi Arabia, Voluntary National Review 2023.
60. See Algeria, Voluntary National Review 2019.
61. Al-Saidi, Saadaoui and Ben-Hamadou, 2023.
62. See Bahrain, Voluntary National Review 2023.
63. See Djibouti, Voluntary National Review 2022.
64. Emirates 24/7, 2023.
65. See Bahrain, Voluntary National Review 2023.
66. See Saudi Arabia, Voluntary National Review 2023.
67. See the United Arab Emirates, Voluntary National Review 2022.
68. See Jordan, Voluntary National Review 2022.
69. Espanol, 2022.
70. Kacemi, 2009.
71. See Algeria, National Strategy for the Blue Economy.
72. Khelil and others, 2019.
73. See Morocco, adoption of Law No. 81.12.
74. Nader, El Indary and Tahhan, 2023.
75. IMO, 2022.
76. See the Comoros, Voluntary National Review 2023.
77. See Mauritania, Strategie nationale de gestion responsable pour un developpement durable des peches et de l'economie maritime 2015-2019.
78. See the Comoros, Voluntary National Review 2023. See also the 2023 Moroni Declaration for Ocean and Climate Action in Africa and the Great Blue Wall initiative, which engage the Comoros and Somalia.
79. See the State of Palestine, Voluntary National Review 2018.
80. Johansen and Vestvik, 2020.
81. See more on WTO members submitting their acceptance of the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies.
82. See more on the programme here.
83. Morocco world news, 290 Aquaculture Projects Emerged in Morocco in 2021, 2022.
84. See the UN SDG Indicators Database, accessed on 8 December 2023.
85. United Nations, 2023.
86. See Somalia, Voluntary National Review 2022.
87. Ibid.
88. See more on the fund and agreement.
89. See more on the MedFund.
90. See Lebanon, Palm Islands Nature Reserve Management Plan 2000-2005.
91. See the United Nations Global Compact on blue bonds.
92. Bosmans and de Mariz, 2023.
93. The United Nations Economist Network defines the *sustainable* ocean economy as including all ocean-based economic sectors operating and/or investing in sustainable systems. The focus is shifted from the production unit and economic output to conservation, livelihoods and jobs.
94. See the Data Platform on Development Finance for the Sustainable Ocean Economy.
95. The Fish Site, 2022.
96. See more on The state of Mediterranean and Black Sea fisheries reports.
97. FAO, 2022.
98. See more on the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean.
99. Oceana Europe, 2023.
100. See more on the Marine Emergency Mutual Aid Centre.

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15 LIFE ON LAND

SDG 15

Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

A. Introduction

The Arab region is progressing on SDG 15, albeit at a slow pace. Improvements comprise actions to protect important sites for terrestrial and freshwater biodiversity and to manage forest areas. Yet regressions are also evident in terms of land degradation, the limited protection of endangered species, and the insufficient mobilization of development aid to finance the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.

Advancing SDG 15 in the region depends closely on progress on sustainable agriculture (SDG 2), sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12), climate change adaptation (SDG 13), and structural issues of governance (SDG 16) and partnerships (SDG 17).

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).

While data availability for SDG 15 has improved since 2020, up-to-date data on desertification and land degradation, both crucial policy areas for the region, are missing.



The region is naturally poor in forests, housing 1 per cent of the world's forested area. More than two thirds of forests are in the least developed countries, where the forest area as a proportion of total land area has been decreasing slowly over the past decade. The share fell from 6.8 per cent in 2010 to 6.2 per cent in 2020. A quarter of these forest areas are within legally established protected areas and are covered by long-term management plans.



The proportion of terrestrial and freshwater key biodiversity areas covered by protected areas in the region is increasing but remains markedly lower than the global average, at 23 per cent in 2022 compared to 44 per cent globally. Middle-income countries perform best on this indicator, while the least developed countries and countries in conflict perform the worst. Mountain key biodiversity areas are the least protected in the region, with only 10 per cent covered by protected areas.



While updated figures on land degradation are lacking, available data suggest that land degradation has more than doubled across the region, increasing from 3.4 per cent in 2015 to 8.7 per cent in 2019. The least developed countries had the highest percentage of degraded land in absolute terms, at 14 per cent in 2019, while the Gulf Cooperation Council countries saw the sharpest increase, from 0.7 per cent in 2015 to 9.5 per cent in 2019.



The risk of species extinction is increasing in some countries, independent of income level. The Red List index of species survival is low and trending downward in a number of least developed and Gulf Cooperation Council countries.[1]



In 2022, 73 per cent of countries were parties to the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization, yet only 27 per cent had legislative, administrative and policy frameworks or measures for adequate implementation.

Official development assistance on conservation and the sustainable use of biodiversity **received by Arab countries peaked in 2015 at $843 million. It has since trended downward, reaching $412 million in 2021. Between 2015 and 2021, middle-income countries received around two thirds of this assistance; the share of the least developed countries was 13 per cent.**[2]

For an up-to-date view of SDG 15 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 15

- Develop simple and cost-effective protocols to monitor biodiversity and ecosystem health, inform adaptive management approaches for protected areas and demonstrate impact.
- Devise policies and initiatives that support populations dependent on fragile ecosystems, including forests and wetlands, for livelihoods. This encompasses engaging them in community-based conservation projects that increase their income while maintaining their traditional methods.
- Integrate biodiversity into national policies that govern land tenure and use, including agriculture and urban development policies.
- Enhance ecological connectivity across protected areas at the national and regional levels by leveraging geographic sites that can provide corridors for species movement and genetic exchanges, and improve regional cooperation in this area.
- In designing and implementing tree-planting and land restoration projects, consider all sources of influence – social, political, economic and environmental – to increase the success rate and long-term sustainability.
- Document and legally protect native genetic resources and corresponding traditional knowledge to ensure that economic benefits from their commercial exploitation is equitably shared, and support research partnerships among academia, industry and local communities to increase the added value of natural capital.
- Develop bankable biodiversity and land restoration projects that permit better access to innovative financing mechanisms, including green bonds.

B. The policy landscape for SDG 15

Multilateral environmental agreements have in many ways driven and shaped SDG 15 policies in Arab countries.

All countries are contracting parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity.[3] Since its adoption in 1992, the Convention and its two subsequent protocols have promoted the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, along with the fair and equitable sharing of benefits from genetic resources. The Convention has helped to raise the bar on biodiversity with the adoption of progressively more ambitious goals and targets. The 2022 agreement on the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework gave further momentum and is expected to drive new commitments by countries and other stakeholders.



The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework: towards living in harmony with nature

The fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity endorsed an ambitious global biodiversity framework. It lays out 23 action-oriented global targets to achieve by 2030. These are aimed at four goals by 2050: safeguarding ecosystems, species and genetic resources; the sustainable use of biodiversity; the fair and equitable sharing of benefits from genetic resources; and the means of implementation, including closing the biodiversity finance gap of $700 billion per year.[a] Countries are already translating global goals and targets into updated national biodiversity strategies and action plans.

[a] See more on the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

All countries are contracting parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification,[4] adopted in 1994 to address desertification, land degradation and the effects of drought. Multiple global initiatives have been launched within the frame of the Convention, notably, the Land Degradation Neutrality Target Setting Programme in 2015. It invites parties to the Convention to formulate voluntary targets to achieve land degradation neutrality in accordance with their specific national circumstances and development priorities.[5]

It is therefore not surprising that SDG 15 policies in the region exhibit more commonalities than differences, although national contexts and differences in natural environments affect priorities and means of implementation. Common trends, which transcend income and geographic subgroupings, are highlighted in the following section.

For policies on the protection of marine biodiversity, see the chapter on SDG 14.

1. Protection and restoration of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems

◆ **Most countries have expanded the number and extent of terrestrial and inland freshwater protected areas, but progress is slow. Evidence on the effectiveness of these protected areas in improving the condition of biodiversity remains limited.** According to the World Database of Protected Areas, the region counts 750 terrestrial and inland freshwater protected areas, 125 of which (17 per cent) hold one or more international designations.[6] **Qatar** has increased its protected area coverage from 11 to 29 per cent, one of the highest rates globally, but none of its terrestrial or marine protected areas have management plans.[7]

The governance structure for protected areas varies. In more than half of cases, the protected area is under the authority of a national or federal ministry. In a third of cases, non-governmental organizations are fully delegated or are part of joint management arrangements. Very few delegations to subnational authority are noted, as in **Mauritania** and **Saudi Arabia**, reflecting weak decentralization in the region.

The region is not moving fast enough in designating freshwater and terrestrial key biodiversity areas as protected areas for many reasons. These include competing priorities, limited technical, human and financial resources, and ineffective governance structures.

In the least developed countries, where the protection of key biodiversity areas is the weakest, a participatory strategic planning process needs to take place to assess the ecological importance, threats and conservation needs of biodiversity areas. This will help ensure that limited resources are targeted where they can have the greatest impacts.

Around half of terrestrial and freshwater protected areas in the region benefit from a management plan.[a] Where they exist, such plans often lack community participation and face implementation hurdles, however. The delegation of protected area management to non-governmental organizations is not always matched with adequate funding and capacity-building and therefore remains ineffective.

Site-specific efforts to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of protected areas remain modest. As a result, the extent to which these areas have been successful in conserving biodiversity is largely unknown.[b] The lack of evidence on the effectiveness of protected areas is a major shortfall in halting biodiversity loss in the region. Simple and cost-effective monitoring protocols that focus on key indicators of biodiversity and ecosystem health and inform adaptive management approaches are highly needed, especially in the least developed countries.

Countries miss opportunities for using protected areas as sites of innovation and multidisciplinary learning. In many instances, these areas attract only biologists.[c]

[a] As reported in the World Database of Protected Areas of UNEP-IUCN, available at the Protected Planet website, accessed on 19 April 2023.

[b] According to the Global Database on Protected Area Management Effectiveness, available at the Protected Planet website, accessed on 19 April 2023. From 2001 to 2019, just 120 protected areas in the region (some 12 per cent of the total) were subject to one or more evaluations of management effectiveness of some form, with Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates leading in terms of the number of protected areas evaluated. For the eight protected areas in the region designated as natural world heritage sites, which are consistently assessed by IUCN, the conservation outlook was good for only one (in Egypt), good with some concerns in three (in Algeria, Jordan and the Sudan) and of significant concern in the remaining four (in Mauritania, Iraq, Tunisia and Yemen).

[c] UNESCO, 2020.

◆ **While in general, countries have low forest cover, most have developed forestry laws that delimit, classify and protect forests, govern their exploitation and define penalties.**[8] Some date to as early as the 1910s,[9] well ahead of laws governing protected areas, and have undergone updates over time. Forestry laws have not always been effective for social, technical and institutional reasons, including low capacities to enforce penalties and a lack of participation by affected groups in forest policy creation.

A few countries have elaborated forest development strategies, such as the **Comoros, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia** and **Tunisia**, and, more recently, **Morocco**. Just a third of the region's forest area is covered by a long-term management plan. **Morocco** and **Tunisia** lead on that front with 62 and 70 per cent of forest area having a long-term management plan, respectively.[10]

Forest governance models are most often top-down, with little engagement of local communities, civil society organizations and the private sector, and hence no recognition of their local knowledge, practices and livelihood needs.

Moreover, national forest management programmes often depend on international aid and funds, and suffer from a lack of capacity-building, decision-making powers and sometimes legal support. These challenges can limit implementation and lead to unsustainable practices such as illegal logging, encroachment and overexploitation of forest resources.

2. Conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and genetic resources

◆ In compliance with their membership in the Convention on Biological Diversity, **20 Arab countries had by 2023 developed at least one national biodiversity strategy and action plan**[11] detailing how they intend to fulfil the objectives of the Convention in light of specific national priorities and circumstances.

Among the more common strategies is to **reinforce policy coherence and the integration of biodiversity into national planning,** therefore striking a better balance between the conservation of biodiversity and ecosystems and their sustainable use. **Iraq** and **Mauritania** have, for example, integrated biodiversity into their poverty reduction strategies, while **Egypt, Jordan, Morocco** and the **United Arab Emirates** have incorporated biodiversity protection within ecotourism promotion policies. Another common aim relates to **improving understanding of biodiversity across society. Algeria, Iraq** and **Qatar** identify biodiversity education and awareness-raising as strategic pillars of their national biodiversity strategy and action plans. **Enhancing the resilience of ecosystems to climate change** is a strategic pillar in some plans.

National biodiversity strategy and action plans have varying levels of quality but are largely outdated, with the majority submitted from 2016 to 2017. They have not been updated to align with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Implementation remains inadequate due to insufficient financial and human resources and limited institutional coordination and cooperation. Only eight plans are costed **(Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, Mauritania, Somalia, Tunisia and Yemen)**.

There are barriers, mostly institutional in nature, to mainstreaming biodiversity across sectors, including in agricultural policy where it is needed most. Awareness and understanding of the importance of biodiversity and its links to different sectors may also be lacking.

Insufficient national policies to govern land tenure and use, and weak implementation where they exist, constitute major challenges in most countries. This shortfall generates detrimental effects on biodiversity and natural habitats.

The integration of biodiversity values into national accounting and reporting systems is still lagging, with only six countries having done so in 2022 **(Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Qatar** and **Tunisia)**.[a]

[a] See the database on indicator 15.9.1 of the United Nations Statistics Division, accessed on 11 December 2023..

◆ **Most countries seek to protect endangered species through a mix of measures,** including: dedicated action plans (such as the Arabian Leopard Programme and Fund of **Saudi Arabia**, which increased the number of leopards and reintroduced the species to the wilderness of the AlUla region,[12] and the 2017–2018 plans of **Algeria** for magot monkeys, cheetahs and Cuvier's gazelles); the designation of protected areas for endangered species (such as birds in **Egypt** and the **United Arab Emirates**); the establishment of red lists and regular assessments of the status of living species (as in **Bahrain** and the **United Arab Emirates**); hunting licenses (as in the **Sudan**); measures against the illegal trade in wildlife (such as the use of high-tech border control and a digital certification system in the **United Arab Emirates**); and the establishment of seed banks (as in **Saudi Arabia** to conserve native plant species).[13]

Sixteen Arab countries are parties to the Convention on Migratory Species of Wild Animals,[14] which covers terrestrial, aquatic and avian migratory species, their habitats and migration routes. In addition to legal measures

to protect endangered migratory species, countries have addressed obstacles to migration, such as by adopting safeguards to protect migratory birds flying over powerlines in **Egypt**[15] and wind energy installations in **Jordan**.[16] Since 2009, the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi in the **United Arab Emirates** has hosted the Convention's regional office and helped to address common threats to migratory species of regional interest, notably dugongs and raptors.[17]

Twenty-one countries are parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna.[18] Only nine countries, however, have been able to enact and enforce legislation to designate at least one Management Authority and one Scientific Authority; prohibit trade in specimens in violation of the Convention; penalize such trade; and confiscate specimens illegally traded or possessed. Three countries have met some of the requirements while nine countries met none (mostly least developed countries or countries in conflict).[19] In **Djibouti** and **Somalia**, the Convention recommended the temporary suspension of all commercial trade until compliance is secured.[20]

The lack of well-designated and effectively managed protected areas, which are critical for the provision of habitats for threatened species, represents a major policy gap. Protected areas are most often not connected to provide the ecological corridors needed for species movement and genetic exchanges. In that respect, other geographic sites that can contribute to biodiversity conservation, such as those with cultural and religious significance known as "other effective area-based conservation measures", could play a role in better connecting protected areas. Regional cross-border cooperation to prevent the fragmentation of habitats would also be instrumental.

Inadequate resources, weak enforcement of penalties for violators and challenges in integrating conservation objectives into broader land-use planning all contribute to the ineffectiveness of actions to protect endangered species.

Weak collection of data disaggregated by ecosystem types and at the species level hinders integrated assessments and the ability to demonstrate concrete impacts from conservation actions.

◆ **Sixteen Arab countries are contracting parties to the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization**.[21] This calls for establishing transparent and predictable rules for accessing genetic resources, an important issue for Arab countries. Many are home to unique plant and animal species and are rich in traditional knowledge related to their use and management, such as in the field of medicinal plants. The **Comoros** is among the few countries globally to have adopted a law on genetic resources, in 2020, as well as formal procedures for the issuance of permits to access them and corresponding traditional knowledge for commercial and non-commercial uses.[22] This step is critical to protect against biopiracy. It helps ensure that Comorian holders of traditional knowledge on the planting and use of medicinal and aromatic plants, such as ylang-ylang, will be fairly compensated in contracts with foreign companies and laboratories.[23] It will also encourage local communities to protect important endemic species.

Eighteen countries are parties to the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. It facilitates access to plant genetic materials among farmers and scientists, and ensures that countries providing these materials also benefit. This treaty is very important for food security and the resilience of agriculture to climate change. More than 6,500 Standard Material Transfer Agreements were reportedly concluded from 2012 to 2022 to transfer plant material to 21 countries in the region for research, training and plant breeding.[24]

Only 6 countries (**Algeria**, the **Comoros**, **Mauritania**, **Morocco**, **Qatar** and the **Sudan**) out of the 16 Arab State parties to the Nagoya Protocol have related legislative, administrative and policy frameworks or measures.[a] Only 11 of the 18 parties to the Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture have a corresponding legislative, administrative and policy framework. Even where frameworks exist, the lack of awareness and engagement among local communities and targeted entities contributes to the low enforcement of existing laws and implementation of treaty commitments.

Complementary efforts are needed to document and safeguard traditional knowledge and support research partnerships among academia, industries and local communities to promote innovation and value addition to genetic resources.

[a] See the database on indicator 15.6.1 of the United Nations Statistics Division, accessed on 11 December 2023.

◆ **In 2022, all 22 countries had legislation, regulation or an act related to the prevention of the introduction and management of invasive alien species,** up from only 7 countries in 2016. The National Invasive Species Strategy & Action Plan 2022–2026[25] of the **United Arab Emirates** aims to raise awareness, enhance capacity, and prevent the introduction and spread of alien and invasive alien species. **Bahrain** is presently compiling an invasive alien plant and animal species blacklist and preparing to strengthen existing national regulations on invasive alien species.[26]

From 2016 to 2022, only six Arab countries allocated funds in their national budgets to manage the threat of invasive alien species (**Egypt, Iraq, Oman**, the **Sudan**, **Tunisia** and the **United Arab Emirates**). Five Arab countries received global funding for projects related to invasive alien species management (**Egypt**, the **Comoros**, **Jordan, Libya** and **Yemen**).[a]

[a] See the database on indicator 15.8.1 of the United Nations Statistics Division, accessed on 11 December 2023.

◆ **All Arab countries are parties to the Cartagena Protocol of the Convention on Biological Diversity[27] and are taking necessary biosafety measures** for the safe handling, transport and use of living modified organisms resulting from modern biotechnology. Among the 14 countries that have reported on implementation, only **Algeria** has indicated that it had measures fully in place. Seven others have only partial measures. Countries with full or partial measures, however, do not necessarily allocate a budget for operations or secure permanent staff to administer biosafety functions. This puts the effectiveness of these measures in doubt.[28]

3. Combating desertification, land degradation and drought

◆ **As contracting parties to the Convention to Combat Desertification, 16 countries have produced national action programmes that spell out how they intend to implement the Convention.** The plan of **Somalia** has a three-pronged strategic approach combining considerations that are ecological (improving the condition of affected ecosystems), economic (improving the living conditions of affected populations) and administrative (access and rights to communal land). National action plans are outdated in most countries, with just two having updated their plans since 2015 (**Somalia** in 2018 and the **United Arab Emirates** in 2022).

◆ **Several countries have set ambitious land degradation neutrality targets;** nine registered voluntary targets under the Convention to Combat Desertification. The **Syrian Arab Republic** pledged in 2020 to reverse 20 per cent of degraded agricultural land and rehabilitate 50 per cent of forest land, wetlands and other ecosystems and natural habitats affected by degradation by 2030. The **United Arab Emirates** pledged in its National Strategy for Combating Desertification 2022–2030 to restore at least 80 per cent of degraded land by 2030.[29]

Countries foresee a variety of actions to achieve these targets, **with most embarking on afforestation and reforestation projects.** The green dam programme of **Algeria**, initiated in the 1970s and revived in 2020, plans to develop a huge forest belt from east to west as a nature-based solution to halt desertification. The forthcoming phase of the project foresees a strong local development component.[30] The Green Initiative of **Saudi Arabia** aims to plant 10 billion trees to rehabilitate 40 million hectares of land.[31]

Tree planting and land restoration efforts in the Arab region have had positive results in some locations, helping to increase forest cover, restore degraded land and improve ecosystem services such as soil fertility, water regulation and habitat provision. Positive changes have also been observed in terms of increased community engagement, awareness and participation in community-based restoration activities.

Some tree-planting projects fail to achieve anticipated results, however, due to inadequate follow-up, maintenance and monitoring to ensure the survival and growth of planted trees. In some cases, inattention to the impact of climate change, grazing activity, use of non-native plants and tree irrigation needs have endangered the success and sustainability of these efforts. This points to a lack of science-based and holistic planning that considers all influential factors. The participation of local communities in the development of tree-planting schemes can lower the risks of such failures.

Community-based restoration actions have faced hurdles in some countries due to land fragmentation, which has led to an unwillingness to invest in the protection of small parcels of land due to low economic returns. Alternatively, traditional participatory land management approaches, such as the agdal and hima systems in the Maghreb and Mashreq, respectively, have helped promote more equitable and sustainable resource use.[a]

[a] UNESCO, 2020.


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◆ **Countries with significant agricultural sectors, especially middle-income and least developed countries, have established institutions at various levels of governance to monitor and manage droughts.** The **Syrian Arab Republic** developed a national drought strategy, with integrated drought monitoring, and **Iraq** set up a Higher Committee for Drought to work across government agencies. Early warning systems were launched in **Djibouti, Somalia** and the **Sudan** with the support of regional organizations and international non-governmental organizations.[32]

Institutional and management frameworks have proven insufficient in enhancing drought preparedness and resilience due in part to a disconnect from ever-changing vulnerabilities in local communities. This is in addition to inequalities in access to information and resources to act on information, such as access to credit.[a] Multilateral cooperation over shared basins has also been weak.

[a] UNDRR, 2021.

C. Policy trends by subregion

1. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

Gulf Cooperation Council countries have hyper-arid environments that are rich in biodiversity that is under threat. Despite expansions of protected areas, these cover only 23 per cent of terrestrial key biodiversity areas. Land degradation is advancing quickly. Dust and sandstorms are increasingly problematic due to limited rainfall and severe soil aridity, with significant impacts on people's health, economies and the environment. Significant infrastructure development, especially along coastal areas, has serious consequences for natural habitats.

◆ **Countries have taken visible actions to monitor and collect data related to biodiversity**. The **United Arab Emirates** developed a Natural Capital Smart Map to collect biological and economic information and generate assessments to guide land use and investment policies. It has also conducted back-casting exercises to build historical knowledge on biodiversity. **Qatar** and **Kuwait** have built databases on biodiversity and inventories of animal genetic resources. **Oman** is using remote sensing to monitor green cover.[33]

◆ **Countries are taking part in regional and interregional sand and dust storm assessments and early warning efforts and investing in mitigation.** The National Centre for Meteorology of **Saudi Arabia** hosts the Sand and Dust Storm Warning Regional Center. Accredited by the World Meteorological Organization, it uses satellite imagery to forecast and help Gulf Cooperation Council countries respond to storms.[34] **Kuwait** and **Iraq** are collaborating to better understand the conditions that create sand and dust storms and restore ecosystems in areas that generate these storms.[35]

2. Arab middle-income countries

Arab middle-income countries have diverse habitats with a large number of endemic plant species, including essential crops. Protection efforts are considerable, with 63 per cent and 44 per cent of freshwater and terrestrial key biodiversity areas covered by protected areas, respectively. Yet urbanization, pollution and the unsustainable use of natural resources, including in agriculture, are major and increasing causes of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation.

◆ **Middle-income countries have made more visible attempts to adopt integrated and long-term approaches to biodiversity, linking it to agriculture, poverty reduction and climate resilience. Tunisia** developed a national natural resource management plan to 2050 that integrates biodiversity in provisions related to agriculture, water and climate change. **Algeria** has established an intersectoral Committee on Biodiversity (2018) and a National Commission for Protected Areas (2017) to ensure a cross-sectoral emphasis. The Forest Strategy 2020–2030 of **Morocco** follows an integrated and participatory approach to strike a balance between conservation and the development of local economies around forests, such as through argan and palm production.

◆ **In the Mashreq, non-governmental organizations have prominent roles in managing biosphere reserves and protected areas, in cooperation with local and national Governments.** This helps sustain protection and management of the sites. For example, the Shouf Biosphere Reserve in **Lebanon** is managed by a committee appointed by the Ministry of Environment that includes the Al-Shouf Cedar Society, a non-governmental organization, as well as mayors of larger villages in the region and technical experts.[36]

◆ **Host to the majority of the region's Ramsar[37] wetland sites of international importance, countries in the Maghreb have established legal frameworks and elaborated comprehensive strategies to protect their wetlands**. Further efforts are needed to bridge knowledge gaps related to wetland distribution, spatial extent and the condition of related species, however. **Algeria** developed a 15-year strategy to sustainably utilize its 50 Ramsar wetlands, with clear roles for national and provincial governments.[38] The national wetland strategy 2015–2024 of **Morocco** specifies integrated action plans to restore the wetlands and develop sustainable value chains for artisanal fishing, tourism, aquaculture and bird watching. It sets an ambitious target to raise the awareness of 50,000 people per year.[39]

3. Arab least developed countries and countries in conflict

Arab least developed countries have more than two thirds of the region's forests. Despite conservation efforts, the share of forests in total land area in these countries has slowly declined from 7.4 per cent in 2000 to 6.2 per cent in 2020. Outdated and fragmented institutional and legislative frameworks on biodiversity and the environment more broadly along with significant financing constraints prevent governments from enforcing protection policies. Economic insecurity leads people to adopt practices such as overgrazing and tree cutting for firewood that harm the environment and contribute to land degradation.

Conflicts and associated displacement are negatively affecting ecosystems. Protected areas in **Yemen** are neglected due to a shift in national priorities away from environmental issues. Oil spills have contaminated rivers and farmlands in the **Syrian Arab Republic**. The destruction of rain-fed farming systems in **Iraq** has accelerated land degradation. In some countries, the scarcity of natural resources is exacerbating conflict.

◆ **The least developed countries seek to modernize legislative and institutional frameworks governing SDG 15.** In **Somalia**, a central responsible body, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, was only established in 2022.[40] To address fragmentation in policies and laws relating to land use and the environment in the **Sudan**, national responsibilities were centralized in the Higher Council for Environment and Natural Resources, an interministerial body placed under the Prime Minister.[41] The Sudan has yet to develop a comprehensive policy to protect habitats, including forests, and combat land degradation.[42]

◆ **The least developed countries are taking policy measures to limit practices harmful to biodiversity, but further efforts are needed to address root causes.** The national charcoal policy of **Somalia** regulates the use of charcoal, which constitutes a major driver of deforestation. **Mauritania** has sought to secure alternative low-cost energy sources and undertaken awareness-raising to reduce the use of wood for fuel.[43]

◆ **In conflict-affected countries, policies supported by development partners, including United Nations bodies and international non-governmental organizations, focus on community-based approaches to biodiversity conservation.** The Global Environment Facility, for instance, has supported the establishment of community-run nurseries for dragon's blood tree seedlings to restore degraded forests in Socotra, **Yemen**.[44]


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D. Policies to leave no one behind

The degradation of ecosystems and loss of biodiversity can have knock-on effects on the health and well-being of poor and vulnerable populations, especially those whose livelihoods depend on these resources. Without adequate policies, existing socioeconomic inequalities can be amplified, which in turn can lead to further land degradation and the destruction of habitats.

Table 15.1
Examples of policies to leave no one behind

Rural and other subnational communities, including mountain communities, rely on subsistence farming for their livelihoods and are greatly affected by reductions in ecosystem services.	**Oman** has adopted a policy to support populations in mountainous areas that depend largely on livestock breeding and beekeeping made possible by rich plant and animal ecosystems. The policy supports traditional practices and livelihood improvements, resulting in win-win outcomes for people and the environment.[a]
Women tend to be disproportionately affected by land and ecosystem degradation due to limited control over and access to resources.	Acacias For All is a social enterprise formed through a partnership between the Government, non-governmental groups and research institutions in **Tunisia**. Implemented in 14 villages, it offers an economic model to fight desertification where the Government offers public land to women in return for planting green barriers of acacias. The acacias offer natural protection favourable to agriculture and biodiversity. The project is also helping to secure stable incomes for women.[b]
Internally displaced populations: The degradation of ecosystems can trigger the displacement of vulnerable populations such as small farmers and pastoral communities.	Sustainable land management and environmental restoration activities in the Qaraoun Catchment in **Lebanon** took place from 2016 to 2021 through a partnership between the Ministry of Environment and development partners. It halted land degradation and provided economic opportunities for underprivileged local residents (limiting out-migration) and Syrian refugees.[c]

[a] See Oman, Voluntary National Review 2019.
[b] See the Women and Gender Constituency on Acacias For All.
[c] UNDP and GEF, 2020.


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E. The financing landscape

1. SDG 15 financing needs

ESCWA has estimated that over $18 billion is needed by 2030 to finance biodiversity conservation in just seven Arab countries (table 15.2). While the figure is not particularly high, mobilizing resources for SDG 15 is challenged by competing priorities, especially in middle- and low-income countries. Funding mobilization is listed as a strategic priority in the national biodiversity strategies and action plans of countries including **Algeria, Bahrain,** the **Comoros, Egypt, Jordan** and **Tunisia**.

Table 15.2
SDG 15 costing in selected countries

Country	Additional investments to conserve biodiversity (billions of dollars)	Reference document
Algeria	4.6	National Reforestation Plan
Egypt	5.0	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
Iraq	3.3	National Biodiversity Protection Strategy
Jordan	1.0	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
Lebanon	1.2	National Afforestation/ Reforestation Programme
Morocco	2.9	Nationally Determined Contribution
Tunisia	0.5	Forest Investment Programme

Source: ESCWA Arab Financing for Development Gateway, accessed on 17 April 2023.



2. SDG 15 financing mechanisms

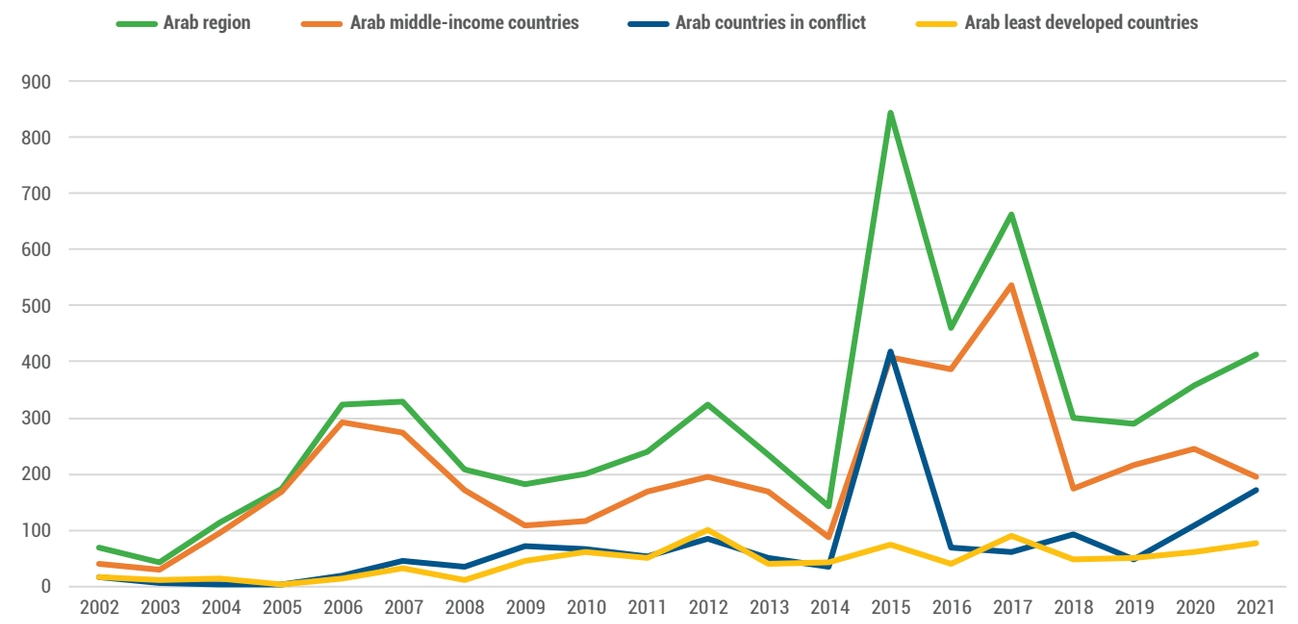
Biodiversity conservation and ecosystem protection in the region are typically financed through domestic public budgets and development finance. Innovative financing sources remain mostly untapped. Investments in biodiversity and sustainable land use are perceived as having low returns over a long time, and as such, may not be attractive to investors unless supported by some degree of risk-sharing and guarantees. While the issuance of green bonds, which are debt instruments to finance projects with environmental benefits, is growing fast globally due to increasing investor demand, the share allocated to biodiversity and sustainable land use from 2017 to 2019 was only around 3 per cent. By contrast, sustainable energy and transport projects received 80 per cent of funding.[45] The Arab region may benefit further from green bonds if more bankable biodiversity projects are developed that are multisectoral and backed by multiple government and non-governmental stakeholders.

The main SDG 15 **financing mechanisms** in the region include:

- **Public spending:** ESCWA has tracked public social expenditure covering seven dimensions, including environmental protection, in nine countries. This showed that public spending on environmental protection (with biodiversity spending as a subcategory) has been decreasing since 2015 across most tracked countries.[46] For the latest available years (2015 to 2023), spending on environmental protection as a share of GDP ranged from 0.02 per cent in **Lebanon** to 0.63 per cent in **Tunisia**. Spending on environmental protection as a share of total social expenditure did not exceed 3 per cent, as registered in **Egypt**. Spending remains incommensurate with the high costs of environmental degradation in the region.
- **Official development assistance and other multilateral funding mechanisms,** including the Global Environment Facility, the Green Climate Fund and the Adaptation Fund, continue to be major sources of finance for biodiversity in most Arab countries. Some benefit more than others. A "biosphere reserve" designation has in some cases helped to mobilize resources as it provides credibility.

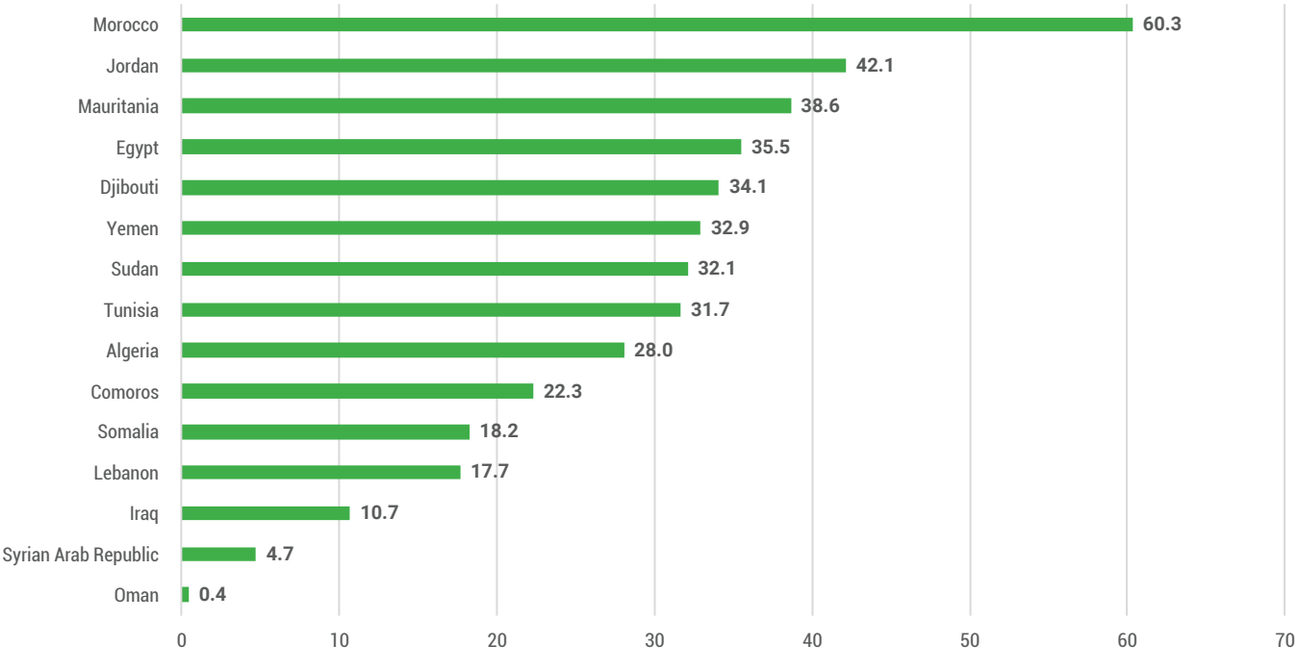
The region received over $412 million in official development assistance for biodiversity in 2021 (constant dollars), down from a peak of $843 million in 2015 (figure 15.1). Funding is lowest in the least developed countries, where it is needed the most. This may reflect low prioritization of environmental issues in these countries, but also structural problems related to their ability to mobilize and spend such funding.

Figure 15.1
Total official development assistance for biodiversity (Constant dollars, millions)



Source: UNDESA, SDG Indicators Database, accessed on 5 February 2024.

Figure 15.2
Global Environment Facility funding received by Arab countries (Millions of dollars)



Source: Global Environment Facility project database, accessed on 11 December 2023.
Note: Figures reflect national funding only and exclude multi-country projects. They cover projects with a focus on biodiversity or land degradation across all funding periods.

Fifteen Arab countries received over $409 million in grants from the Global Environment Facility for national projects focused on biodiversity or land degradation over different funding periods (figure 15.2). **Morocco** has benefited the most, receiving over $60 million in grants.

Morocco was the first country in the region to receive funding from the Land Degradation Neutrality Fund, a blended financing mechanism, to foster sustainable land management and water efficiency practices in the citrus sector.[47]

Tunisia was the first Arab country to benefit from the Climate Investment Funds through the Forest Investment Program, which included measures to increase carbon sequestration, enhance the ecosystem services of agro-sylvo-pastoral landscapes and sustainably manage rangelands.[48]

- **Philanthropic funding** is helping to broaden the scope of action to support nature. For example, the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund provides small grants for species conservation and also backs larger projects.[49]
- **Private sector investments** in some biosphere reserves are generating revenues that are leveraged to conserve and sustainably use biodiversity and ecosystems. The Shouf Biosphere Reserve in **Lebanon** is one example, where government support covers one third of the expenditures of the reserve while the other two thirds are secured through ecotourism packages developed with local businesses.[50] The Arganeraies Biosphere Reserve in **Morocco** capitalizes on a growing argan oil industry to attract investors to conserve the argan ecosystem.[51]
- **Biodiversity-relevant economic instruments** are emerging, but their use is still limited. **Mauritania** and **Morocco** redirect taxes collected on pesticides, fertilizers, forest products and timber harvests to finance biodiversity protection. Mauritania has additionally benefited from relevant fees and charges such as entrance fees to national parks, while Morocco has established tradable hunting and fishing permits under a cap-and-trade scheme.[52]





F. Regional dimensions

Regional collaboration is advancing in some SDG 15 areas but could be further strengthened.

- **Regional cooperation is significant in combating desertification and land degradation**. For example, the Middle East Green Initiative, launched in 2021 in **Saudi Arabia**, is a regional collective action aimed at planting 50 billion trees and restoring an area equivalent to 200 million hectares of degraded land.[53] Other notable multilateral actions include the African Great Green Wall initiative, which has expanded beyond the Sahel to include North African countries (**Djibouti, Mauritania** and the **Sudan**). The initiative emphasizes natural resource governance solutions driven by and supporting local communities.

  The Union of Arab Maghreb developed the Sub-regional Action Programme to Combat Desertification in the Maghreb (2011–2020)[54] to build capacities, transfer technologies, conduct scientific research and establish an early warning system for drought management. It has a total cost of over $15 million to be financed by member States and development partners. More can be done on this front in the region as a whole.

- **In the area of forestry,** regional and bilateral cooperation, notably at the Mediterranean level (such as the Collaborative Partnership on Mediterranean Forests[55]), has supported scientific research, sustainable forest management, seedling production for afforestation and reforestation efforts, and combating forest fires, among other efforts. The effectiveness and impact, however, are not well documented.

- **On genetic resource protection,** international efforts, including those by the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, have helped to collect, conserve, regenerate, distribute and document vital genetic material in collaboration with countries to protect agrobiodiversity. Active since 1985 in the **Syrian Arab Republic**, the centre now operates two gene banks in **Lebanon** and **Morocco**.

- **Regional collaboration to strengthen ecological connectivity across protected areas** continues to be an unmet priority; if acted upon, this could result in significant gains in protecting species.[56]



Endnotes

1. See the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, SDG Indicators Database, accessed on 15 September 2023, and IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species.
2. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, SDG Indicators Database, accessed on 15 September 2023.
3. See the list of parties to the Convention.
4. See country profiles.
5. See more on target-setting.
6. The World Database of Protected Areas of UNEP-IUCN, available online through the Protected Planet website, accessed on 19 April 2023. The 750 protected areas are established, inscribed or designated. International designations include Ramsar Site (wetland of international importance), UNESCO-MAB Biosphere Reserve and UNESCO World Heritage Site (natural or mixed). In addition, the website lists 127 proposed protected areas.
7. See Qatar at the website for the Convention on Biological Diversity.
8. See FAOLEX Database, accessed on 15 September 2023.
9. For example, Morocco's law on the conservation and exploitation of forests dates to 1917 (Madani, 2018).
10. See the United Nations Statistics Division database on indicator 15.2.1, accessed on 11 December 2023.
11. Plans were submitted from 2004 to 2019, with the most recent provided by Kuwait in 2019. Libya and the State of Palestine have not elaborated plans. The two countries have nevertheless submitted national reports to the Convention's Secretariat. See more here.
12. See the Arabian leopard by the Royal Commission for AlUla.
13. See Algeria, Voluntary National Review 2019; Bahrain, Voluntary National Review 2023; Egypt, Voluntary National Review 2021; Saudi Arabia, Voluntary National Review 2023; the Sudan, Voluntary National Review 2022 and the United Arab Emirates, Voluntary National Review 2022.
14. Non-parties are the Comoros, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the State of Palestine and the Sudan. See the list of Parties and Range States.
15. See the UNEP and CMS factsheet, Towards bird-friendly powerlines in Egypt.
16. See the UNEP and CMS factsheet, Regional wind farm planning in Jordan.
17. See the UNEP and CMS factsheet, Convention on Migratory Species Office – Abu Dhabi.
18. All Arab countries except the State of Palestine. See the List of Contracting Parties.
19. See the Status of Legislative Progress for Implementing CITES.
20. See Countries currently subject to a recommendation to suspend trade.
21. See the Access and benefit-sharing clearing-house.
22. See the Access and benefit-sharing clearing-house on the Comoros.
23. UNDP, 2021.
24. See the United Nations Statistics Division database on indicator 15.6.1, accessed on 11 December 2023.
25. See the United Arab Emirates National Invasive Species Strategy and Action Plan 2022-2026.
26. SCE, DANAT and UNESCO, 2023.
27. See the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol and its Supplementary Protocol on Liability and Redress.
28. See the analysis of the fourth national reports submitted by 14 Arab countries.
29. See the United Arab Emirates National Strategy for Combatting Desertification 2022-2030.
30. Presentation by Ms. Saliha Fortas at the ESCWA regional consultation on nature-based solutions for strengthening resilience, held online on 16 February 2022.
31. See the Saudi Green Initiative.
32. UNDRR, 2021.
33. See Kuwait, Voluntary National Review 2023; Oman, Voluntary National Review 2019; Qatar, Voluntary National Review 2021 and the United Arab Emirates, Voluntary National Review 2022.
34. See more on the Sand and Dust Storm Warning Regional Center.
35. United Nations in Iraq, 2023.
36. See the Al-Shouf Cedar Society.
37. Eighteen Arab countries are contracting parties of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Exceptions are Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine and Somalia.
38. Ramsar.org, 2017a.
39. Ramsar.org, 2017b.
40. Gikandi, 2022.
41. See the Sudan, Voluntary National Review 2022.
42. UNEP, 2020.

43. See Mauritania, Voluntary National Review 2019 and Somalia, Voluntary National Review 2022.
44. UNEP, 2022.
45. Chahine and Liagre, 2020.
46. See the ESCWA Social Expenditure Monitor, accessed on 10 December 2023. The countries tracked include Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, the Sudan and Tunisia.
47. Mirova, 2021.
48. See more on the activities of the Climate Investment Funds in Tunisia and the Forest Investment Programme.
49. See examples of grants and projects.
50. See the Shouf Biosphere Reserve's Ecotourism Strategy.
51. See Filière de l'Arganier.
52. See the OECD PINE database, accessed on 15 April 2023.
53. United Nations, 2021.
54. See the Sub-regional Action Programme to Combat Desertification in the Maghreb: 2011-2020.
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56. UNESCO, 2022.

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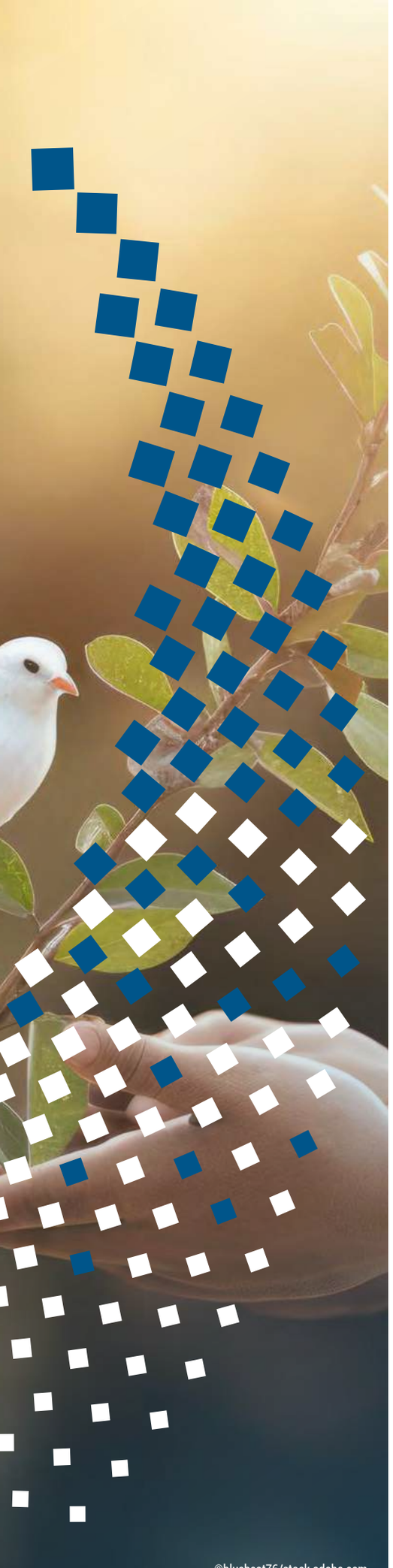

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16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

SDG 16

Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

A. Introduction

Systemic governance challenges and the lack of right-based social contracts stymie the implementation of SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions) in the Arab region. Public spending deficits compound and are exacerbated by the low responsiveness, transparency, accountability and efficiency of national institutions. Such weaknesses curtail the ability of Governments to design and enforce robust policies for achieving sustainable development, directly impacting all SDGs.

The performance of audit institutions varies significantly within the region, while the role of parliaments in budgetary oversight is likewise quite diverse. Access to information by the public, press and researchers is typically constrained. The independence of the judiciary and the media is under question. Participation in decision-making remains limited and political representation is often far from inclusive. All these factors undercut human rights and hinder the reduction of inequality.

Seven countries are in conflict, impacting the potential for regional integration and cooperation. Conflicts give rise to forced migration and increase poverty, and lead to drastic reductions in living standards and reversals of socioeconomic progress. The collapse, fragmentation and weaknesses of State institutions in countries in conflict have a long-term negative impact on peace, security and development, undermining the potential for a vibrant civil society to facilitate reconciliation.[1] The destruction of infrastructure and regression in development gains have ripple effects across generations, further impeding progress on the SDGs.

The Arab region has the greatest democratic governance challenges worldwide, including high rates of corruption that erode trust in governments.

Restoring trust in institutions and the rule of law and strengthening their effectiveness in securing justice and sustainable development for all are critical for the region to reduce and prevent violence, involve citizens and civil society in decision-making, and build peaceful societies through inclusive, rights-based social contracts.

Source: ESCWA, 2022d.



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What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).

The Arab region is the least peaceful in the world;[2] **38 per cent of the population (173 million people) lives in conflict-affected areas.[3] More than 65 million people need humanitarian assistance in seven countries in conflict.[4]**

Fatalities have notably fallen in the region over the past two years, from the 2014 peak of conflict to the levels of 2010, the baseline. **The number of victims of intentional homicide per 100,000 inhabitants** increased from 5.4 in 2010 to 7.0 in 2021, compared to 5.8 on average at global level. Yet 2022 saw a significant 65 per cent decrease in **deaths due to conflicts (battle-related deaths).** These fell to slightly over 10,000 from around 30,000 in 2021. The impacts of conflict and resulting deaths have been largely concentrated in **Iraq, Somalia,** the **Sudan,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Yemen**. The war in Gaza, **State of Palestine**, has reversed the decline, however, with about 30,000 Palestinians killed after more than four months of the conflict that erupted on 7 October 2023 (as at 28 February 2024).

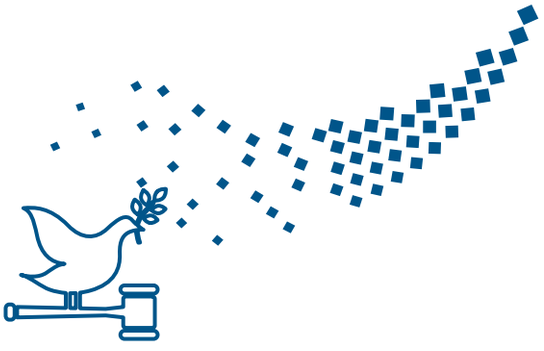
Representing only 5.8 per cent of the world's population, **the region is the origin of about 14.8 million refugees. It hosted 9.4 million refugees under the mandates of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in 2023.** These figures are about 40.5 per cent and 25.4 per cent of all refugees worldwide, respectively. More than 6.5 million refugees have come from the Syrian Arab Republic. The region has around **19.4 million internally displaced persons**.[5]

Of 163 countries ranked by the **2023 Global Peace Index,**[6] including 21 in the Arab region, only two and four Arab countries fell in the first and second quantiles, respectively, denoting relatively high levels of peace: **Qatar** with a rank of 21, **Kuwait** at 35, **Oman** at 48, **Jordan** at 62, the **United Arab Emirates** at 75 and **Tunisia** at 81.[7] Out of the 10 least peaceful places worldwide, 5 were Arab countries, namely, **Iraq, Somalia,** the **Sudan,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Yemen.**

Measuring progress on SDG 16 based on the SDG data framework is not possible in the Arab region due to extensive data gaps. Given the enabling role that SDG 16 plays in all SDGs, the political commitment of Governments to producing and disseminating SDG 16 data will be critical for progress as a whole.

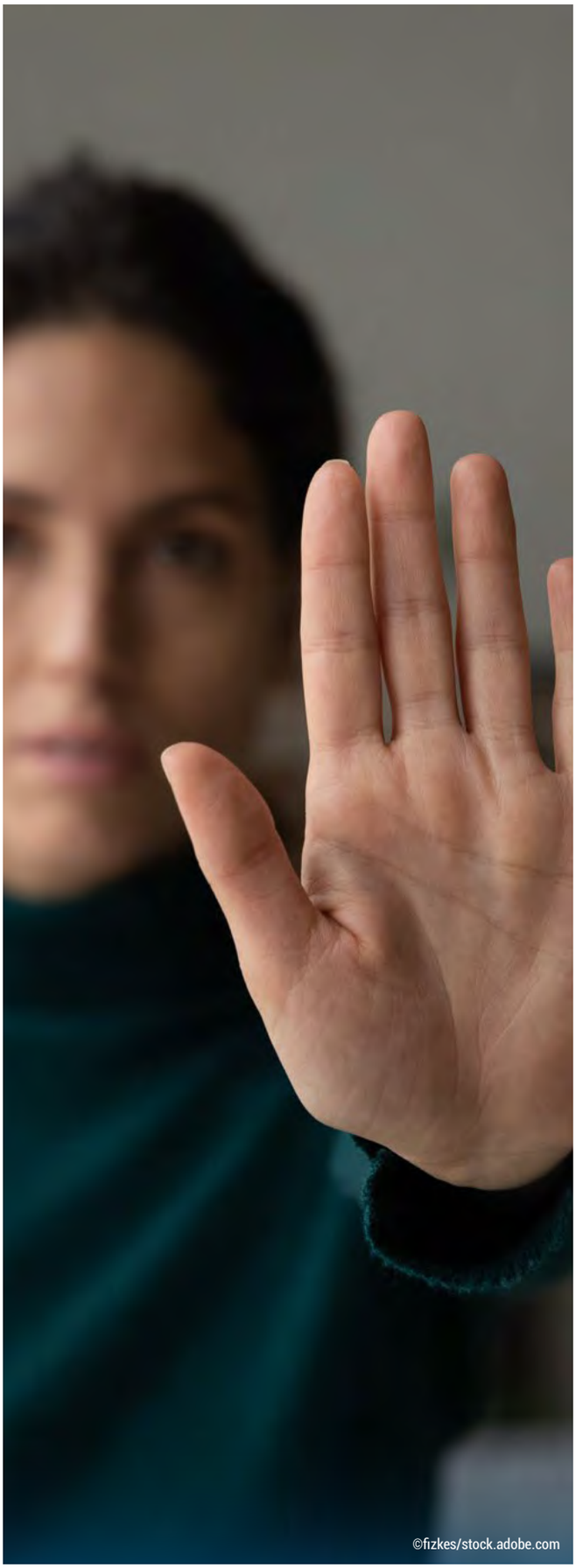
Limited data reflect institutional weaknesses. The production of quality and accessible data could advance in part through nurturing a culture of monitoring and evaluation across State institutions (see the chapter on SDG 17).

For an up-to-date view of SDG 16 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please visit the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.



On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 16

- Strengthen accountability mechanisms and the capacities of public servants to design and implement evidence-based policies and deliver public services for all.
- Uphold the rule of law to ensure equal rights for all, and guarantee the separation of powers so that judicial and legislative institutions function independently. This entails parliamentary oversight and mechanisms for transparency, accountability and responsiveness to the needs of citizens, and the implementation of anti-corruption measures and monitoring mechanisms.
- Expand civic space, encourage a vibrant civic culture and engage with civil society organizations so that citizens can freely express their opinions, participate in decision-making processes and form associations, fostering public participation and advocacy.
- Promote open government, strengthen information-sharing and open data, operationalize access to information laws through effective and monitored policies and mechanisms, and enhance legal and regulatory environments on digital technologies, contributing positively to governance and institutional effectiveness while addressing potential risks.
- Facilitate the work of national and regional human rights institutions and the promotion of human rights principles across educational systems and media institutions.
- Reduce and prevent violence through comprehensive strategies to stop all forms of violence, including gender-based violence. This process comprises legal reforms and enforcement, support services for victims and awareness campaigns.
- De-escalate conflict and boost peacebuilding through efforts to identify and address the root causes of conflict, and enhance regional dialogue and cooperation to achieve SDG 16. Peacebuilding initiatives should integrate humanitarian and development approaches, fostering dialogue, reconciliation and social cohesion.
- Ensure the full realization of the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people, promoting peace and stability in the region. This entails diplomatic efforts and international cooperation to address the longstanding occupation of the **State of Palestine** in full compliance with international law.



B. The policy landscape for SDG 16

SDG 16 promotes peaceful and just societies with representative decision-making processes, the empowerment of all stakeholders, and respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights. Participatory decision-making is critical for leaving no one behind. Accountability and transparency ensure that sustainable development improves the lives of people at large.

The policy landscape for SDG 16 is marked by policy gaps. This chapter focuses on select policy areas with common trends and ways forward.

1. Ending armed conflicts through violence reduction and prevention

◆ **Conflict-related risk in the region has risen in the past decade. As of 2021, it is more vulnerable and less resilient to conflict than in 2010.** The region also saw a marked deterioration in terms of economic risks, with countries more vulnerable to shocks than in the previous decade, as well as in climate risks amid worsening natural disasters. It improved only on social risks between 2010 and 2021, given expanding social safety nets and decreasing infant mortality rates.



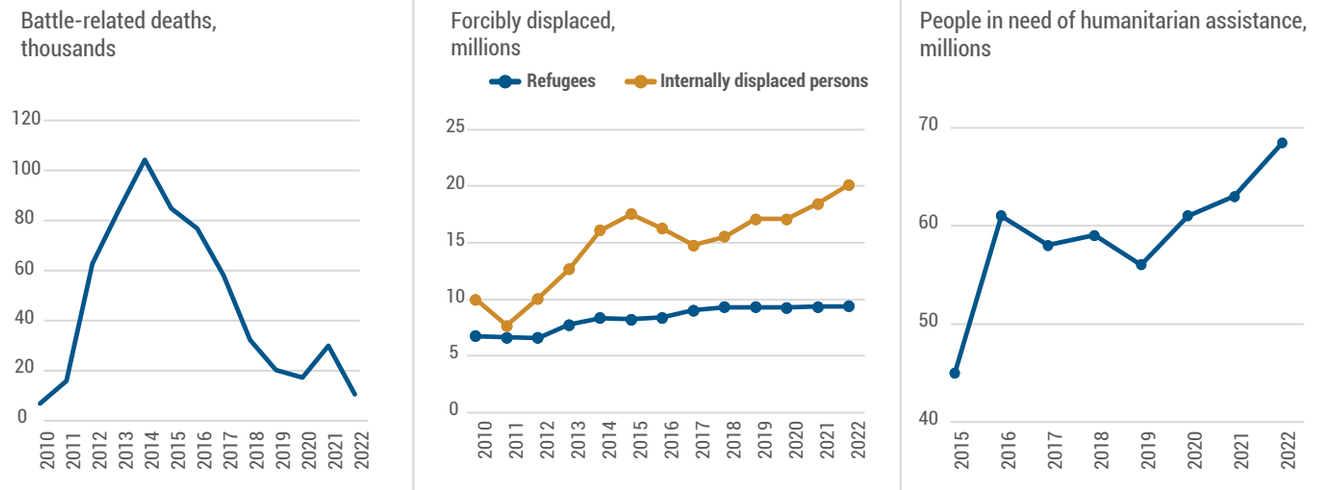
Table 16.1
Evolution of risk in the Arab region

Risk domain	Component	2010	2015	2021	2021 compared to 2010	
Conflict risk	Vulnerability	0.29	0.41	0.32	10%	Deteriorated
	Resilience	0.48	0.44	0.43	-11%	Deteriorated
Climate hazard risk	Vulnerability	0.11	0.16	0.18	59%	Deteriorated
	Resilience	0.30	0.35	0.47	56%	Improved
Natural resource risk	Vulnerability	0.47	0.49	0.49	5%	Deteriorated
	Resilience	0.39	0.39	0.38	-4%	Deteriorated
Economic risk	Vulnerability	0.39	0.40	0.43	9%	Deteriorated
	Resilience	0.65	0.59	0.55	-15%	Deteriorated
Social risk	Vulnerability	0.37	0.34	0.33	-9%	Improved
	Resilience	0.50	0.53	0.51	4%	Improved
Institutional risk	Vulnerability	0.66	0.69	0.70	7%	Deteriorated
	Resilience	0.43	0.41	0.40	-8%	Deteriorated

Source: ESCWA, Arab Risk Monitor: assessing vulnerability and resilience in the region, 2023. Data for a list of 43 indicators for 22 Arab countries were scaled between 0 and 1.

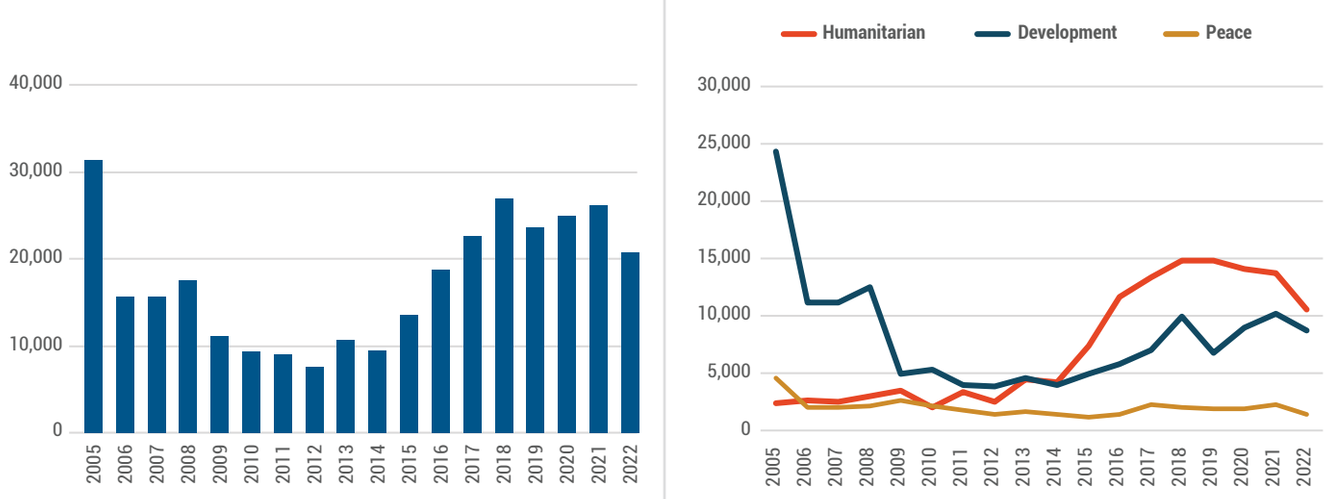
◆ **Action-oriented, technically-informed operationalization of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus in countries experiencing conflict or fragility is limited.** The nexus represents a critical framework to address complex crises. Linking humanitarian, development and peace efforts can reduce service delivery gaps and duplications while better tackling the root causes of critical situations.[8] Most work on the nexus has involved the multilateral system and international organizations. National institutions have made limited efforts to mainstream it. A complicating factor has been the tendency, over the last few years, to devote a much larger share of aid to crisis responses (humanitarian aid) as opposed to development assistance (development aid), limiting resources to tackle the roots of crises.

Figure 16.1
Key conflict trends in the Arab region



Source: Data retrieved from UCDP Georeferenced dataset (GED), version 23.1 (left); data retrieved from UNHCR Refugee Data Finder and data on internally displaced persons retrieved from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) (center); data retrieved from OCHA Global Humanitarian Overview (right).
Note: The figure on the right includes data for Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

Figure 16.2
Gross aid trends to countries classified as fragile by the OECD, broken down by humanitarian, development and peace functions (Millions of dollars)



Source: OECD/DAC – Compare your country by OECD.
Note: Data available for the Comoros, Djibouti, Iraq, Libya, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

There are tentative signals of embedding long-term reconciliation in peacebuilding agendas in countries in conflict. For instance:

- In **Iraq,** the Integrated Reconciliation Project (2017–2021) supported a national agenda for long-term reconciliation by creating infrastructure to promote peace, focusing on the most vulnerable communities and minorities. The initiative created and strengthened community social cohesion mechanisms, providing socioeconomic support services, reinforcing civil society capacities, and bolstering national systems to effectively coordinate and plan social cohesion and reconciliation efforts.[9]
- In **Libya,** the Presidential Council in February 2023 convened a national dialogue to achieve reconciliation.[10] In addition, a socioeconomic vision was developed in 2021 under the Libya Socioeconomic Dialogue Project.[11] It provided informed options for strategic policies to move from a logic of rent-seeking and exploitation to one of institutions based on the principles of justice and equity, dignity, and universal rights and fundamental freedoms. It suggested avenues for a shift from a rentier economy to a productive and diversified one for the sake of a peaceful and prosperous society.[12] Despite the continuing division of the country between two administrations, the announcement of measures to reunify the Central Bank of Libya offers scope for cautious optimism regarding the collective intent of Libyan actors to advance towards a unified nation.
- As a result of the Israeli occupation, the **State of Palestine** faces economic hardships, insecurity, violence and death. All facets of life and development are under siege. Seeking to realize the vision of an independent sovereign State, with sovereignty over the entire territory defined by the 1967 borders, including East Jerusalem as the capital, the State of Palestine has activated mechanisms for holding Israel to account before international structures and courts. This is in addition to its participation in the multilateral system and consolidation of bilateral relations.
- In **Somalia,** despite fragmentation between the federal Government and regional States, as well as tensions on issues related to governance, resource allocation and jurisdiction, the National Consultative Council reached an agreement on a model for fiscal federalism and amendments to the national security architecture. The model specifies the creation of two independent agencies: a national revenue authority and a planning and allocation agency.
- Worsening violence in the **Sudan** has fragmented and weakened national institutions, with the potential for a full-fledged civil war and humanitarian crisis. As part of efforts by international and regional actors to prevent escalation, the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, supported by the United Nations, have adopted a conflict resolution road map. In addition, leaders of the armed movements that are signatories to the Juba Peace Agreement are officially committed to neutrality in the conflict and are making efforts to restore peace. Civil society is playing a key role in the peace process, advocating for ending the violence and working for peace locally through the Declaration of Principles of Civil Actors for Ending the War and Restoring Democracy. Agreements on several ceasefires to enable the delivery of humanitarian assistance are paralysed, however.
- In the **Syrian Arab Republic,** despite a continued deadlock in the political process and a significant economic crisis, recent years have seen a reduction in violence and armed conflict in most parts of the country. Reintegration into the League of Arab States happened 12 years after the country's suspension following the outbreak of the conflict in 2011. This is expected to enable delivery of humanitarian aid to those in need, in accordance with mechanisms adopted in relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions.
- In **Yemen,** coordination between the Central Bank offices in Aden and Sana'a is attempting to unify currency and monetary policies after years of different banknotes and exchange rates. Negotiations include resuming the payment of civil service salaries after a five-year period of irregular disbursements. These are steps towards unifying public institutions to revive the public sector and increase capacities to address basic needs in a population of 30 million, of which 21 million are in dire need of humanitarian assistance.



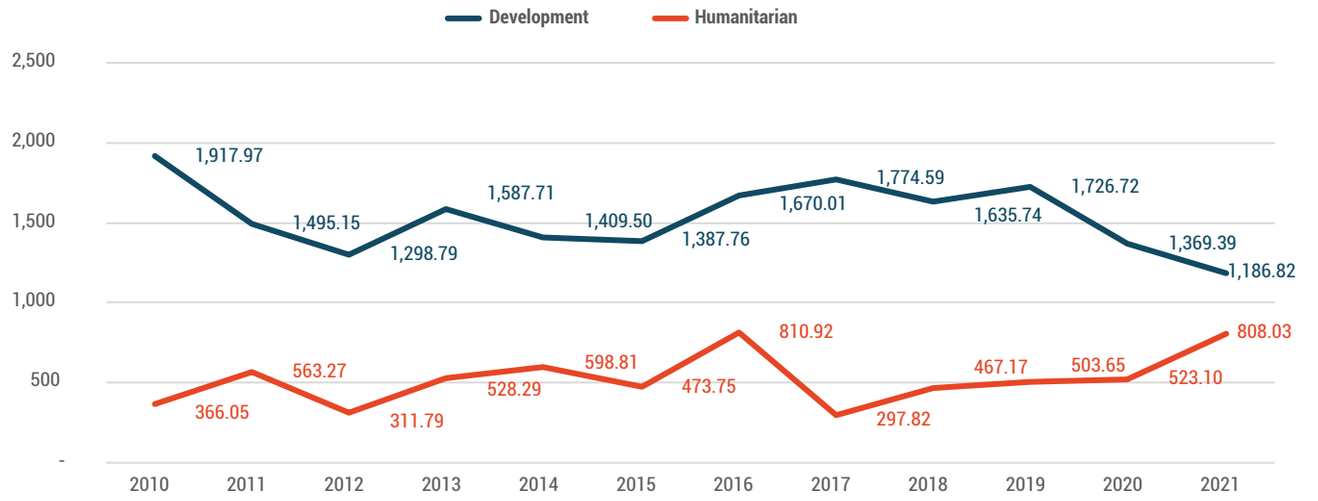
The unprecedented and devastating impact of the war in Gaza

Justice and peace for the Palestinian people require ending the Israeli occupation and associated discriminatory practices and violations of human rights and international law. The blockade imposed on Gaza since 2007 and a series of violent offensives have resulted in "de-development" and a humanitarian crisis, condemning the entire population to be left behind, with women, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities in severely disadvantaged positions.

Living conditions in Gaza were already precarious before the war broke out in October 2023 in terms of poverty (61 per cent in 2020), unemployment (45 per cent in 2022) and food insecurity (63 per cent of households in 2022). The total siege of Gaza has resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and plunged 2.3 million people into deprivation. Essential services have been disrupted by attacks on civilian infrastructure, including the targeting of hospitals and medical centres. The war is forcing the population to use unsafe water and sanitation facilities. Heavy bombardment, massive destruction of houses, the displacement of more than 1.5 million people, and a lack of critical medical, food, water and energy supplies have multidimensional impacts, compounding losses related to safety, health, education and income. Heightened insecurity, reduced trade and increased production costs will have long-term negative effects on the economy. The financial stability of the State of Palestine and the banking sector will be at much greater risk. The war could also compel neighbouring countries to redirect resources from development to security expenses.

Source: ESCWA, 2023b, 2023e, 2023f, 2023g.

Figure 16.3
Development versus humanitarian official development assistance to the occupied Palestinian territory (Millions of dollars)



Source: OECD, Detailed aid statistics: ODA Official development assistance: disbursements, 2021; OECD International Development Statistics, accessed on 26 January 2021.

Failing to address the root causes of the conflict will render any recovery efforts unsuccessful. Ending the Israeli occupation, restoring sovereignty over resources, and re-establishing free movement between Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem are central to resolving territorial fragmentation and cultivating a lasting and just peace.



Even before the ongoing war in Gaza, the diversion of funds from development assistance to short-term humanitarian needs contributed to trapping Palestinians in a spiral of dependency and de-development.

Long-standing development issues should be addressed by integrating the humanitarian dimension into recovery plans, thus empowering the Palestinian people and their institutions as agents of change and leaders of the development process.

2. Strengthening institutional effectiveness and enforcing the rule of law to address shrinking civic space

Government effectiveness varies widely in the region,[13] influenced by history, economics and geopolitics. Gulf Cooperation Council countries generally perform well on government effectiveness, given financial abundance and political stability. Countries experiencing conflict or fragility have highly compromised government effectiveness due to war and institutional fragility. Middle-income countries that are not in conflict fall in-between, showing some deterioration in government effectiveness.

The inability of weak institutions to address political or socioeconomic grievances remains a root cause of conflict in several Arab countries and a major obstacle to recovery from crises.

A compounding factor is the chronic insufficiency of civic space. Four countries have obstructed civic spaces (**Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco** and **Tunisia**), six countries have repressed them (**Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar** and the **State of Palestine**) and seven countries have closed them (**Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia,** the **Syrian Arab Republic,** the **United Arab Emirates** and **Yemen**).

Source: Civicus Monitor and Transparency International.

Ineffective institutions, with limited accountability, can create a breeding ground for social and political instability and conflict. Such institutions also hinder the capacity to deal with shocks or disasters, including natural ones. Several human and climate-related disasters have resulted in massive losses of lives that could have been avoided with the effective mitigation of risks. The collapse of the two dams in Derna, **Libya,** in September 2023, is one example, where conflict and extreme weather collided, yielding disastrous outcomes. The dams collapsed due to poor maintenance and inadequate operation, which in turn stemmed from fragmented, divided and weak institutions and supervision. Libya also lacks effective institutional systems for disaster prevention and management. Prior to this disaster, a decade of turmoil had left 300,000 people in need of humanitarian aid, an already high number that increased to more than 850,000 after Storm Daniel. In **Lebanon,** the Beirut port explosion on 4 August 2020 was another example of the failure of institutions. In this case, they did not take decisive action to remove dangerous material from a heavily populated urban area.

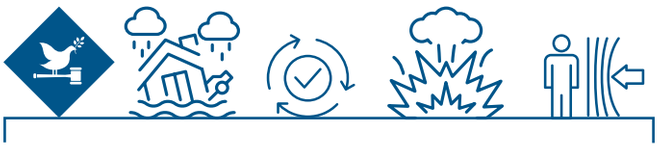
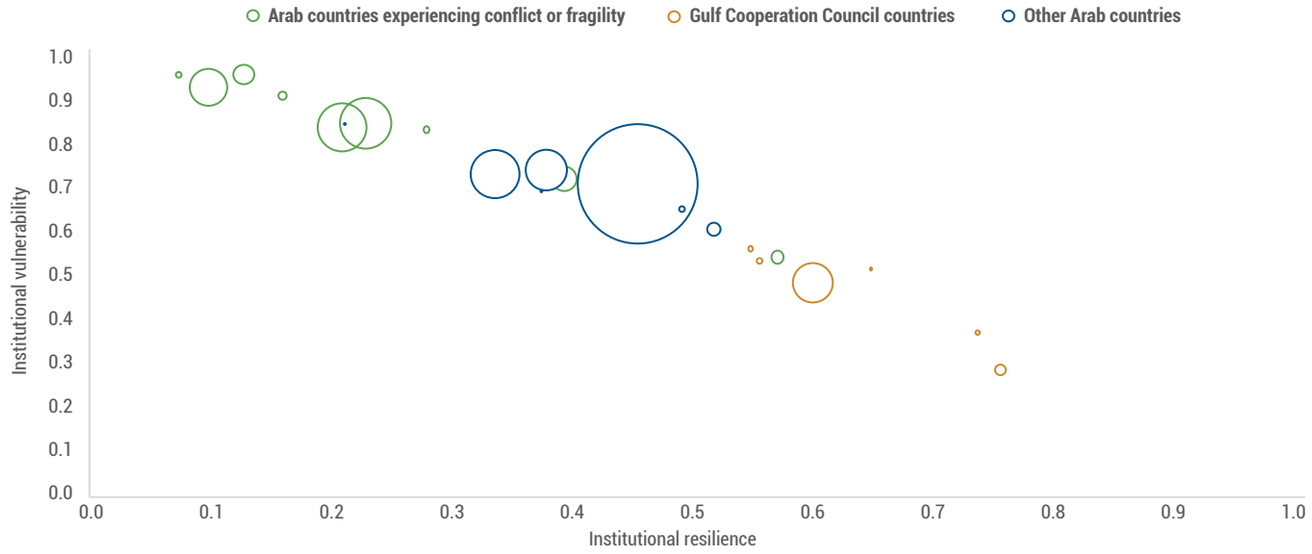
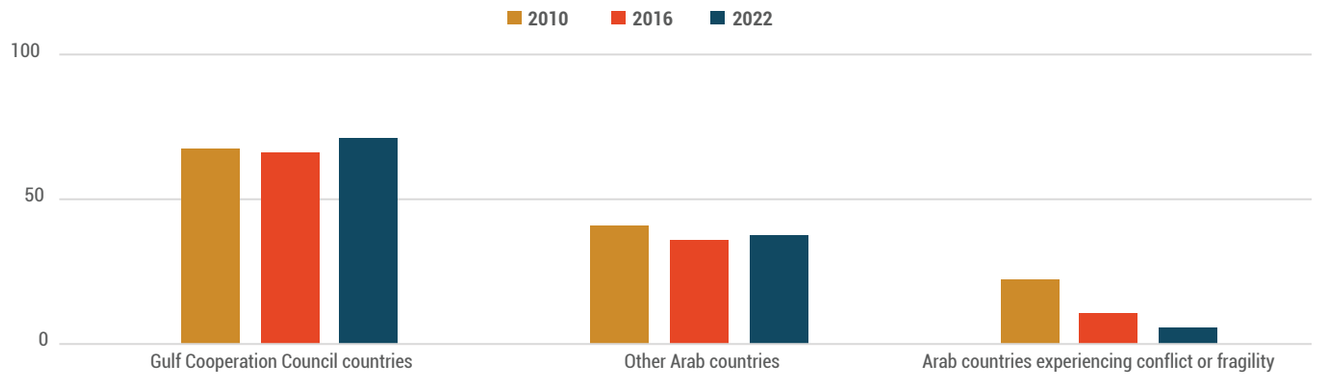


Figure 16.4
Institutional effectiveness in the region



Source: ESCWA elaboration based on data for 2022 and the Arab Risk Monitor: assessing vulnerability and resilience in the region, 2023.

Figure 16.5
Government effectiveness: percentile rank

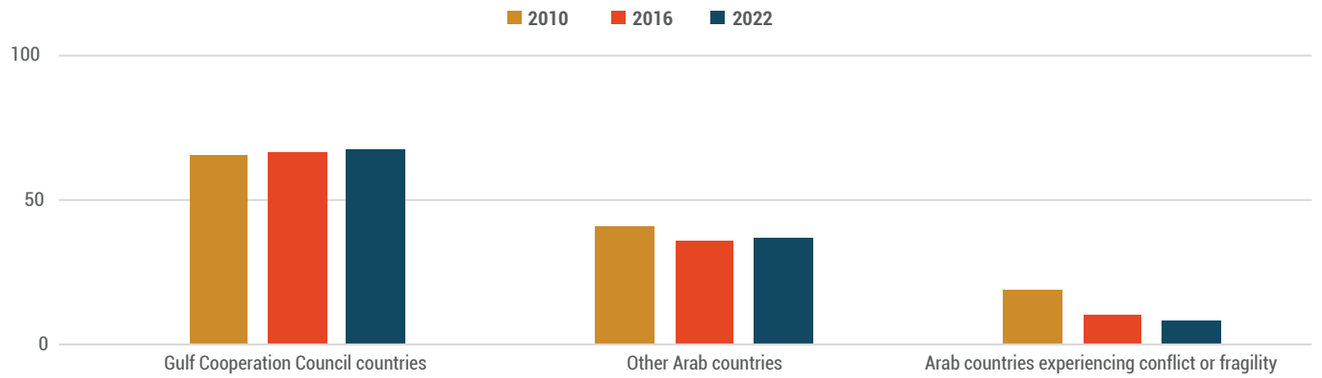


Source: World Bank, World Governance Indicators.
Note: Average percentile rank. The scale goes from 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest). "Arab countries experiencing conflict or fragility" are those classified as such by the World Bank FY24 list, namely: the Comoros, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. Countries indicated as "Other Arab countries" are Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

a. Little progress in promoting the rule of law and ensuring equal access to justice for all

◆ **Unconstitutional transitions of power are undermining the rule of law and human rights and weakening governance systems.** In the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, substantial financial resources have facilitated investments in legal and institutional frameworks. These nations often have modern legal systems, better law enforcement capabilities and more stable governance structures, but limited political freedoms and human rights concerns persist. In contrast, countries in conflict face severe challenges in upholding the rule of law. Ongoing conflicts have led to the collapse of institutions and lawlessness, contributing to human rights abuses and war crimes. Judicial systems are either dysfunctional or under the control of conflicting parties. Middle-income countries that are not in conflict have made modest progress but face substantial challenges from corruption, a lack of judicial independence and limited political freedoms.

Figure 16.6
Rule of law: percentile rank



Source: World Bank, World Governance Indicators.
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b. Lack of transparency and accountability

◆ **Curtailments of freedom of speech and assembly are routine, and the prosecution and jailing of writers, journalists and activists is common across the region.** Yet all national constitutions – except in **Qatar** and **Saudi Arabia** – include guarantees of freedom of expression or opinion.[14] Freedom of assembly, freedom of association and freedom of the press are also enshrined in most constitutions, except **Djibouti, Saudi Arabia** and **Yemen** for freedom of assembly; **Saudi Arabia** for freedom of association; and **Djibouti, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia,** the **United Arab Emirates** and **Yemen** for freedom of the press.[15] Overall, enforcement remains inconsistent.

Laws penalize criticism of ruling authorities and religious figures, leading to the imprisonment of activists and journalists.

Censorship, website and social media blocks, arbitrary arrests and abusive detentions persist.

Independent media encounter obstacles, limiting pluralism.

- In **Kuwait,** the Government amended its freedom of speech laws to prohibit pretrial detention for defendants in freedom of expression cases. A new law on the public's right to access information came into effect in 2021, allowing Kuwaiti nationals to request information, decisions and documents from government entities.[16]
- The law of **Morocco** 76–15 (2018) expanded the mission of the National Human Rights Council, an independent institution promoting civic space by monitoring government adherence to human rights standards, investigating complaints and making recommendations for policy improvements.[17]
- The 2019 law governing NGOs in **Egypt** removed jail penalties from a former law controlling NGOs' operations and eliminated formal oversight roles for security and intelligence authorities. Executive regulations clarifying the law in 2021 stated that NGOs would have exclusive access to and control of their funds as well as procedural protections, such as impartial administrative and judicial appeal mechanisms.[18] However, international NGOs stated that the new regulations maintained many restrictions on NGOs' work in Egypt.
- In **Libya,** the Presidential Council announced on 6 August 2023 that a High Financial Management Committee would supervise public finances and promote principles of fairness, accountability and transparency in public spending. This is a milestone as a Libyan-owned mechanism for transparent management of public funds.


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c. Curbing corruption

◆ **All Arab countries are parties to the United Nations Convention against Corruption, except the Syrian Arab Republic, which has signed but not ratified it.** The convention is the only legally binding, universal anti-corruption instrument, superseding national laws when ratified. Anti-corruption legislation in the region has advanced in recent years, primarily fuelled by the adoption of pivotal laws and expanded assessments based on a broader set of indicators. This progress reflects a more in-depth legislative approach to combating corruption and enhancing integrity across the public sector. It signifies an intensified commitment to bolstering transparency and accountability as well as regulatory mechanisms.

The percentage of firms that experienced at least one bribery payment request was 21.7 per cent in the region in 2022, compared to a world average of 14.8 per cent.

Corruption diminishes trust in institutions and undermines the legitimacy of the State, fomenting social tensions and conflict. It tends to thrive when the social contract between States and citizens is broken, and when political participation and peaceful dissent can be risky endeavours.

Source: ESCWA, 2021a.

◆ **The region still faces considerable challenges, however, in ensuring the effective implementation of anti-corruption laws.** All countries have legislation criminalizing bribery in the public sector, for example, but enforcement lags. A significant stumbling block arises from major exemptions and immunities in some countries, which effectively undermine the potency of anti-corruption legislation. These exemptions frequently benefit individuals or entities with political or commercial advantages, thereby perpetuating the cycle of corruption.

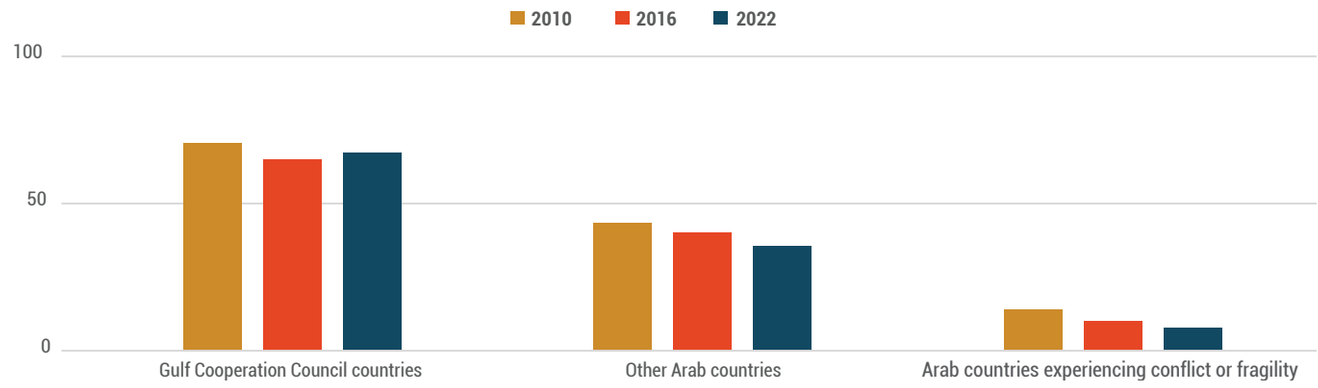
- **Gulf Cooperation Council countries** score highest in terms of anti-corruption legislation. They have established public procurement standards and promote open government and transparency.
- **Kuwait** and **Qatar** have incorporated international agreements and commitments against corruption into legislative frameworks. Beyond the adoption of its Integrity and Anti-Corruption Strategy 2019–2024, **Kuwait** passed a law that establishes the Public Anti-Corruption Authority, and an anti-corruption and wealth disclosure decree criminalizes corruption. **Jordan**, **Morocco** and **Tunisia** also match some international standards for anti-corruption measures.
- **Libya** and the **Syrian Arab Republic** rank lowest on anti-corruption efforts in the Maghreb and Mashreq subregions, respectively.
- There are gaps in the enforcement of anti-corruption legislation in **Lebanon, Mauritania, Somalia, Palestine** and the **United Arab Emirates.**



The 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index released by Transparency International showed the pervasiveness of corruption in the Arab region.[a] Even Arab States that scored above 50 on the index – such as the **United Arab Emirates** at 67, **Qatar** at 58 and **Saudi Arabia** at 51 – showed signs of decline compared to previous years. The Middle East and North Africa regional average dropped to 38 in 2022, with most countries ranked below 50. War-torn **Libya** at 17, **Yemen** at 16 and the **Syrian Arab Republic** at 13 scored the worst. **Qatar** at 58 and **Egypt** at 30 have seen their lowest scores since the Corruption Perceptions Index began offering comparative rankings in 2012.

[a] The Corruption Perceptions Index ranks 180 countries and territories by their perceived levels of public sector corruption on a scale of zero (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). For each country's individual score and changes over time, as well as analysis for each region, see the webpage on the Arab region. See also Transparency International, 2023.

Figure 16.7
Control of corruption: percentile rank



Source: World Bank, World Governance Indicators.
Note: Average percentile rank. The scale goes from 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest). "Arab countries experiencing conflict or fragility" are those classified as such by the World Bank FY24 list, namely: the Comoros, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. Countries indicated as "Other Arab countries" are Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

Table 16.2
Recently introduced anti-corruption legislation, 2020 to 2021

Country	Title of the law	Year of adoption
Morocco	Anti-Corruption Law No. 46.19	2021
Qatar	Penal Code 2004, Arts. 140–158	2020
	Code of Conduct (Law No. 18/2020)	2020
Sudan	Anti-Corruption National Commission Law	2021
Lebanon	Law on Anti-Corruption in the Public Sector, Establishment of the National Anti-Corruption Authority (Law No. 175/2020)	2020
	Law on Financial Disclosure, Conflicts of Interest and Illicit Enrichment	2020
	New Public Procurement Law (No. 244/2021)	2021
Saudi Arabia	Public Procurement Law M/128	2020
	Digital Government Authority Law (No. 418/2021)	2021

Source: Authors.

Examples of anti-corruption policies include the following.

- **Egypt** launched the National Anti-Corruption Strategy 2019–2022. The National Anti-Corruption Committee includes government entities and partners from civil society.
- The National Strategy on Integrity and Countering Corruption 2017–2025 of **Jordan** includes an online platform for tracking corruption cases.
- In **Mauritania,** a participatory process led to the adoption of a new national strategy to combat corruption in April 2023. The strategy seeks to strengthen the power and effectiveness of the regulatory authorities and the judiciary. It aims to enhance the key role of the parliament as the entity responsible for overseeing government actions.
- In **Morocco,** the National Anti-Corruption Commission is responsible for the national integrated strategy to

fight corruption. In addition to central and decentralized inspection and audit units, a toll-free number for denouncing corruption cases and a national complaints portal have been set up. Morocco also adopted a law establishing the National Authority for Probity, Prevention and the Fight against Corruption.

- The Administrative Control and Transparency Authority of **Qatar** adopted a strategy to promote integrity and transparency. The agency is equipped with communications channels to receive complaints and provide training to public servants. Legislation includes provisions to report the corruption of public officials through a specific hotline.
- In **Saudi Arabia,** Vision 2030 aims at creating a high-performing Government that is effective, transparent and accountable.[19]
- In **Somalia,** following its recent accession to the United Nations Convention against Corruption, anti-corruption commissions were created under the framework of a new Anti-Corruption Law.
- In **Tunisia,** the National Anti-Corruption Authority launched a consultation to develop a national strategy for good governance and the fight against corruption from 2022 to 2026.



3. Advancing inclusive governance and public participation

a. Women's participation in decision-making

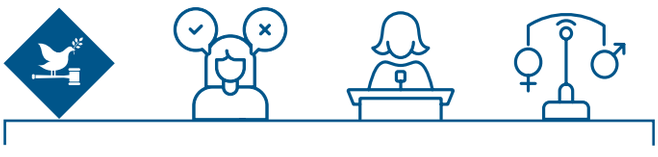
◆ **Women's participation in political life and peace and security processes is a prevalent issue in national action plans on women, peace and security.** These focus on three priorities:

- **Increasing women's participation in political leadership and decision-making positions,** especially senior civil service and elected positions. The national action plans of the **State of Palestine, Tunisia** and **Yemen** refer to judicial positions as well.
- **Increasing the participation of women in public life,** including as voters, entrants to the civil service, the security forces and other spheres.
- **Increasing the participation of women in conflict prevention and mitigation, peace mediation, and humanitarian and post-conflict support.** Notable differences exist among approaches to this issue. For example, while **Iraq** cites measures to support women's roles as civilian monitors and military observers, **Tunisia** focuses on their parts in preventing and countering violent extremism, among other priorities.[20]



The institutional mechanisms for engaging women's groups in conflict prevention and peacebuilding remain limited. The same applies to the engagement of civil society organizations, which are seldom included in formal conflict resolution, peacebuilding or political dialogues, although they play key roles in implementing the women, peace and security agenda.

Enhancing the political participation of women requires the political will to implement related national action plans, backed by adequate budgets, clear implementation timelines, effective coordination and collaboration across sectors.



b. Youth participation in decision-making

◆ **The region lacks adequate structures for the civic and political engagement of young people.** This intensifies their sense of exclusion, dissatisfaction and distrust of political leaders and systems. Although laws governing political parties often do not support youth political engagement and leadership, countries have formulated youth policies or strategies[21] that address issues of concern to young women and men. Most emphasize youth participation in decision-making. Some countries have also addressed youth participation in peace and resilience-building. Several countries are considering volunteerism and youth engagement in legislation related to young people, recognizing the role they can play in civic spaces, violence prevention and peacebuilding.

Young people below age 25 cannot run for parliamentary elections in most Arab countries.

Political upheaval and instability and cultural and social biases against young people, especially young women and persons with disabilities, inhibit engagement in political processes.

- Developed by **Iraq** in 2021, the Youth Vision for 2030 focuses on peace, security and dialogue as well as citizenship and participation, among other issues. One proposed intervention to promote citizenship and participation involves establishing consultation meetings between young people and local authorities at the governorate level.[22] Iraq in 2020 launched the National Coalition on Youth Peace and Security to engage in dialogues with decision-makers, supporting the participation of young peace activists in peacebuilding and fostering exchanges of experiences and knowledge. The coalition also advocates for the implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda.[23]
- Adopted in 2019, the Jordanian National Youth Strategy 2019–2025 calls for strengthening the resilience of young people to deal with emerging challenges and promote sustainable development.[24] **Jordan** also formed a Youth, Peace and Security 2250 National Coalition, in reference to a United Nations Security Council resolution on the issue; it operates under the Ministry of Youth.[25]
- **Lebanon** launched the National Youth Policy Action Plan in 2022. It is aligned with the 2012 National Youth Policy's five priority areas, including social integration and political participation, and aims to support young people in volunteering and participating in decision-making. The establishment of a National Youth Council enables consultations with the Government. It serves as a platform to communicate concerns and viewpoints, and was instrumental in lowering the voting age to 18 for parliamentary and municipal elections.[26]
- **Mauritania,** in 2022, drafted legislation to institutionalize a national programme on voluntary engagement in sustainable development. The legislation creates a legal environment supporting young volunteers working on development projects throughout the country. It will operationalize an inclusive national mechanism for managing young people mobilized for volunteering. The goal is to deploy more than 10,000 young people, half of whom are women, as part of community development activities, especially in education, health, legal assistance, social cohesion, environmental preservation, civil protection and sustainable development.
- In **Palestine,** volunteering is regulated through legislation on civil society organizations. In the Jenin Creative Cultural Centre, volunteers have used art and cultural projects to foster peace and justice in the West Bank.
- The National Youth Policy of the Federal Government of **Somalia**[27] incorporates 10 priority pillars for supporting young people, among which are peace and security, and participation and citizenship. The policy encourages young men and women to engage in decision-making processes. It is designed to increase their awareness of active and responsible citizenship and to create opportunities for participation, including through forming youth advisory councils and promoting volunteering.[28]
- In **Tunisia,** an open data hackathon has been organized annually since 2020. In May 2023, 33 teams comprising students, start-up founders and young professionals used open government data to create solutions that could improve government service delivery.
- In the **United Arab Emirates,** a federal law regulates volunteer work. In addition, subnational laws in individual emirates regulate voluntarism, such as in Dubai. In line with its federal counterpart, it sets out minimum protection standards for volunteers and recognizes voluntarism's contribution overall.[29]



c. Access to information, public participation and e-governance

◆ **Public participation is weak in the region, with most countries lacking a specific open government strategy or action plan.** Some have initiated national plans that include some dimensions of open government, especially open data. Only eight countries[30] have laws or guarantees of public access to information. Eleven countries[31] have launched their own open data platforms, and an additional six[32] make open data available through the portal of the African Development Bank.

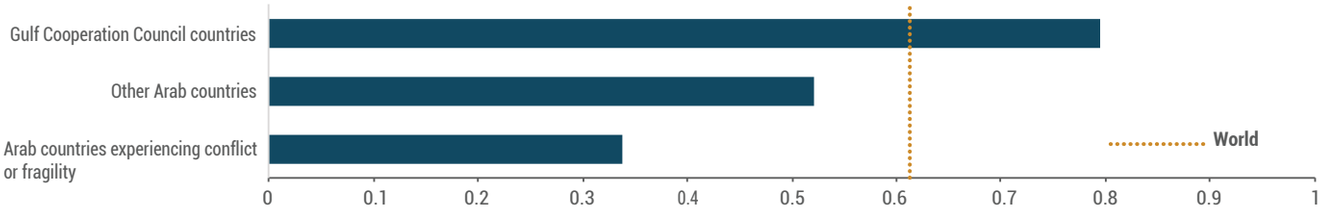
The enforcement of access to information laws remains constrained. Low awareness among institutions and citizens, limited financial resources and vague language in laws are some roadblocks requiring attention to ensure effective implementation.



◆ **Digital government (or e-government) has progressed in the region, transforming the operations and services of public institutions.** Countries have developed digital policies to modernize public entities[33] and advance digital transformation.[34] The use of digital technologies by governments, in partnership with the private sector, accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain essential public services in health, education and social protection (see the chapter on SDG 9). Nevertheless, wide regional differences are evident in e-government effectiveness in delivering public services.[35] The Gulf Cooperation Council countries outperform other States. **Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates** perform the best in e-government and open data and have won United Nations public service awards for digital solutions.[36]

Tunisia passed the Right to Access Information Law[37] in March 2016, joining the few Arab countries with such laws. It is the first country in the region to create a National Authority for Access to Information, which manages compliance. The law of Tunisia obliges public bodies to furnish a more extensive range of information than is the case under legislation in **Jordan** (adopted in 2007), **Lebanon** (2017), **Morocco** (2017) or **Yemen** (2012). The law of Tunisia also limits which information can be denied. The Kurdistan Regional Government of **Iraq** has had a similar law on the books since 2013.[38]

Figure 16.8
Average e-government index score, 2022



Source: DESA, United Nations E-Government Knowledgebase.
Note: The dotted line represents the world average. "Arab countries experiencing conflict or fragility" are those classified as such by the World Bank for 2023 (The Comoros, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen). "Other Arab countries" are Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.



- **Jordan, Morocco** and **Tunisia** are members of the Open Government Partnership, with national action plans for citizen participation and public engagement in decision-making. These countries have enshrined access to information in their constitutions.
- **Egypt** launched Sharek 2030, an application that informs the public about governmental initiatives, laws and policies, and collects citizens' views, proposals and suggestions to improve public services.
- In 2020, **Jordan** adopted three protocols on classifying, enforcing and managing information, providing clearer procedures and standards to strengthen the law on access to information and its implementation by public institutions.[39]
- **Kuwait** adopted Law No (12) on the right to access to information (2020–2021).
- In **Morocco,** the Commission on the Right to Information launched its digital platform in 2020, where requests for information can be submitted and tracked.[40]
- The **State of Palestine** launched its open data initiative in 2018 to promote innovation, increase transparency, strengthen government performance, and build trust between the Government and citizens. Data sets have been published, and laws on access to information and personal data protection are undergoing review. Training courses are continuously organized for technical teams to build skills, and an open data policy was approved.[41]
- **Saudi Arabia** adopted a digital transformation strategy, the Smart Government Strategy 2020–2024. Its purpose is to create a responsive and effective citizen-centric Government through the use and deployment of technologies. In 2023, the Digital Government Authority released a report on the readiness of government institutions to adopt emerging technologies so that agencies can identify gaps as well as training and strategic needs.
- The **United Arab Emirates** is among the 15 leading countries worldwide on e-government services. The Government launched the Unified Digital Channel in 2023, a citizen-centric digital Government portal that provides access to more than 3,000 services.

4. Increased vulnerabilities in the context of SDG 16

Discriminatory laws and practices against minorities persist in many Arab countries, posing significant challenges to human rights, social cohesion and inclusive governance. Discrimination manifests in unequal access to education (for example, limited access to quality education for marginalized groups such as refugees and rural residents as well as gender-based discrimination that restricts girls' education in some areas; see the chapter on SDG 4), employment (gender-, nationality- and religion-based discrimination; see the chapter on SDG 8) and political representation (the exclusion of groups of people or ethnic or religious minorities from the political process, and weak representation of women in institutions). Individuals and groups subject to discrimination based on identity or status, including the poor, people with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, refugees and migrant workers, among others, are often subject to multiple, intersecting constraints on political, economic and social participation.

a. Addressing violence against women in conflict settings

The prevention, protection and prosecution of sexual violence are essential to peace and security. As of 2023, 11 Arab States[42] have national action plans to advance the Women, Peace and Security Agenda,[43] including components on addressing conflict-related sexual violence and gender-based violence. Priorities include legal and policy frameworks to prevent and prosecute sexual and gender-based violence, service provision for violence survivors, and the extension of protection to internally displaced and refugee women.[44] In 2018, United Nations organizations and Member States engaged in dialogue on accountability for sexual violence in conflict. The consultation shared best practices and lessons on the prosecution of sexual violence crimes under national jurisdictions, with a focus on **Iraq,** as well as discussions concerning **Libya,** the **Sudan,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Yemen.** In 2022, the League of Arab States and UNHCR launched the Arab Strategy for the Prevention of and Response to Combat All Forms of Violence in the Asylum Context, Especially Sexual Violence against Women and Girls. The strategy outlines key strategic priorities for countries to protect refugees against sexual and gender-based violence.

Conflict-related sexual violence and gender-based violence have yet to abate as tactics and weapons of war.

The United Nations Secretary-General's report on conflict-related sexual violence profiles 14 conflict-affected contexts where sexual violence has been documented, six of which are in the Arab region: **Iraq, Libya, Somalia,** the **Sudan,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Yemen.**

Protective services for women survivors are often scattered among different institutions with relatively limited geographic coverage.

Source: United Nations, 2022.

◆ **A few national accountability mechanisms or regulatory frameworks prosecute offenders for violence against women committed in conflict settings and provide reparations for victims.** But there has been little progress in implementing these frameworks. While some countries have legal frameworks to indict perpetrators of acts of sexual violence against women, they apply a narrow definition that does not account for all forms of violence inflicted in conflict, including forced marriage and sexual slavery and exploitation (see the chapter on SDG 5). Generally, issues related to advancing gender equality and eliminating discrimination against women and girls become less of a priority in conflict-affected countries. Even in post-conflict settings, gender concerns are seldom prominently included in reconstruction agendas.

Examples of existing frameworks include:

- In **Iraq,** the Yazidi Female Survivors Law of 2021 recognizes the crimes against Yazidi, Turkmen, Christian and Shabak communities as crimes against humanity, and provides for reparations to survivors and rehabilitation. The law makes Iraq one of the first countries in the region to recognize female survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. The law does not cover women and girls who are victims of sexual violence through forced marriage to members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and children born of wartime rape.[45]
- The Ministerial Decree 119 of 2014 of **Libya** recognized survivors of sexual violence during its uprising as war victims and gave them a right to reparation.
- In **Somalia,** the Sexual Offences Bill, endorsed by the Council of Ministers in 2018, deals with crimes of sexual exploitation, slavery, trafficking, abduction and kidnapping as well as forced marriage. It is still pending review and approval by the Parliament,[46] and continues to trigger negative reactions from religious leaders and clan elders.[47]
- The **Sudan** amended the 1991 Criminal Act in 2009 to include conflict-related sexual violence as a war crime.

Only Djibouti, Jordan, the State of Palestine, and Tunisia are States Parties to the Rome Statute. It codifies widespread and organized sexual violence against civilians as a crime against humanity and as a war crime when inflicted as part of armed conflict.

b. End trafficking, abuse and exploitation

◆ **Arab States are making efforts to end human trafficking, abuse and exploitation,** building on the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (the Palermo Protocol). Policy responses to trafficking in persons, including forced labour, have encompassed drafting and revising laws and action plans, establishing specialized committees and organizing awareness campaigns. Fewer efforts have been pursued to address migrant smuggling. Some countries guarantee freedom of movement for migrants (**Bahrain**), do not penalize smuggled migrants (**Egypt**) or prohibit arbitrary arrest (**Lebanon**). **Kuwait** has created alternatives to detention facilities. Governments of countries[48] that give national employers sponsorship permits to bring in foreign workers – binding the latter to their employers, with risks of exploitation, and posing issues related to labour rights and working conditions, especially for domestic workers – have moved to regularize the stays of migrants or facilitate their departure without penalties, including through reforms of the *kafala* system (see the chapter on SDG 10).

To date, no Arab country has ratified the Domestic Workers Convention (2011) of the International Labour Organization.

- In **Egypt,** the National Coordinating Committee for Combating and Preventing Illegal Migration and Human Trafficking launched a campaign, "Together Against Human Trafficking", urging citizens to report cases through hotlines.
- **Iraq** issued its national anti-trafficking action plan in March 2019.
- In **Jordan,** in addition to a law on countering human trafficking, the National Strategy for Human Trafficking

2019–2022 seeks to address human trafficking through complementary efforts among relevant entities.

- **Kuwait** adopted a national referral system to prevent human trafficking.
- In **Lebanon,** civil society organizations support the protection of victims, and several laws address trafficking in persons, including migrant domestic workers.
- In **Morocco,** Law No. 27.14 includes provisions for protecting victims of exploitation (forced labour and servitude), and Law No. 19.12 clarifies labour and employment conditions for domestic workers. Morocco also established a national commission to combat trafficking in persons (2019).
- The National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking of **Qatar** monitors cases and refers them to competent authorities. A unit to track data has been established within the Public Prosecution Office, and the Qatar Red Crescent Department opened the Humanitarian Care Home for victims.
- The **Sudan** amended its Combating of Human Trafficking Act with stringent penalties for violators. It created the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking and launched the National Action Plan for Combating Human Trafficking 2021–2023. In addition, the Better Migration Management programme, funded by the European Union and Germany, has supported the Government in countering human trafficking and improving the protection of victims and vulnerable migrants.
- **Tunisia** established a national mechanism to guide and support victims of trafficking, providing them with free medical care.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c. End sexual, physical and psychological violence against children

Some countries have legislative reforms and strategic action-oriented instruments to prevent sexual, physical and psychological violence against children.

The share of children under age 5 whose births have been registered with a civil authority increased in the region from 82.6 per cent in 2021 to 86.2 per cent in 2022, compared to a world average of 77.2 per cent. The Arab least developed countries still have low levels of birth registration, however, at 52.3 per cent on average in 2022. In **Yemen,** the share was only 29 per cent.

The region must reckon with the reality of children born under ISIS rule. They have been exposed to levels of violence and may require special and long-term care.

- Based on an exemplary institutional and legislative framework in the Kurdistan Region of **Iraq,** the federal Government committed to a Child Protection Directorate, with a draft Child Protection Law under review by Parliament.
- **Jordan,** which recently enacted a Child Rights Law, and the **United Arab Emirates,** where a new draft motherhood and childhood strategy is being developed, are among the pathfinding countries under the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.[49] They are expected to develop national action plans to address violence against children.
- In **Morocco,** the integrated public policy for child protection 2015–2025 aims to strengthen the legal framework, promote protective standards and practices, and set up information and monitoring systems. In addition, the National Action Plan to End Child Marriage promotes social protection and social services for the empowerment and education of girls, strengthens judicial practices and supports new amendments to the family code.
- The **State of Palestine** launched a national intersectoral violence against children strategy in the context of COVID-19 (2021–2023).[50]
- **Qatar** developed a draft Child Protection Law, including provisions for protection from exploitation. It prohibits all forms of corporal punishment against children, and strengthens capacities to monitor cases of violence. Institutional support for victims of violence is provided in social rehabilitation centres.
- In **Saudi Arabia,** a national child online safety framework, a national policy on anti-bullying, and

a national schools well-being framework are under development. The National Strategic Plan for the Prevention of and Action on Family Violence are intended to address the needs of victims of violence and battered people through family visitations and the fostering of children subjected to violence.

- In the **Sudan,** the endorsement of the Child Act 2021 was delayed due to the political situation.
- In the **Syrian Arab Republic,** a law on protection from domestic violence is being drafted and a five-year national strategic plan for child protection is under development.

The Syrian Arab Republic and host countries have taken steps to improve the civil registration of displaced persons. The Civil Status Law (2021) of the **Syrian Arab Republic** introduced provisions to enhance registration access. In **Jordan,** the Urban Verification Exercise facilitated the regularization of Syrian nationals. In the Kurdistan Region of **Iraq,** a flexible approach was taken to residency and registration processes. **Lebanon** adopted measures to increase birth registration for Syrian refugee children born in the country. Regionally, the Arab Charter on Human Rights and the Sharjah Principles on Protecting Refugee Children in the Middle East and North Africa advocate for legal identity and birth documentation for refugees.

Many Syrian refugees still struggle to obtain or update documentation, however, leaving them undocumented or underdocumented. A lack of civil documentation severely limits opportunities to recover from crises and undermines housing, land and property rights. Over 35 laws and regulations related to these rights have been adopted in the **Syrian Arab Republic,** weakening the security of tenure for displaced individuals and exacerbating their challenges.

Source: UNHCR and Norwegian Refugee Council, 2021.


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◆ **The region has notable measures to assist children from conflict-affected areas who are at risk of being left out of school** (see also the chapter on SDG 4):

- In **Jordan** and **Lebanon,** education measures for Syrian refugee children are coordinated among national institutions, United Nations organizations and donors as part of the response to the Syrian crisis. Both countries have developed educational strategies to include refugee children in the public educational system, for instance, through the "second shift" programme (afternoon classes after morning sessions for nationals).
- The Government of **Jordan,** through the 2018–2022 education strategic plan, made schools and learning facilities available to children regardless of their status or nationality. The plan laid out concrete actions and investments, such as the establishment of 60 new schools per year to accommodate both Jordanians and refugees. Jordan also encourages Syrian children to return to schooling with campaigns to counter dropping out, bullying and violence among students. Some measures facilitate the registration of Syrian students in higher education, and extend work permits to support their entry into the labour market.

d. Migrant and migrant children in vulnerable situations, refugees and forcibly displaced persons

◆ **Migrants and migrant children in vulnerable situations, refugees and forcibly displaced persons often struggle to obtain education, employment and justice.** They are at risk of falling into the hands of criminal networks and being subjected to violence and exploitation. The primary form of trafficking within the region is forced labour, including domestic servitude and debt bondage, followed by forced and early marriage and sexual exploitation. Regarding child labour, notably in conflict-affected countries where law enforcement is lax and dire economic conditions leave children with no other options, many young workers come from groups already facing discrimination, including refugees and migrants.

- Syrian refugees have been allowed to work in several sectors of the economy in **Jordan** since 2016. In 2021, a record 62,000 work permits were issued to Syrians, including 31,000 flexible ones; refugees holding these can move between similar jobs in the same sector as well as among employers and governorates. Previously, Syrian refugees were mostly allowed to work only in agriculture,

construction and manufacturing. In 2020, some exemptions were given to work in other sectors, including as health-care professionals to help fight COVID-19. Since 2021, Syrian refugees have been able to obtain work permits in all sectors open to non-Jordanians.

- **Qatar** passed the Council of Ministers decision No. 13 of 2019 defining the rights, advantages and benefits of political refugees, with provisions on freedom of movement, the right to work, housing, health care and education.

C. The financing landscape

The mobilization of domestic resources for financing sustainable development remains low in the region, in part due to the absence of in-depth tax reforms.[51] Through structural fiscal and financial reforms, including to fight corruption and staunch tax leakages, as well as significant cuts in military spending, States could mobilize domestic resources to establish long-term social development programmes, reduce inequalities, improve socioeconomic welfare and promote the rule of law.

1. Tax leakages

Domestic resource mobilization is affected by tax leakages, including illicit financial flows, trade mis-invoicing and tax abuse (see also the chapter on SDG 17). Illicit financial flows have outstripped the combined aggregate of total official development assistance and foreign direct investment inflows,[52] hampering the effectiveness of tax administration, distorting trade and investment figures, and worsening macroeconomic conditions. Illicit financial flows inhibit sustainable development efforts by negatively affecting abilities to raise domestic resources, undermining the rule of law and trust in governments, and weakening the social contract. Enhanced capacities to collect revenue and finance the SDGs should include ending illicit and harmful financial leakages that undermine good governance and anti-corruption efforts.[53]

The region misses out on $8.9 billion annually due to corporate tax abuse.[54] Trade mis-invoicing amounts to $77.5 billion in losses each year. The top six countries adversely affected by illicit financial flows are **Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia** and the **United Arab Emirates.** They account for 80 per cent of regional illicit financial flows associated with mis-invoicing.[55] Eliminating trade mis-invoicing by 2030, as called for by SDG 16, would close approximately 13.5 per cent of the SDG financing gap in the region,[56] enough to reduce poverty rates by up to 70 per cent.

2. Military spending

Excessive military spending is diverting funds from socioeconomic development, regional integration and peacebuilding, and increasing instability due to mutual suspicion among neighbouring countries. Regional military expenditure was nearly $112 billion in 2021.[57] This sum represents 4.6 per cent of regional GDP[58] and 16.4 per cent of regional general government expenditure,[59] against the world averages of 2.2 and 5.8 per cent, respectively. At the global level, four Gulf Cooperation Council countries (**Kuwait, Oman, Qatar** and **Saudi Arabia**) topped the ranking of high-income countries against military spending as a percentage of GDP in 2022. **Bahrain** was in the eighth position.[60] While the average based on 48 high-income countries was 2.1 per cent, the highest value was in **Saudi Arabia** at 7.42 per cent. If military expenditure in the region did not exceed the world average of 2.2 per cent of GDP, it would have an additional $63 billion annually for SDG financing, enough to eradicate poverty in two years or to close the financing gap in education.



D. Regional dimensions



The percentage of Arab countries with **national human rights institutions that comply with the Paris Principles** increased from 27.3 per cent in 2020 to 31.6 per cent in 2022, compared to the world average of 42.8 per cent.

As of 29 November 2023, 12 out of the 120 national human rights institutions accredited by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institution were from the Arab region. **Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Qatar** and the **State of Palestine** were in full compliance with the Paris Principles (A status), while **Algeria, Bahrain, Libya, Oman** and **Tunisia** were not fully compliant (B status).[61]

The Arab Network for National Human Rights Institutions is a regional alliance formed by national institutions to advance human rights in line with the Paris Principles. It aims to empower national human rights institutions to protect human rights domestically and foster a human rights culture among citizens and stakeholders. The network advises on aligning national legislation with international conventions, enhances the capacities of member institutions for international accreditation, promotes the creation of national human rights bodies, and fosters cooperation between national institutions and international organizations.[62]



Endnotes

1. Abu-Ismail, Chaitani and Nehme, 2021.
2. See the Global Peace Index 2022.
3. ESCWA, 2023d. See also UNDP, 2022.
4. Data on humanitarian assistance from the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) for Iraq, Libya, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.
5. See the UNHCR Refugee Data Finder, accessed on 1 February 2024.
6. A composite index measuring the peacefulness of countries made up of 23 quantitative and qualitative indicators.
7. They are performing better than the 15 Arab countries on the second half of the index, including six and nine in the third and last quantiles, respectively: Morocco at 84, Algeria at 96, Bahrain at 108, Djibouti at 112, Mauritania at 114, Saudi Arabia at 119, Egypt at 121, the State of Palestine at 134, Lebanon at 135, Libya at 137, Iraq at 154, the Sudan at 155, Somalia at 156, the Syrian Arab Republic at 161 and Yemen at 162. See 2023 Global Peace Index.
8. For instance, the United Nations Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund links recovery, stabilization, local governance and peacebuilding, investing in programmes that support local authorities in rebuilding trust around service delivery, local conflict resolution and employment. See more on the Peacebuilding Fund.
9. See the Integrated Reconciliation Project.
10. Bchir, 2023.
11. The project was carried out in partnership with ESCWA and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit with the support of a Libyan consulting group.
12. ESCWA, 2021b.
13. Government effectiveness is a critical factor that determines the quality of governance, the functionality of institutions and the overall well-being of citizens.
14. Algeria (2020), Bahrain (2017 revision), the Comoros (2018), Djibouti (2010 revision), Egypt (2019 revision), Iraq (2005), Jordan (2016), Kuwait (1992), Lebanon (2004 revision), Libya (2012 revision), Mauritania (2012 revision), Morocco (2011), Oman (2011 revision), the State of Palestine (2005 revision), Somalia (2012), the Sudan (2019), the Syrian Arab Republic (2012), Tunisia (2014), the United Arab Emirates (2009 revision) and Yemen (2015 revision). Source: Constitute.
15. See Constitute.
16. United States Department of State, 2022b.
17. See the CNDH Mandate for the Protection of Human Rights.
18. United States Department of State, 2022a.
19. See more on Vision 2030.
20. ESCWA, 2023c.
21. Djibouti, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. See AUB and UNFPA, 2021. Some policies or strategies have expired and have not been replaced.
22. See Iraq's Youth Vision for 2030.
23. Arab Reform Initiative, 2022.
24. See Jordan's National Youth Strategy 2019–2025.
25. UNFPA, 2020.
26. See Lebanon's National Youth Policy Action Plan.
27. Somali Youth Hub, 2023.
28. See the the National Youth Policy of the Federal Government of Somalia.
29. See Federal Law No. 13 and Law No. (5) of 2018.
30. Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen. UNESCO, 2021. See also the Global Right to Information Rating by Country.
31. Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.
32. Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Somalia and the Sudan.
33. Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar and the Syrian Arab Republic.
34. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.
35. DESA, 2022.
36. Saudi Arabia was one of the 2022 winners for the COVID-19 Tawakkalna application, while the United Arab Emirates was one of the 2015 winners based on the National Validation Gateway initiative. See more on the Public Service Innovation Hub.
37. See Law No. 2016–22.
38. Human Rights Watch, 2019.
39. OECD and ESCWA, 2022.
40. See the Chafafiya platform.
41. See more on the Open Government Data Initiative.
42. Djibouti, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.
43. The women, peace and security agenda seeks to support the participation of women in advancing peace and security, and ensure their protection from sexual and gender-based violence in situations of conflict. It comprises four main pillars: participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery.
44. ESCWA, 2023c.
45. United Nations, 2022.

46. ESCWA and others, 2019.
47. United Nations, 2023.
48. All Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Jordan and Lebanon.
49. Since its launch in July 2016, the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children has promoted the concept of pathfinding, which aims to raise awareness, stimulate leadership commitment, galvanize action and establish a standard of national violence prevention throughout the world.
50. See more on the State of Palestine's strategy.
51. ESCWA, 2023a, 2022c, 2017b.
52. ESCWA, 2018b, 2017a.
53. ESCWA, 2018a.
54. ESCWA, 2023a, 2022c.
55. ESCWA, 2018a.
56. Costing estimates include information for Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.
57. The World Bank data.
58. 15.5 per cent in Libya, 7.3 per cent in Oman, 6.7 per cent in Kuwait, 6.6 per cent in Saudi Arabia, and 5.6 per cent each in Algeria and the United Arab Emirates.
59. More than 20 per cent in Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.
60. See the GlobalEconomy.com, Military spending, percent of GDP – Country rankings.
61. See more on the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions.
62. See more on the Arab Network for National Human Rights Institutions.

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17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

SDG 17

Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

Introduction

SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals) is an overarching goal that emphasizes global and regional cooperation, interdependence, and shared and differentiated responsibilities for transformative change. It focuses on the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda, which are influenced by multilateral partnerships and international frameworks, such as the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing for development. SDG 17 addresses global dynamics shaping flows of financial resources, technology and knowledge, and seeks to strengthen the coherence of partnerships that make them possible.

Shared responsibility and cooperation, knowledge and technology transfer, and inclusive financing are crucial for reducing inequalities among countries. They can have ripple effects in driving regional and global progress on SDG implementation, accelerating efforts to address common priorities such as water management, food security, climate change and peacebuilding. In that regard, stronger regional integration can support achievement of the vision for sustainable development articulated by the 2030 Agenda.

This chapter focuses on three crucial dimensions of SDG 17, namely **(1) finance, (2) technology, and (3) data, monitoring and accountability.** Other important aspects, such as capacity-building, policy and institutional coherence, and multistakeholder partnerships, are addressed as transversal themes across the thematic chapters of this report.

Finance

A. Introduction

The Arab region faces significant challenges in achieving SDG 17 targets on financing for sustainable development amid massive resource requirements[1] and a context of shrinking fiscal space. Many countries have struggled to maintain fiscal sustainability in the face of rising debt loads and fluctuating commodity prices, challenges worsened by successive shocks stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic consequences of the 2022 escalation of the war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, rising interest rates and a global acceleration of inflation. These crises have aggravated pre-existing vulnerabilities, including high debt service costs and insufficient domestic resource mobilization capacities, and jeopardized governments' abilities to finance policy measures to realize the 2030 Agenda.

Achieving fiscal sustainability will require action by national Governments and the international community. Countries will need to implement integrated national financing frameworks to bolster resource mobilization capacity, create fiscal space to maintain social spending, safeguard economic stability, and ensure well-targeted, equitable, efficient public spending decisions that maximize development outcomes and accelerate progress on the 2030 Agenda.

At the global level, it is crucial for countries that provide official development assistance to fulfil their funding commitments and for stakeholders to work towards a more equitable and sustainable international financial architecture, including the design and implementation of effective debt relief mechanisms.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).

Although regional data for most SDG 17 indicators related to financing are unavailable, related figures illustrate the challenges Arab countries face in sustainably financing development:

Public debt has ballooned across the region, growing from an estimated 10 per cent of GDP in 2008 to around 47 per cent in 2023, and has been accompanied in many cases by unsustainable debt servicing burdens. There is significant variation among countries and subregions, with the problem being particularly acute for middle-income and least developed countries.[2]

Table 17.1
Debt projections by subregion, as percentage of GDP

	2023	2024	2025
All Arab countries	46.8	46.1	45.8
Gulf Cooperation Council countries	30.9	31.9	32.2
Middle-income countries	71.1	67.4	64.9
Least developed countries	78.0	70.3	70.4
Conflict-affected countries	52.1	55.0	58.7

Sources: Data from ESCWA, 2023c; ESCWA projections based on the World Economic Forecasting Model, 2023.

In 2022, **incoming personal remittances** amounted to 2.1 per cent of GDP at the regional level. Remittances are particularly significant outside the Gulf Cooperation Council subregion, accounting for approximately 4 per cent of GDP in the Maghreb, 4.9 per cent in the least developed countries and 5.2 per cent in the Mashreq.

Foreign direct investment inflows in 2022 amounted to $53.8 billion, nearly 40 per cent below their 2008 peak.[3] More than 90 per cent of these inflows went to just five countries **(Egypt, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates);** 45 per cent of which went to extractive industries. The region sees $1.50 in foreign direct investment outflows per $1 in inflows, rendering it a net exporter of capital.[4]

Tax systems in the region are subject to multiple distortions and leakages, and suffer from high rates of tax evasion and abuse. The region has a substantial tax gap (the difference between what should be collected based on prevailing tax rates and what is actually collected). **Tax gaps** amount to 15 per cent of non-oil GDP in hydrocarbon-exporting countries and 17.9 per cent in hydrocarbon-importing countries. An estimated $8.9 billion in annual revenues is lost due to corporate tax abuse, while tax competition cost the region an estimated $50 billion between 1980 and 2020.[5]

Illicit financial flows are a major contributor to lost revenue in the region, with **trade mis-invoicing** alone accounting for an estimated $77.5 billion in foregone revenue collection. This number is greater than both foreign direct investment and official development assistance inflows to Arab countries, and is estimated to impact at least 8.2 per cent of the region's non-oil trade.[6]

Net official development assistance disbursements to the region from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)-Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries totalled $13.9 billion in 2022. While this represents an increase of 26 per cent relative to 2013 levels (when aid amounted to roughly $11 billion), it is roughly equivalent to the amount received from OECD-DAC countries in 2016. Since then, aid inflows to the region from these countries have fluctuated, peaking at $16 billion in 2020, followed by consecutive declines in 2021 and 2022. Of gross aid disbursed to the region from OECD-DAC countries in 2022, 74.9 per cent was grant funding and 31.4 per cent was humanitarian assistance, both the lowest proportions since at least 2012. Of the gross assistance inflows disbursed from these countries to the region in 2022, 26.8 per cent was disbursed to the least developed countries and 55.8 per cent to countries in conflict. Of non-humanitarian assistance, 16.6 per cent went to the least developed countries and 42.5 per cent to countries in conflict.

Although there is significant variation among OECD-DAC countries, as a group, they contributed official development assistance equivalent to 0.36 per cent of their gross national income in 2022, far less than the targeted level of 0.7 per cent endorsed in multiple agreements, including in SDG target 17.2. If OECD-DAC countries fulfilled their commitment, the region would have received an additional $24 billion in development financing, assuming an unchanged distribution across recipient countries globally.[a]

Within the Arab region as elsewhere, the role of non-traditional donors in development financing is increasingly significant. While OECD-DAC countries provided roughly 49.5 per cent of total official development assistance inflows into the region in 2013, this figure has steadily declined, with this group accounting for just 42.2 per cent of the $33 billion in total assistance received in 2022. The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have emerged as major sources of support to countries within the Arab region and beyond. Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates collectively accounted for nearly $9 billion in worldwide net official development assistance in 2022.

Sources: OECD Stat, "Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions [DAC2a]", accessed on 18 April 2024; OECD, 2023b.

[a] Based on the Arab region receiving an average of 11.5 per cent of net official development assistance from OECD-DAC countries between 2013 and 2022.

Regionally, more data are needed to fully understand progress on SDG 17 targets related to financing. Indicators on resource mobilization and budgeting are particularly difficult to track as data are often not publicly released, highlighting a need for increased fiscal transparency.

For an up-to-date view of the SDG 17 data on finance at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.





On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to SDG financing

- Urgently adopt debt management strategies to ensure the sustainability of public finances. Measures should include enhanced coordination between monetary and fiscal policies, improving data to ensure evidence-based borrowing, strengthening domestic bond markets to reduce reliance on external debt, and resource mobilization measures such as those discussed below.
- Actively work with international and regional partners to achieve reforms to the international financial architecture and business models of multilateral development banks. This must include fair debt relief and restructuring procedures, more favourable borrowing terms for developing countries, equitable access liquidity support during crises, and greater representation in the governance of international financial institutions.
- Avoid the evolution of debt crises into social crises by prioritizing social expenditures that provide support and services to populations at risk of being left behind and facilitate social mobility.
- Develop and implement integrated national financing frameworks that identify resources needed to realize the 2030 Agenda and include actionable measures to align financing and other means of implementation to achieve the SDGs.



- Adopt budget reforms and fiscal policies to improve the efficiency of public expenditures, including through measures to increase the transparency of budgeting processes and track the impact of spending on SDG progress.
- Rationalize tax incentives and systematically conduct cost-benefit analyses and evaluations to ensure that measures achieve their intended purposes and maximize the positive long-term effects of investment.
- Strengthen the enforcement of tax policies to reduce tax leakages and evasion, adopt measures to increase the equity of resource mobilization policies, and align resource mobilization policies with sustainable development priorities.

B. The policy landscape

Several common trends are evident in the efforts of Arab countries to finance sustainable development.

◆ **Many least developed and middle-income countries are developing and implementing integrated national financing frameworks to better align budgetary decisions with development priorities.** The frameworks are valuable tools for implementing the Addis Ababa Action Agenda at the national level and for supporting SDG achievement by ensuring that policies and reforms align financing and other means of implementation to achieve sustainable development priorities. Integrated national financing frameworks can improve the coherence and complementarity of financing from different sources, and increase the capacity to make risk-informed spending decisions during crises.[7] They help to bridge the gap that often exists between national development plans and efforts to mobilize the financial resources needed to achieve them. Establishing integrated national financing frameworks requires complete assessments of local financing contexts and needs, actionable sustainable development financing strategies, effective monitoring and evaluation frameworks and administrative capacity for implementation.[8]

Eight Arab countries **(**the **Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco** and **Tunisia)** have reported progress on developing such frameworks to the Integrated National Financing Framework Facility. Most countries remain at early stages of the process, aiming to develop a costing of resources needed for SDG achievement;

incorporate SDG and national development plan targets into spending decisions and budgetary processes; prioritize key sectors and groups at risk of being left behind; strengthen policy coherence; and mobilize and ensure the coherence of various financing sources, including public expenditures and private investment.[9]

◆ **Countries have introduced budgeting reforms, but they remain limited in scope and transparency.** Although no country in the region has shifted towards an SDG budgeting model that explicitly plans and tracks expenditures according to the Goals, many countries have launched reforms to improve public sector performance by shifting the focus of budgetary processes from fiscal inputs to achievements and outputs, through approaches including results-, performance- and programme-based budgeting. Although there are nuances among these approaches, they all involve identifying performance objectives and indicators to be achieved with allocated funds, with recipient entities generally enjoying somewhat more flexibility in how resources are directed to realize objectives compared to line-item budgeting approaches. Such efforts can support budgeting for the SDGs and enhance monitoring and evaluation by using national development targets as indicators during the budgeting process.[10] Reforms to move towards such models have been launched in **Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar** and **Tunisia.**

Other tools have been utilized to respond to specific policy objectives. For instance, **gender-responsive budgeting processes** determine the extent to which fiscal policies advance or detract from gender equality, including by mainstreaming a gender perspective at all levels of the budgetary process and using insights to structure revenues and expenditures accordingly.[11,12] Such methodologies have been employed to varying extents in at least seven countries in the Arab region (including **Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine** and **Tunisia**), often with the involvement of national women's machineries. Although the scope of such efforts varies considerably, common features include measures to ensure equal opportunity within the public sector, the development of performance indicators and sex-disaggregated data, and allocations made according to identified needs. Despite such efforts, serious gaps persist in gender-responsive budgeting efforts (see the chapter on SDG 5).

Despite reforms, budget processes in the Arab region are frequently characterized by limited public participation, poor oversight and a general lack of transparency, which constitute policy gaps that inhibit effective SDG financing. In many countries, budget documents and audit reports are unavailable to the public, difficult to access or published with delays. Most countries in the region rank poorly on the International Budget Partnership's Open Budget Survey.[13]

◆ **Amid rising debt burdens, Governments across the region have enacted tax reforms to improve their fiscal positions.** Tax rates are generally low, with the regional tax-to-GDP ratio standing at just 8 per cent in 2019. This is far below the global median rates of middle- and high-income countries, which were 18 and 25 per cent, respectively, during the same period.[14] This regional average, however, disguises significant variations among country groups. While tax-to-GDP ratios in middle-income countries average around 20 per cent, the proportion averages below 5 per cent in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

Recent years have seen the introduction of new taxes and modifications to existing tax rates to expand the role of taxation in revenue generation. A notable example has been the introduction of value-added taxes in **Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates** following a 2016 agreement among the Gulf Cooperation Council countries that has led to diversified revenue and an increased role for taxation in public financing. Direct taxes, such as personal and corporate income taxes, have remained limited, however.[15] Many middle-income and least developed countries, which derive much larger proportions of their budgetary resources from taxation, have also sought to increase revenues through adjustments to tax rates. For instance, within the past decade, value-added and sales taxes, which constitute the majority of tax revenues in most of these countries, have increased in **Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Mauritania, Palestine** and **Tunisia.**[16]

Several countries have raised their top-tier tax rates for corporate and personal income taxes. In the past 10 years, **Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania** and **Tunisia** each increased their highest personal marginal tax rates, while **Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon** and the **State of Palestine** raised the highest applicable corporate income tax rates. The tax bases of many countries remain extremely narrow, however, as large numbers of earners either do not carry any tax liability or operate outside the formal tax system. Further, tax increases have not necessarily yielded equivalent increases in revenue, as weak enforcement capacity, numerous exemptions, high levels of informal economic activity, low compliance rates and various forms of tax abuse undercut the efficiency of tax administrations. Consequently, **the shares of both personal and corporate income taxes in total tax revenue have not significantly changed in most countries, despite reforms.**

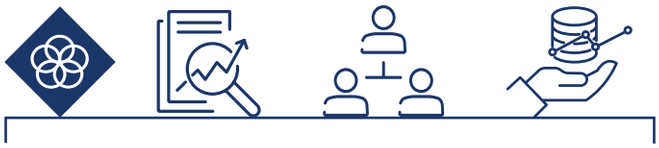
Even administratively simpler taxes, such as value-added taxes, suffer from considerable inefficiency, resulting in significant revenue losses. If Arab countries were to improve value-added tax efficiency to the average level of OECD countries, revenue raised from such taxes would increase by as much as 47 per cent in some countries. Increasing tax efficiency requires, among other elements, a greater capacity to enforce policy, including through better data collection; a careful analysis of the coherence of tax incentives; and a track record of effective social investment that improves the quality and availability of public services to demonstrate value, build trust and create buy-in among taxpayers while reducing tax evasion.[17]

As outlined in the chapter on SDG 10, **tax policies and reforms in the region have not been optimized for addressing inequality,** as regressive indirect taxes, such as value-added taxes, continue to predominate in the tax revenues of most middle-income and least developed countries, representing 40 to 50 per cent of total tax revenues in **Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco** and **Tunisia;** 50 to 60 per cent in **Mauritania** and **Palestine;** and over 70 per cent in **Jordan.** Despite an increasing concentration of wealth among the richest people in the region, countries have adopted very few measures to tax wealth.[18]

State-owned enterprises are prominent in Arab economies. Although some stand out for their remarkable performance, in many cases, they have low productivity and competitiveness. State-owned enterprises play a significant but often non-transparent role in public financing through investment and quasi-fiscal activities such as lending or providing goods and services at below-market prices.

Frequently, extensive support measures, guarantees and subsidies allow state-owned enterprises to operate under "soft" budget constraints, leaving Governments liable for shortfalls. Many operate at a loss and carry substantial debt loads, and in some countries, direct fiscal support to these enterprises rivals spending on health or education. The substantial risks and opportunity costs that underperforming enterprises can pose to national budgets underscore the need for reform, fiscal transparency and risk management frameworks to avoid burdening public treasuries and crowding out private activity.

Sources: ESCWA, 2023b; IMF, 2021.



◆ **In the face of a growing SDG financing gap, Governments are turning to the private sector to mobilize additional resources. To this end, an increasingly popular tool has been the use of public-private partnerships (PPPs).** PPPs are agreements between public entities and private companies to finance, build and operate projects, often through initial private funding that is subsequently compensated through operating revenue, tax concessions or other incentives. While such partnerships can accelerate the financing and implementation of critical projects, they also carry risks. These include risks of increased long-term costs to the public; corruption, rent-seeking and capture of public resources; reduced transparency; and distortions of policy priorities to enhance the commercial viability of projects. Accordingly, such projects must be carefully designed and regulated by legal and institutional frameworks to ensure continued prioritization of long-term development objectives.

As of 2023, 15 Arab countries had adopted dedicated laws to govern the implementation of PPPs,[19] **while at least another 3 were developing such legislation.** In countries without dedicated PPP legislation, such projects are typically governed by public procurement law, although in some countries, executive decrees have been issued on the subject in the absence of a law. In addition to legislative frameworks, some countries have established dedicated PPP units within their administrations to promote, facilitate and evaluate private sector collaborations. Countries with such structures include **Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco** and **Saudi Arabia.**

Overall, PPPs in the region have yet to have a transformational impact on SDG achievement. A review of recent data on low- and middle-income countries found a heavy concentration of PPPs geographically and by sector – 85 per cent of infrastructure projects targeted just three countries **(Egypt, Jordan** and **Morocco),** and 94 per cent were in the energy or transportation sectors.[20]



◆ **Other efforts to stimulate private development financing have included the issuance of sustainable use-of-proceeds bonds (such as green bonds or social bonds) to raise funds for projects related to SDG achievement.** Between 2015 and June 2022, the region raised $14.4 billion in proceeds from such instruments, mostly after 2018. **Qatar, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates** have issued 91 per cent of sustainability bonds, and 84 per cent were categorized as green bonds.[21] Most sustainability bonds are issued by corporations or government-linked entities. **Egypt** is the only country to have issued sovereign green bonds, with proceeds directed towards financing transportation, water and sanitation projects. Despite growth in sustainable use-of-proceeds bonds, they are still a relatively small part of the regional SDG financing landscape. The region accounts for 0.5 per cent of the global total of such bonds, trailing every developing region except sub-Saharan Africa.

The private sector in the Arab region remains less effective in mobilizing investment than in other developing regions, and total investment has gradually fallen since 2010. While data were only available for six countries, from 2015 to 2018 the private sector in **Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and the **United Arab Emirates** made investments equivalent to 12 per cent of GDP, significantly lower than the East Asia and Pacific rate of 34 per cent, and even lower than the global least developed country average of 21 per cent. Poor rates of investment reflect the need to establish an enabling environment, including by stabilizing foreign exchange reserves, reducing borrowing costs, and ending political turmoil and protracted conflicts.[22]

◆ **While countries have sought to spur investment through tax incentives, such efforts have largely fallen short of their potential to raise resources for sustainable development financing.** Many Governments have offered generous tax incentives and established special economic zones to promote investment activity (see the chapter on SDG 8 for additional analysis). Tax holidays are a particularly common instrument, with most countries offering schemes that exempt profits derived from eligible investments from corporate income taxes. In some cases, such benefits are extended to incentivize the development of particular sectors – for instance, **Algeria** and **Jordan** have offered reduced tax rates on medical goods, and both **Lebanon** and **Tunisia** offer exemptions for eligible investments in education, health and agriculture. Tax incentives are frequently extended to exporters, although sometimes they are limited to companies operating in special economic zones or free zones catering to international markets, or restricted to specific sectors such as finance, logistics or manufacturing. Such zones have been established in **Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Palestine, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates.** In some cases (including **Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon** and **Libya**), eligible entities operating in such zones receive permanent tax benefits, while in others, exemptions are time limited.[23]

Some countries have established special taxation regimes or offer tax holidays for domestic and international investments in underdeveloped regions. For instance, **Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia** and **Tunisia** have designated specific regions as "development zones" based on socioeconomic conditions, and offer corporate income tax exemptions of 5 to 10 years for eligible activities in such areas. Further incentives often include waivers of certain registration fees and import duties for input materials. Other incentives to further specific policy objectives include outcome conditions for tax exemptions. In **Algeria,** for instance, corporate income tax exemptions of 5 to 10 years are offered for projects creating at least 500 jobs, while other countries (including **Lebanon** and **Libya**) condition investor tax relief on achieving hiring targets for national employees.[24]

Countries have used tax incentives to encourage domestic and foreign investments that advance sustainable development objectives. For instance, nearly all countries have at least one tax incentive designed to encourage investments supporting environmental objectives (such as for renewable energy or pollution reduction projects), and more than half reward investments that boost links with local supply chains. In **Jordan,** a unique tax allowance is extended to firms where at least half of employees are women. Although tax incentives for job creation are relatively common, a few countries also offer breaks linked to upskilling or job quality. For instance, **Morocco** has a reduced tax rate for vocational training establishments. **Saudi Arabia** provides tax exemptions on training expenditures for Saudi nationals employed in qualifying projects. **Egypt** permits a tax allowance for certain firms where employee wages exceed 30 per cent of operating costs.[25]



While tax incentives are often designed to attract investment, they are not by themselves sufficient to do so. Factors such as human capital, bilateral trade links, and institutional quality are also important considerations for investors, highlighting interlinkages with SDGs 4, 8 and 16 in rendering the region more attractive to investors. Moreover, tax incentives for investors have undercut corporate tax revenues by an average of 60 per cent in the region, without yielding commensurate increases in economic activity to offset the loss.

Source: ESCWA, 2022a, 2022b.

◆ **Net foreign direct investment inflows remain highly concentrated and have a muted impact on growth and development.** They fell considerably from a peak of $89 billion in 2008 to $25.5 billion in 2015, though have steadily increased since then, rising to $53.8 billion in 2022.[26] A limit on the impact of this investment is the fact that the region's capital outflows outpace inflows – on average, the region returns $1.50 in outflows for every $1 gained in inflows.[27] Most outflows entail the repatriated profits of foreign investors, with only modest shares reinvested within the region.[28]

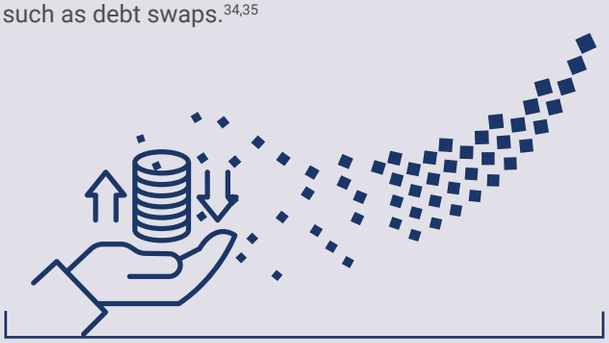
Inflows are highly concentrated in just a few countries: **Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates** alone receive 56 per cent of the total. Five countries **(Egypt, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates)** account for nearly 90 per cent. Overall, foreign direct investment does not tend to flow towards places where it is needed the most – 68.5 per cent of net inflows went to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries while only 4 per cent to the least developed countries. This inequity is inconsistent with SDG target 10.b, which calls for increased financial flows to the least developed countries.[29]

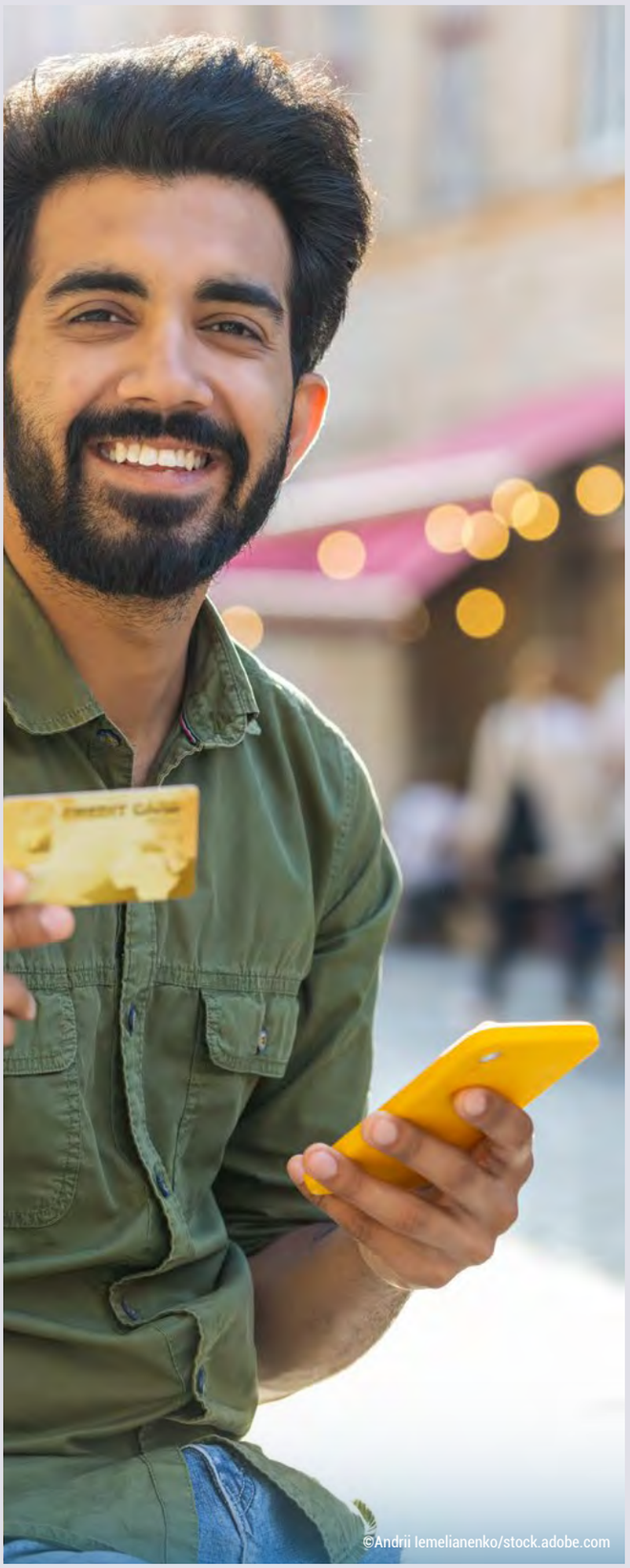
Foreign direct investment remains concentrated in capital-intensive sectors that create relatively few jobs. A majority of investments have been in industries that do not generally have strong positive SDG impacts, such as coal, oil and gas, chemicals, mineral mining, and real estate and leisure. These collectively absorb 56 per cent of inbound investment.[30] A review of experiences in eight Arab countries **(Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine** and **Tunisia)** has found that foreign direct investment largely does not drive transformative development change. It has mixed but mostly unfavourable results in terms of impacts on productivity, employment, skills, gender equality and industries' carbon footprints.[31]



C. Regional dimensions

- Although resource mobilization challenges in the Arab region require decisive national action, such efforts must be accompanied by **renewed international commitment to sustainable development financing.** In particular, **programmes to restructure debt and reforms to create a more equitable global financial system** could alleviate fiscal constraints in developing countries. Regional cooperation offers Arab countries possibilities to share experiences in managing challenges, capitalize on cross-border networks and **work towards a more equitable international financial system.**
- Given the increasing complexity of modern economies, the potential benefits of **coordinating tax policies** continue to grow. As mentioned in the chapters on SDG 10 and SDG 16, regional cooperation is essential for countering corporate tax abuse, illicit financial flows and the negative effects of tax competition. The potential boost to resource mobilization is enormous. Working to harmonize tax incentives and other policies can help avoid a "race to the bottom" that diminishes revenues to finance SDG progress and undermines the potential benefits of foreign direct investment.[32]
- To tackle the growing problem of unsustainable debt burdens, an **Arab Debt Management Group** could be established to serve as an important peer learning platform to exchange best practices on debt optimization strategies. Such collaboration could include improving the quality of debt-related data and sharing strategies for evidence-based borrowing to stabilize debt-to-GDP ratios over the medium term.[33] Countries in the region and international actors could contribute to making debt more sustainable by changing the business models of the multilateral development banks, including through longer loan terms, lower interest rates, greater use of state-contingent clauses, increased lending in local currencies, and innovative financing mechanisms such as debt swaps.[34,35]





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Technology

A. Introduction

Digital technology and Internet connectivity sustained business continuity and access to information during the COVID-19 pandemic, shedding light on the importance of solid and upgraded infrastructure, the development of digital products and services, and an enabling regulatory and market environment. Technology supports development projects in all sectors and can help accelerate the implementation of the SDGs.

Arab countries continue to seize opportunities from technology to transform governance and economies. Technology advancement, adoption and use and the amount of investment, however, vary notably among high-, middle- and low-income countries. The digital divide stems from disparities in infrastructure access, language barriers, digital literacy and socioeconomic factors such as wealth, gender and age. It erects barriers to benefits from new technologies, particularly generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), which requires high data availability and computational power as well as advanced digital skills.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).

The number of **Internet users per 100 inhabitants** in the Arab region reached 70.3 in 2022, up from a pre-pandemic value of 55.2 in 2019. This is the largest growth over a three-year period. The current level surpasses the global average of 66.3.

In 2022, the **rate of fixed-broadband penetration** was 10.4 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, compared to a global average of 17.6. Significant differences exist between the penetration rate in Arab high-income countries (26 per cent) and least developed countries (0.6 per cent).

In 2022, the region had 69.5 **active mobile-broadband subscriptions** per 100 inhabitants compared to a global average of 86.9.[36]

Only four countries **(Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates)** were in the top 50 performers on the **Government AI Readiness** Index in 2023; all are from the Gulf Cooperation Council subregion. **Jordan** came in first among Arab middle-income countries (at a rank of 55 globally). Half of Arab countries are in the bottom 30 per cent, ranking at 120 and below.[37]

Total trade in tracked environmentally sound technologies had a regional value of $52 billion, around 2.2 per cent of the global value. Around 81 per cent of regional trade takes place in Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

The digital divide persists. Among men in the region, 71.9 per cent were Internet users in 2022 compared to 61.5 per cent of women. Disparities persist between urban and rural areas, with access rates of 79.1 and 49.4 per cent, respectively.

Subregional disparities are stark. While the percentage of Internet users in Gulf Cooperation Council countries is close to 100 per cent, the share is only one third of people in the least developed countries.[38]

For an up-to-date view of SDG 17 data on technology at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate technology use and development

- Invest in infrastructure development and upgrades, including last mile connectivity, to ensure universal access to the Internet. Such investments are usually secured from national budgets, multilateral development banks or through public-private partnerships.
- Strengthen the regional integration of ICT infrastructure, including linkages and expanded Internet exchange points (IXPs) across the region to enable the direct, low-cost exchange of content. This will reduce reliance on expensive international routes, improve Internet speeds and stimulate local content creation, ultimately lowering costs for users and boosting the digital economy.
- Maximize the potential of a digital transformation approach to accelerate SDG implementation by identifying priority sectors and benefits from digital technologies. This could include, for example, digital banking for financial inclusion (SDGs 1 and 8), precision agriculture (SDG 2), telemedicine or digital health (SDG 3), online and distance learning (SDG 4), ICT for water management (SDG 6), smart grids (SDG 7), e-government and open data (SDG 16) and real-time monitoring and data (SDG 17).
- Invest in energy-efficient programming languages, data centre efficiency measures, tools to optimize the use of the Cloud and guidelines for green digital products to contribute to sustainability in digital technology.[39]



- Develop national plans for lifelong digital upskilling and reskilling to keep up with emerging technologies, including AI, while guarding against risks and countering or minimizing negative outcomes.
- Ensure that training programmes cater to the needs of Arabic speakers and different demographics, and include people living in rural areas, women and different age groups.
- Integrate assistive technologies into e-services to facilitate access for people with disabilities, and adopt "leaving no one behind" as a guiding principle of e-government programmes.
- Institutionalize the process for generating digital Arabic content in all sectors and provide necessary elements, including partnerships and networking, incentives for content developers, and investment in tools for content development, curation and management.

B. The policy landscape

The technology component of SDG 17 includes targets that relate to global mechanisms, namely, the Technology Facilitation Mechanism and the United Nations Technology Bank for the Least Development Countries. Based on the SDG 17 indicators, however, technology measurement is limited to Internet users and broadband. A meaningful analysis of technology and its role as a means of implementation requires going beyond these indicators to consider digital transformation and emerging technologies.

◆ **Each Arab country has developed at least one strategy relevant to ICT, either general for the ICT sector or to address a focused theme.** Some overarching strategies were adopted before 2015 but not all have been updated,[40] reflecting a global pattern where umbrella ICT plans or strategies are expiring and not being renewed.[41] Many countries are opting for specialized plans responding to national priorities or keeping up with specific technological advancements.

- 21 Arab countries have overarching digital strategies, but all 22 countries have strategies relevant to the ICT sector, such as the delivery of electronic services.
- Some countries have specific strategies for electronic services such as e-health, e-education and e-payment as well as action plans for broadband, cybersecurity, smart mobility or AI.
- **Algeria, Jordan, Mauritania, Oman, Qatar,** the **Syrian Arab Republic** and the **United Arab Emirates** have dedicated e-commerce strategies.

Cyber legislation varies significantly among countries, influenced by complex political, cultural and legal factors. Two important components are cybercrime laws and data protection and privacy laws. Cybercrime laws have been enacted in 17 countries[a] but are still in the form of a bill or act in 3 countries: **Iraq,** the **Sudan** and **Yemen.** These laws address cyber threats such as hacking, fraud, identity theft and online harassment. Data protection and privacy laws have been enacted in 14 countries[b] but are still in the form of a bill or cabinet decision in 2 countries: **Iraq** and **Palestine.** These laws aim at safeguarding personal information and privacy, especially with the rapid growth of data-driven public operations and services.

Source: Compiled by authors based on the ESCWA ENACT project.

[a] Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritanian, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.

[b] Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

◆ **Most countries are moving forward in building basic and specialized ICT skills. Many training programmes are implemented through partnerships with the private sector.** Skills development is still very much needed across the region. Where data are available, they reflect considerable variation. For example, the share of people with basic skills such as using copy/paste tools or sending emails reaches over 60 per cent in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and as much as 100 per cent in some. The share drops significantly, to less than 15 per cent, for countries in conflict.[42] Shares are lower across countries for more advanced ICT skills such as setting up privacy or security measures.

In **Egypt,** collaboration between the Ministry of Communications and Information and the Decent Life Initiative resulted in improved connectivity in rural areas via the installation of fiber optic cables. The collaboration included capacity-building to improve digital literacy and awareness of available digital services as well as to equip citizens with skills such as digital marketing. More than 43,000 trainees in rural areas benefited from digital literacy sessions in 2022. Government employees in rural areas were also targeted for digital training to support implementation of the initiative.

Source: Egypt, Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2022.

- Skills needs and objectives for skills-building are an integral part of national technology plans. They are particularly evident in new plans for AI. **Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates** have included objectives and/or key performance indicators for capacity-building and education in their national AI strategies.
- The 2023 AI strategy of **Jordan** aims to train 15,000 individuals. Jordan also launched the One Million Jordanian Programmers online learning initiative.
- The National Skilling Program of **Qatar** plans to train 50,000 people on digital skills by 2025.[43]

◆ **Countries are investing in e-government to improve public administration and facilitate digital transformation in different sectors.** The shift towards e-government has pronounced implications for health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4) and social protection (SDG 1), and became more necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic when in-person access was limited or non-existent. In 2022, four Arab countries ranked in the "very high" category of the E-Government Development Index.[44] Eight were in the "high" category and eight in the "middle". Only one country was in the "low" category.

- At least 19 Arab countries[45] have issued e-government plans or programmes to leverage ICT for the delivery of government services. These policies are either stand-alone (an e-government strategy or plan) or are part of national development plans or digital transformation strategies. The level of implementation, proliferation and technological advancement of government digital services varies significantly across countries.



Integrating e-service delivery should be part of preparedness and crisis response plans, building primarily on the COVID-19 response.

E-government is also linked to open government and e-participation, which are strong levers for SDG 16 (see also the chapter on SDG 16).

- The **United Arab Emirates** leads the region on the E-Government Development Index and has declared its Government paperless. Its e-government platform offers 500 online services, many of which have been redesigned to cut processing time. For example, the time needed for family registration has been reduced from three days to a few minutes.[46]
- The e-government offering of the **State of Palestine** is growing and falls within the framework of its national development plan. It aims to improve effectiveness and efficiency in the public sector and facilitate access to services, particularly in rural areas and among citizens living abroad. The initiative builds on ongoing technical and security infrastructure development and has focused on data-sharing, data transfer and interoperability across public institutions.

The Technology Facilitation Mechanism

The United Nations established the Technology Facilitation Mechanism in response to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and the 2030 Agenda, which refers to the mechanism in SDG target 17.6. The mechanism comprises four components, each of which includes several activities. While some Arab countries are involved in the mechanism at the expert or institutional level, or are beneficiaries, engagement overall is quite limited, suggesting opportunities for increased participation, as follows.

- A **10-member group** appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General is mandated to engage in preparations for the annual Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) Forum and support the development and operationalization of an online platform, 2030 Connect. Only the first group for 2016–2017 included an expert from the Arab region. The other two groups, for 2018–2021 and 2021–2023, did not include any members from the region.
- **2030 Connect:** This platform collects information on initiatives and publications from countries worldwide. Contributions from the Arab region are mostly to the World Summit on the Information Society platform on digital initiatives. A stocktaking exercise in the Arab region showed that numerous digitization efforts rely on partnerships among government institutions and sectors. For example, the ThinkTech initiative in **Saudi Arabia** was launched by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology to raise awareness and build knowledge on state-of-the-art technologies. Another example is the PortNet National Single Window of Foreign Trade of **Morocco.** Based on a national partnership between the Government and private sector, it plans to digitize international trade services. A third example is the E-Recruitment System of the General Personnel Council of the **State of Palestine,** which was selected as a 2022 prize winner by the World Summit on the Information Society stocktaking exercise.
- **STI Forum:** The multistakeholder STI Forum is the main global event gathering different stakeholders to discuss priority issues, strengthen the science-policy interface and prepare for the High-level Political Forum. On the sidelines of the STI Forum, the Global Solutions Summit is organized to propose and debate research-based policy recommendations for the Group of 20, Group of 7 and beyond.
- **Inter-agency Task Team on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs:** This United Nations inter-agency team promotes coherence and coordination across the United Nations. Of its 10 workstreams, Arab countries are benefiting from capacity- building on science, technology and innovation policies for the SDGs[a] and related roadmaps. Oman and Tunisia have expressed interest in the latter.[b]

[a] Interagency Task Team, 2021.
[b] World Bank and others, 2021.

◆ **Across the region, countries are promoting technological innovations to improve sustainability and transform economic sectors. One notable example is the use of technology in agriculture** to tackle the challenges of water scarcity, limited resources and a growing population through precision agriculture, smart irrigation systems and support for agritech start-ups. Abu Dhabi's Agriculture Authority in the **United Arab Emirates,** for example, is leveraging 50 AI solutions and tracking 250 key indicators to manage agriculture and maximize data impacts on food systems. Partnerships among international, regional and national institutions are steering technological solutions adapted to the region, such as the Solar-Powered Drip Irrigation Optimal Performance system.[47]

Green technology applications have the potential to improve the socioeconomic situation of Arab rural communities. Five agricultural technologies have been identified as adapted to the context of the region: rainwater harvesting, green fertilizers, solar dryers, small-scale food processing and food bioconservation. By enhancing resource efficiency and preserving natural resources, these technologies simultaneously improve the well-being of local populations.

For more information, see the ESCWA project on enhancing the resilience and sustainability of agriculture.

C. Policy trends by subregion

1. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have invested in advanced ICT infrastructure and continue to invest in upgrades. Regionally, they have the highest value of fixed broadband per 100 inhabitants at almost 100 per cent. **Qatar** and the **United Arab Emirates** have the fastest mobile broadband speeds globally. Citizen-centric approaches have led to more refined e-government services. As such, Gulf Cooperation Council countries rank higher on the e-government development index than other countries in the region. The **United Arab Emirates** ranks thirteenth globally.

◆ **Gulf Cooperation Council countries have focused on building the "digital economy".** The fourth industrial revolution has the potential to add between $138 billion and $255 billion to GDP in the subregion, depending on the level of digital transformation achieved.[48] Further, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of the digital economy for improved economic resilience.[49] **Bahrain, Oman** and the **United Arab Emirates** have developed targeted strategies for building a digital economy. These strategies focus on economic sectors undergoing digital transformation and seek to advance e-services such as digital financial services (e-payments).

◆ **A fast pace in adopting advanced and emerging technologies is evident in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.** The **United Arab Emirates** has produced a package of polices that integrate the latest technologies in all economic sectors. It puts a special focus on digitally transforming government services and integrating AI, which is expected to contribute $96 billion to GDP by 2030, and blockchain, which is expected to save around $3 billion.[50] **Saudi Arabia** has shown strong institutional and policy support for building AI-powered government services in data and analytics, foresight and decision-making. Millions of users benefit from these services with savings estimated in the billions of dollars. Advanced ICT infrastructure helps push these policies forward, with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries having achieved an infrastructure level similar to, and sometimes even exceeding, that of highly developed countries. **Qatar** and the **United Arab Emirates** have the world's fastest mobile broadband speeds at 175 and 178 megabits per second, respectively.

Internet use in the Arab region is more focused on social media than impactful economic activity. The World Bank refers to a "digital paradox" in the region,[a] noting: "For its level of development, measured by GDP per capita, the region has an excess in the use of social media and a deficit in the use of digital payments". Elevated levels of Internet use do not imply a transformation towards the digital economy, especially when there is a lack of trust in the government and the financial system.

Source: Cusolito and others, 2021.

[a] The region referred to by the World Bank is the Middle East and North Africa.

◆ **To keep up with the fast pace of technological development, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries are providing venues for regulatory experimentation with new digital products.** A regulatory sandbox, for example, allows experimentation with technology and business models, and fosters collaborations among stakeholders. The Gulf Cooperation Council countries are implementing the sandbox concept to experiment with technologies and launch start-ups with innovative solutions, thus supporting the entrepreneurship ecosystem to keep up with technological development. The Central Bank of **Bahrain** opened its regulatory sandbox in 2017; it currently hosts 19 companies developing fintech solutions. **Saudi Arabia** has launched several sandboxes for fintech, emerging technologies and embedding data and privacy into products. Another example involves intergovernmental regulatory collaboration, such as the Agile Nations network that the **United Arab Emirates** joined with other non-Arab countries. The network helps innovators navigate the regulatory landscape, test new technological ideas in collaboration with regulators and scale up innovations while protecting citizens.[51]

2. Arab middle-income countries

The Arab middle-income countries had 85 Internet users per 100 inhabitants in 2022, higher than the regional average. These countries have a high e-government index ranging from 0.53 in **Lebanon** to 0.65 in **Tunisia.**

Middle-income countries have attempted to address a persistent digital divide, whether related to location, gender or age, with the ultimate objective being to ensure everyone has adequate Internet connectivity that is safe, reliable and affordable. In 2022, **Egypt** provided ICT skills training to 125,000 individuals and built over 1,000 mobile towers in the Decent Life Villages to improve connectivity. Digital inclusion is a top priority in the 2025 digital strategy of **Tunisia.** In 2023, Tunisia launched an infrastructure project to connect over 3,300 schools to broadband.[52] The digital strategy of **Morocco** has a target of reducing the digital divide by 50 per cent, including the gap between rural and urban areas. **Algeria** is expanding coverage and improving bandwidth capacity in all geographic areas as well as in academic and health institutions.[53]

◆ **To enhance digital entrepreneurship and innovation, middle-income countries have been building an entrepreneurship ecosystem over the years through support for incubators, accelerators and educational programmes.** Regulatory frameworks, investment funds, national initiatives and awards are being set up to encourage innovative start-ups in technology **(Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco** and **Tunisia).** In **Egypt,** technology start-ups have received $605 million in venture capital deals.[54] Jordan established a Ministry for Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship in 2019. A recent study found that most Jordanian start-ups are in technology, such as e-commerce, edtech, fintech, health-tech and others.[55]

E-commerce is increasingly recognized for its vast opportunities in accessing markets (SDG 9), increasing employment and contributing to GDP (SDG 8). It can also be leveraged for the empowerment of women entrepreneurs and traders (SDG 5).

E-commerce growth, however, is not without challenges. These mainly relate to:

- Connectivity, depending on ICT infrastructure.
- Digital payments, part of a wider financial inclusion challenge.
- Consumer behaviour, which is shaped by a lack of trust and the need for better cybersecurity.

◆ **Several middle-income countries are working to build an enabling environment for e-commerce through policies, legislation and targeted programmes. Egypt** and **Jordan** have developed dedicated e-commerce strategies that aim to build an enabling ecosystem, including necessary legislation and partnerships. In these strategies, e-commerce is expected to incentivize the private sector and become a lever for economic growth. **Algeria, Jordan** and **Tunisia** enacted e-commerce laws in 2018, 2015 and 2000, respectively.[56] **Morocco** has taken a more practical approach, including e-commerce as a lever for economic development in national development strategies and launching multiple support programmes. Examples of the latter include a certificate of excellence and monetary support to start-ups offering e-commerce services and a national programme to accelerate digital start-ups in commerce.[57] The Government also supports e-commerce websites for artisanal manufacturers to help increase their access to local and international markets.[58]


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3. Arab least developed countries and countries in conflict

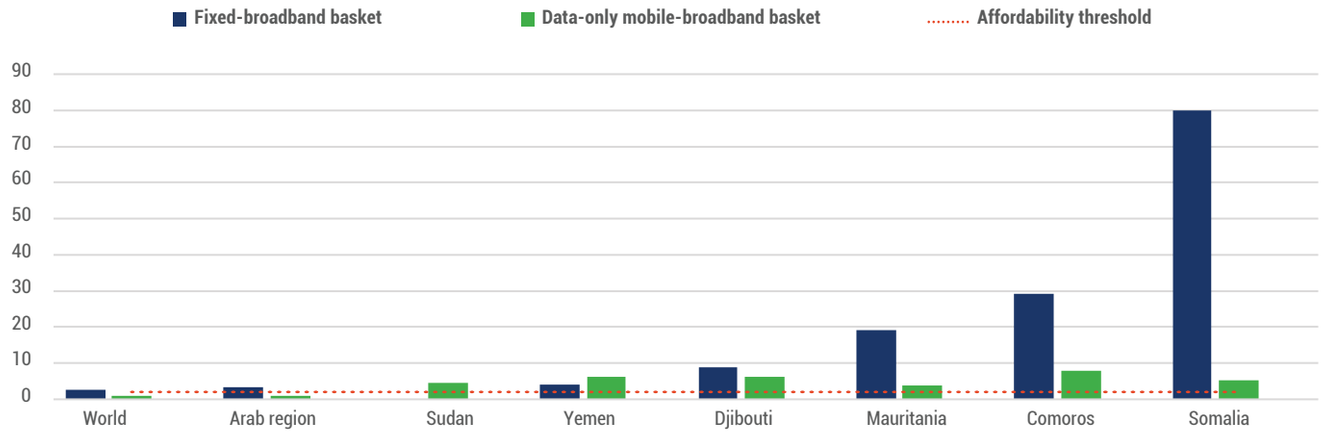
In Arab least developed countries, the number of fixed broadband subscriptions, at 0.6 per 100 inhabitants, is a fraction of the regional average and less than all other regions worldwide. This is mainly because mobile broadband is seen as a less expensive and more accessible alternative, although not the most ideal. Looking at mobile broadband in 2022, subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in the least developed countries (27.1) and countries in conflict (33.7) were both less than the regional average (69.5). The value was alarmingly low in **Somalia** (2.5 in 2022) and **Yemen** (4.9 in 2021). There is a high gender gap in Internet use, reaching 12 percentage points in **Iraq.**

◆ **ICT infrastructure projects in the least developed countries are focused on Internet access, including network coverage and affordability.** These countries are mostly rural with vast geographic areas posing a challenge to connectivity in terms of implementation and costs. ICT or digital strategies in the **Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania** and **Somalia** prioritize infrastructure development, network coverage and development of digital services, among other issues. Globally, broadband remains unaffordable in most of the least developed countries, which also applies to those in the Arab region. The price of fixed and mobile broadband is higher than the affordability threshold (figure 17.1).[59] These countries,[60] in national policies or plans or donor-funded projects, have acknowledged the need to reduce the cost of access.

The economic impact of fixed and mobile broadband is greater in low-income countries than in higher-income countries, demonstrating that policies for improving broadband access, connectivity and uptake in the least developed countries could yield higher economic returns than in other countries.

Source: UNOHRLLS and ITU, 2019.

Figure 17.1
Fixed and mobile broadband basket, 2022 (Percentage of monthly gross national income per capita)



Source: ESCWA based on data from ITU, 2023c.

Even when an ICT policy exists, implementation remains a serious challenge for most countries in conflict, which have destroyed or seriously damaged telecommunications infrastructure. Continued conflict and a lack of funding are major impediments to moving forward. Costs for recovery and reconstruction in **Yemen** were estimated at $20 billion to $25 billion over five years and in **Iraq** at $88.2 billion. The strategy for the digital transformation of government services in the **Syrian Arab Republic** considers the infrastructure development phase a foundational one and requires vast investments.[61] In **Palestine,** the ICT sector is among government development priorities and constituted around 3.2 per cent of GDP in 2021.[62] Employment in the ICT industry almost doubled between 2008 and 2018, while ICT service exports increased from less than $2 million in 2000 to more than $85 million in 2017. Development of the digital economy is among the priorities of the National Development Plan (2021–2023), the recent ICT Sector Strategy 2021–2023 and many sectoral strategies.

Since 7 October 2023, the Gaza Strip has faced severe damage to its telecommunications infrastructure and recurrent Internet shutdowns, which have hindered access to vital information and delivery of humanitarian efforts. Although mobile network operators are able to deliver voice services, the network has become congested due to increased numbers of subscribers in certain areas. This negatively impacts the ability of people and communities to maintain contact with each other as well as the delivery of crucial services and the transmission of information within Gaza and to the outside world.

The Emergency Telecommunications Cluster, a global network of organizations, was activated for the **State of Palestine** on 31 October 2023. It has aided humanitarian agencies with assessments, technical advice, repairs and guidance on ICT equipment in Gaza. The cluster has managed to obtain authorization for importing telecom equipment for humanitarian communications, and continues to engage with Israeli authorities to import other equipment into Gaza, although the process is lengthy and challenging. The cluster is also looking into alternative means to disseminate information such as radio stations.

Source: Emergency Telecommunications Cluster, 2024. See also the ETC Palestine Dashboard.

◆ **Direct engagement with the United Nations Technology Bank is limited among the least developed countries.** The bank was established as stipulated in SDG target 17.8 of the 2030 Agenda and acts as a mechanism to close the science, technology and innovation gap in the least developed countries with a view to meeting the SDGs. It runs initiatives and services including technology needs assessments, technology transfer programmes and capacity-building, comprising the establishment of academies of science, digital training for research, biotechnology research exchanges and technology makers labs, among others. Out of 15 completed and ongoing technology needs assessments, only one is for an Arab country **(Djibouti).** These needs assessments are demand-driven, thus posing a question as to why Arab least developed countries are not requesting them. Some countries have engaged in educational programmes such as the International Design Education Programme, including **Somalia,** the **Sudan** and **Yemen.**[63]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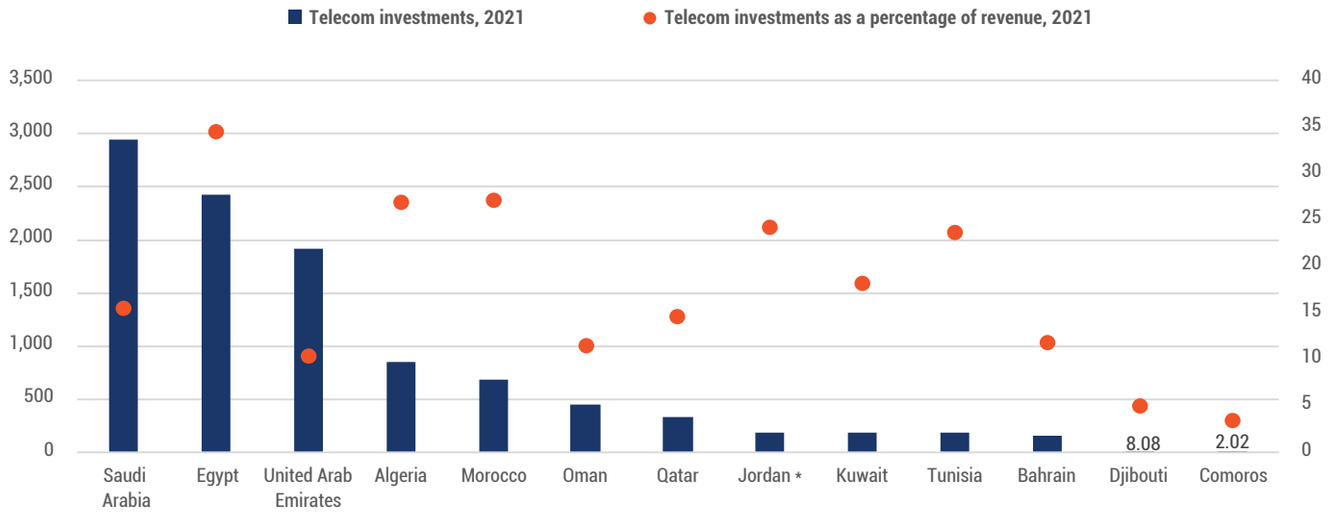
D. The financing landscape

Based on available data, total investments in telecommunications services in Arab States reached $10.34 billion in 2021, less than 5 per cent of global investments. These investments were made by providers of telecommunication networks and/or services either to acquire new assets or upgrade existing ones, and included fixed and mobile Internet services. **Saudi Arabia, Egypt** and the **United Arab Emirates** lead in terms of the value of investments. Over the previous five years, the change in investment varied across countries; the largest increase was in **Egypt,** with more than 130 per cent increase between 2017 and 2021. The largest drop was in the **Comoros.** For most Arab States, the percentage of investment out of revenues was less than 25 per cent (figure 17.2).



Figure 17.2
Telecommunications investments and percentage of revenue, 2021 or latest (Millions of dollars)



Source: ESCWA based on data from the ITU DataHub.
Note: An asterisk (*) denotes data from 2020.

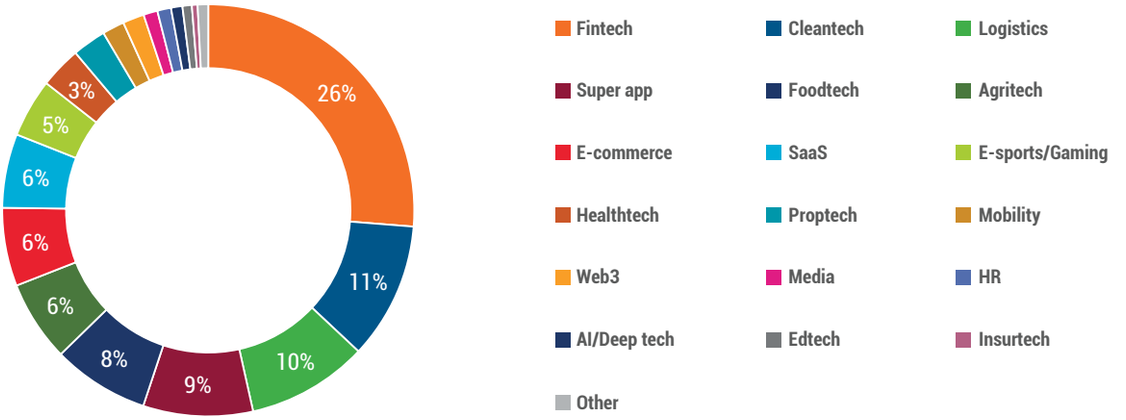
Most countries have established funds to foster investment in small and medium ICT projects, particularly those by young entrepreneurs. They also encourage banks to provide loans to start-ups, particularly in ICT, to facilitate the expansion of the sector. **Jordan, Oman** and the **State of Palestine** incentivize foreign and national investment in ICT by reducing taxes and simplifying procedures. Special economic zones with advantageous facilities and services offer another route to attract investment.[64]

Venture capital is a growing source of funding for start-up companies. Start-ups in 15 Arab countries in 2022 crossed the $3 billion investment mark.[65] **Egypt, Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates** have dominated venture capital, with most deals involving seed or pre-seed investments although the largest amounts have gone into growth investments. Start-ups operate in around 30 domains, the majority of which are technology-based and led by fintech, which attracted over $1.1 billion in investments in 2022. The diversity of domains in figure 17.3 reveals the impact technology has on many SDGs, such as benefits from food-tech for SDG 2 and health-tech for SDG 3.[66]

There is a notable gender gap in recipients of venture capital. The majority of investments in 2022 (94 per cent) went to start-ups founded by men. The rest went to start-ups founded by women only or co-founded by women and men. Start-ups led by women mostly operated in the health-tech, ed-tech and e-commerce sectors.[67]

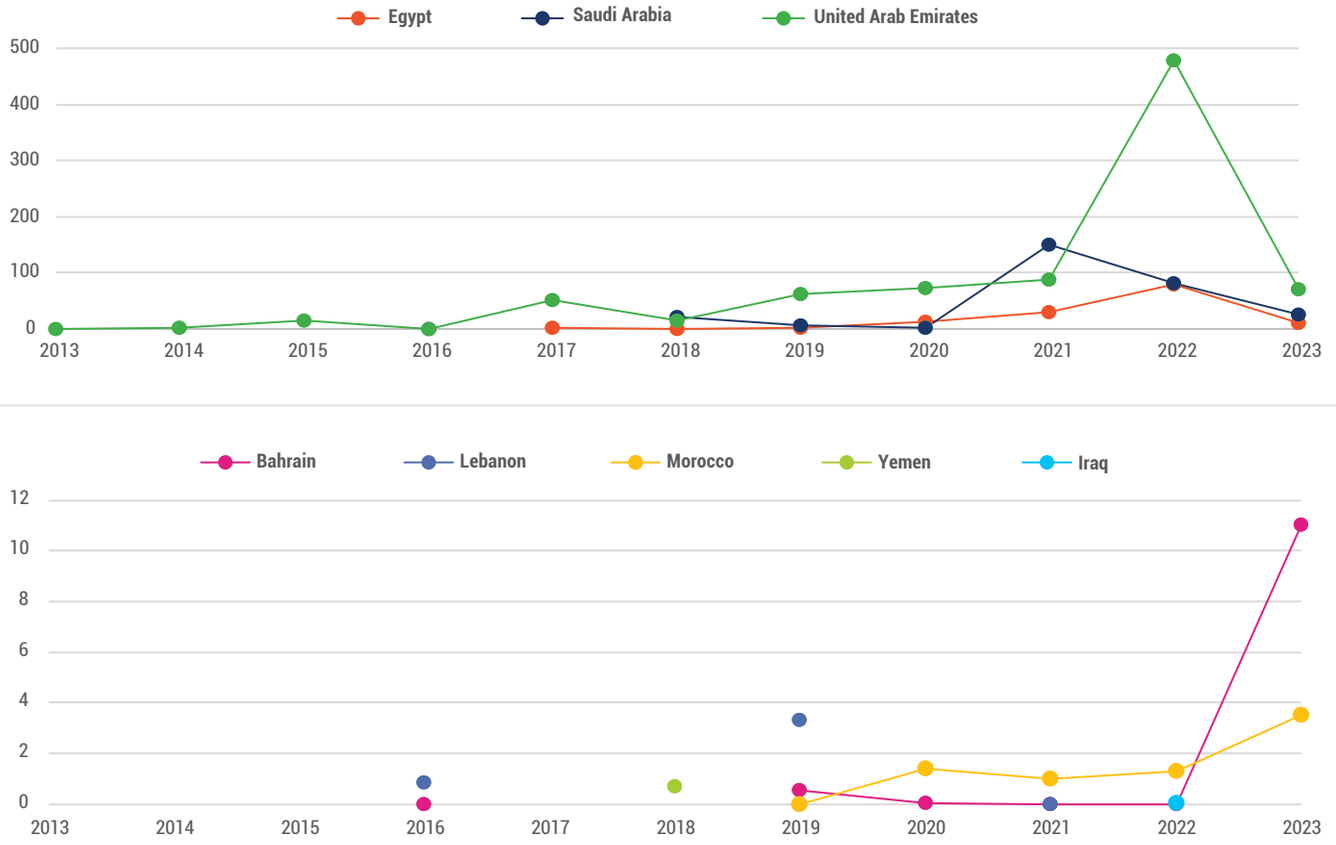
Globally, growing interest in investing in AI companies in recent years has mostly been in developed countries. In terms of government spending on AI, China ranks first (around $22 billion), followed by **Saudi Arabia,** Germany, Japan (all below $4 billion) and the United States (around $2 billion).[68] In the Arab region, venture capital investments in AI were highest in 2022 in the **United Arab Emirates** followed by **Saudi Arabia** and **Egypt** (figure 17.4).

Figure 17.3
Investments in start-ups in the Arab region



Source: ESCWA based on data from Wamda, accessed in April 2023.

Figure 17.4
Venture capital investment in AI, 2013 to 2023 (Millions of dollars)



Source: OECD, 2023. Visualizations powered by JSI using data from Preqin, accessed on 20 April 2023.

Note: This figure displays venture capital investments in AI in millions of dollars by country from 2013 onwards. Data downloads provide a snapshot in time. Caution is advised when comparing different versions of the data, as the AI-related concepts identified by the machine learning algorithm may evolve in time. For more information, see the methodological notes.

E. Regional dimensions

The **Arab Telecommunications and Information Council of Ministers** is a high-level body of the League of Arab States that has worked since 2007 to strengthen regional integration on priority areas in line with technology developments. The council addresses topics such as Internet governance, network connectivity, cybersecurity and digital content. In 2023, the council adopted the Arab Digital Agenda 2023–2033.[69]

The **alliance between leading telecom operators in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries** has been pushing for the interoperability of existing telecom networks. Ongoing collaboration backs deployment of a system that will allow network equipment to operate seamlessly, thus facilitating the adoption of 5G, the Internet of things and other technologies.[70] Technical specifications have been put in place, identifying challenges and opportunities, including those related to cybersecurity and performance.[71] The Gulf Cooperation Council alliance also collaborates on sustainability issues and has signed a memorandum of understanding strengthening commitment to sustainability, with a focus on climate action and reducing the carbon footprint.[72]

The **Arab Internet Governance Forum** was established in 2012[73] to provide a multistakeholder platform for policy dialogue and reflect the region's voice at the global level, mainly at the Global Internet Governance Forum. Deliberations have addressed Internet policy topics such as critical Internet resources, access, inclusiveness, openness and human and cultural aspects.[74]

To cover the technical side of the Internet, the **Middle East Network Operators Group** was formed as a platform for knowledge exchange, learning and collaboration among experts, industry stakeholders and policymakers. The group organizes annual meetings attended by mobile operators, Internet service providers and regulators that take up topics such as network threats and cybersecurity; Internet protocols, including the move to IPv6; domain name systems; and regional connectivity and peering. The group has organized technical capacity-building workshops on Internet exchange points, targeting service providers and domain name infrastructure operators.[75]



E-accessibility for leaving no one behind

While there is increased awareness in the Arab region of the importance of building inclusive physical and digital environments for people with disabilities, challenges and gaps remain. "Achieving accessibility requires a normative shift in how societies perceive disabilities and construct the physical, social and digital environment".[a] Qatar is a top performer in terms of e-accessibility, which is part of a national initiative that brings together Government and private sector actors. The country has an e-accessibility policy and several projects that help people with disabilities. The Mada Assistive Technology Centre, for example, is a non-governmental organization that promotes digital inclusion and access in Arabic. In addition to research and advice, Mada sponsors assistive technology development at its lab. It has a regional reach as shown in its collaboration with Oman.[b]

See more on the ESCWA Arab Digital Inclusion Platform.

[a] ESCWA, 2021.

[b] ESCWA, 2022; Mada – Assistive Technology Center Qatar, 2023.

On the technical side, the **Arab Regional Cybersecurity Centre** was established by ITU and hosted at the National Computer Emergency Readiness Team in **Oman,** which manages its operations. The centre drives the adoption of ITU's Global Cybersecurity Agenda across the region and strengthens regional integration. In addition to offering capacity-building on cybersecurity, the centre facilitates cooperation among countries in the region and beyond on information security and mechanisms to counter attacks and face cyberthreats.[76]

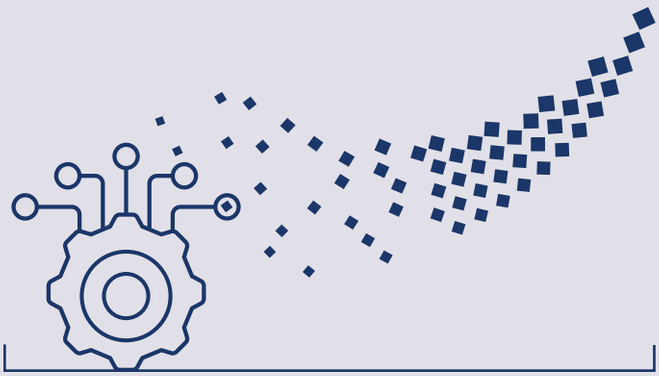


AI for the SDGs

Numerous practical AI applications are being deployed across the region to advance the SDGs. Some examples include using AI to:

- monitor and analyze food scarcity, and enable food aid delivery in hard-to-reach areas
- assist in medical diagnosis and drug discovery;
- break down language barriers in communication, enhance the ability of computers to understand different dialects, and allow for fast, accurate and AI-enabled translation and improved understanding of radio, television and online content
- prevent, detect and prosecute online child sexual abuse and exploitation
- boost innovation in the field of green technology and foster youth employment.

Sources: ITU, 2022 and the AI for Good platform.



Data, monitoring and accountability

A. Introduction

Despite notable national efforts supported by regional and international organizations in recent years, huge challenges remain in monitoring the SDGs in the Arab region. Most countries lack a cohesive, integrated and comprehensive statistical system that leaves no one behind. The lack of comparable and disaggregated data based on income, geographical location, disability, age, gender and other markers impedes the reduction of inequality. Insufficient data on vulnerable or marginalized groups, including refugees, migrants and displaced persons, renders disparities invisible and effectively undercuts the human rights of these populations. Key challenges include the quality and frequency of statistical information produced nationally, international comparability, and data accessibility and transparency. Limited data availability, untimely dissemination of data and a lack of data disaggregation are all bottlenecks to evidence-based decision-making. They emanate mainly from issues related to statistical data governance and capacity.[77]

The COVID-19 pandemic and related disruptions transformed the way national statistical offices[78] and public agencies undertake statistical surveys and censuses. Governments invested in institutional and technological innovations to maintain data flows, accelerating the shift from conventional to innovative approaches in data collection, including through the use of advanced technologies, geospatial data[79] and big data.[80]

This section on data, monitoring and accountability focuses on SDG reporting and data dissemination in the region, based on the global framework of SDG indicators adopted to monitor progress in achieving the goals.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).

In 2023, the publication of data on SDG gender-related indicators by Arab countries ranged from 32 per cent of the total in Libya to 79 per cent in Tunisia. The publication of indicators disaggregated by sex ranged from 19 to 52 per cent.

In 2023, only eight countries (36 per cent) had updated and approved national strategies for the development of statistics, and disseminated them online.

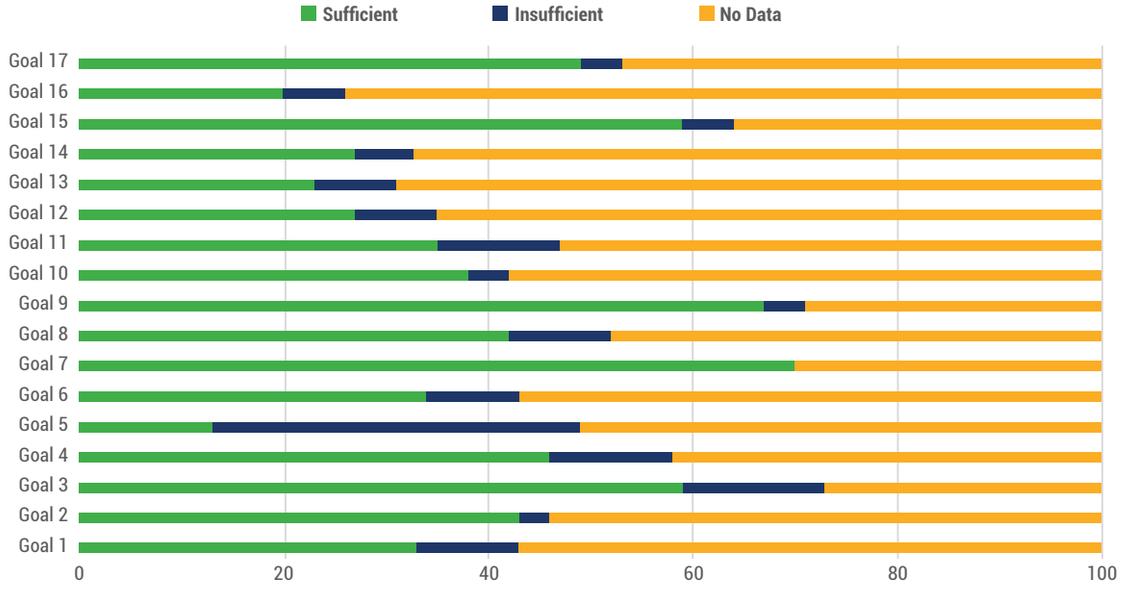
In 2022, 59 per cent of countries in the region had legislation on national statistics in compliance with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics,[81] against 76 per cent globally.

In 2021, 63.6 per cent of countries had national statistics plans under implementation, compared to 77.3 per cent globally. Regional variations were evident since this percentage was at 83.3 per cent for Gulf Cooperation Council and middle-income countries, 50 per cent for least developed countries and 28 per cent for countries in conflict.

In 2022, 40.9 per cent of countries had conducted at least one population and housing census in the last 10 years compared to 80.4 per cent globally.[82]

For an up-to-date view of SDG 17 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

Figure 17.5
SDG data availability in the Arab region, December 2023 (Percentage)



Source: ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor.

On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on data, monitoring and accountability

- Accelerate and prioritize the production of high-quality, timely data disaggregated by income, sex, age, ethnicity, migratory status, geographic location, disability and other characteristics relevant to national contexts.
- Improve data accessibility to regularly update SDG indicators and inform decision-making, and engage different stakeholders (including parliamentarians, researchers, civil society and private sector representatives) in monitoring and evaluating policies and interventions.
- Adopt new sources of administrative data and modernize records for statistical purposes, integrating statistical and geospatial data, and forging partnerships with data producer and user communities.
- Update and modernize national legislation on statistics, in line with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics,[83] and institutionalize the coordination role of national statistical offices, including on monitoring SDG implementation in collaboration with national entities producing data and other data providers.
- Establish and fully operationalize national reporting platforms and systematic coordination channels among data providers to enhance data flows and facilitate transparent information-sharing, and offer analytic tools to enable policymakers to measure progress and adapt development strategies and plans.

- Conduct national population and housing censuses in line with the United Nations Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, including the adoption of register-based censuses, where feasible, and the use of geospatial and other technologies for generating population data in hard-to-reach contexts affected by humanitarian crises.
- Increase coordination between national statistical offices and relevant international and regional institutions to further develop national and regional statistical systems, including through technical support to national statistical offices.
- Increase partnerships with academia and the private sector to enhance innovation and the use of new technologies and methodologies in data collection, analysis, dissemination and use.

B. The policy landscape

◆ **Arab Governments increasingly recognize the importance of modernizing national laws on official statistics and have made commitments in that direction.** Participants at a regional workshop organized by **Qatar** in November 2019 adopted the Doha Declaration on Modernization of Official Statistics.[84] In addition, government representatives participated in the preparation of the "Guide on the Generic Law of Official Statistics in the Arab Countries".[85] Countries are increasingly using voluntary national reviews to broaden the scope of data collection and enhance data quality.

- **Ten Arab countries do not have updated laws that adhere to the fundamental principles of official statistics.** They lack steering councils for statistics users, technical committees of active data producers and national strategies for statistics.
- Most SDG indicators are directly reported to United Nations custodian entities by nationally nominated trained data providers, but data are not always available at national statistical offices.

Only 11 countries have advisory boards or councils on statistics.[86] Some have technical committees for statistics;[87] others have adopted a mixed set-up of data producers with an unclear delineation of roles.

- In the **Comoros,** legislation on statistics defined the national statistical system, which includes the National Statistics Council, the National Institute of Statistics and Economic and Demographic Studies and services in charge of developing statistical data in ministerial departments and public and semi-public agencies. The Government launched the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics 2023–2028.
- **Somalia** adopted a new Statistics Law in 2020, establishing the Somalia National Bureau of Statistics as an autonomous institution mandated to collect, compile, coordinate, analyse, evaluate and disseminate national statistical information.
- **Tunisia** is updating its law on statistics to comply with the fundamental principles of statistics and to have more quality, up-to-date and accurate data, disaggregated by level of income, sex, age, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location.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◆ **Most countries have launched initiatives and measures to improve data collection, analysis and dissemination, recognizing the importance of producing quality and timely data to monitor progress on the SDGs and inform evidence-based decision-making.** Efforts to enhance the capacity of national statistical systems to produce data and demographic, economic, social and environmental statistics have included investing in infrastructure, technology and capacity-building. **Networks of SDG data providers have been established,** strengthening the coordination role of national statistical offices at the centre of multiple and complex data systems. **Qatar** has established a national SDG network of 123 data providers to report progress on SDG indicators in the national statistical system. Other countries, including **Bahrain, Iraq, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Somalia,** the **Sudan,** the **United Arab Emirates** and **Yemen,** are establishing national networks of SDG data providers.

As of January 2020, nine countries (41 per cent) had developed publicly available national reporting platforms[88] **for the SDGs: Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia,** the **State of Palestine** and the **United Arab Emirates.** Countries not equipped with such platforms have been supported by international and regional partners to build (but not necessarily host) platforms, bringing the total to 19[89] in the region as of February 2024. SDG indicator data availability may remain limited in these platforms, however.

Most national SDG platforms suffer from underuse and infrequent updates. The dispersion of data in various platforms or websites instead of a single unified platform creates technical challenges and delays progress.

1. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

- In **Bahrain,** under the guidance of the National Committee for Information and Population established in 2019 and in collaboration with the Information and eGovernment Authority, the National Committee and the Ministry of Sustainable Development established a monitoring and reporting system. It includes an online SDG Portal and an Open Data Portal to facilitate the exchange of information and periodic updates between government entities and partners.[90]
- In **Kuwait,** the Central Bureau of Statistics has developed a website dedicated to the SDGs.[91]
- In **Oman,** an interministerial roadmap is designed to mobilize efforts to overcome obstacles to sharing data among national institutions. It seeks to boost data-sharing and open data[92] while respecting regulations related to privacy and confidentiality and operating in line with the Omani Personal Data Protection Law, which came into effect in February 2023.
- In **Qatar,** the Planning and Statistics Authority populates SDG indicators, publishes them on its website[93] and provides them to the United Nations Statistics Division.
- In **Saudi Arabia,** the National Statistical Development Strategy aims to establish a robust national statistical system by 2030. Investments have been made in providing easy-to-use statistics and information, incorporating new technologies, and enhancing communication and awareness. In addition, the Tenth National Development Plan prioritizes a high-quality statistical infrastructure and modernized information systems. The General Authority for Statistics is implementing a statistical data programme called Masdar to build a national database. It processes data from different sources to produce indicators and analyses needed by data users inside and outside the authority, supporting decision-making and the formulation of development plans.
- In the **United Arab Emirates,** the National Committee on the SDGs developed the SDG Data Hub,[94] which is integrated with the United Nations Open SDG Data Hub. It promotes partnerships for open data and geographical information systems, and serves as an educational and communications tool based on SDG data stories. This platform aims to engage the private sector and various stakeholders by providing knowledge related to the SDGs.


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2. Arab middle-income countries

- In **Algeria,** the Tahat Platform[95] is a "one-stop shop" for statistical information on sustainable development. It helps in strengthening collaboration with United Nations entities in charge of SDG indicators, and strengthens transparency and communication.
- **Egypt** established the National Committee for Monitoring the Implementation of the SDGs and launched its SDG Observatory Dashboard.[96] The Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics has released national statistical reports for monitoring SDG indicators as well as SDG-localized reports at the governorate scale as part of implementing the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics 2017–2021.
- **Jordan** launched the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics 2018–2022, and the Department of Statistics established a Sustainable Development Unit. Jordan has developed measures to improve SDG monitoring, including through the use of non-traditional data sources, capacity-building for relevant entities and the publication of statistical bulletins for SDG indicators. The Jordan Development Portal[97] is a centralized data platform for SDG targets and indicators, intended to empower data owners and enable them to submit information to the system.
- In **Morocco,** the 2020 Voluntary National Review recommended the modernization of the legal framework for statistics, methodological reforms for surveys to populate more SDG indicators and acceleration of the digitalization process.
- In **Lebanon,** in the context of multiple indicator cluster surveys[98] (MICS), the Central Administration of Statistics has conducted surveys of living conditions and carried out other types of field research, bridging the national census gap. The Central Administration of Statistics is also participating in the statistical data and metadata exchange (SDMX) initiative,[99] which aims at standardizing and modernizing mechanisms and processes for the exchange of statistical data and metadata between international organizations and member States.
- In **Tunisia,** the National Statistics Institute has made progress in setting up a collaborative platform of stakeholders committed to achieving the SDGs by 2030.[100]





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3. Arab least developed countries and countries in conflict

- In **Iraq,** the Central Bureau of Statistics established an electronic SDG monitoring platform[101] with data on over 100 indicators.
- The **Palestinian** Central Bureau of Statistics has updated its data management structure to fulfil the vision of integrating data producers and expanding the use of data from administrative records for statistical purposes. A general directorate of Records and Statistical Monitoring was created to collect, compile, publish and document statistics from the administrative records of various public and private institutions, and combine them with data from surveys and censuses carried out by the Central Bureau of Statistics.
- In **Somalia,** beyond primary surveys on key sectors, the National Bureau of Statistics has completed the Somali health and demographic survey 2018–2019 as well as a 2019 labour force survey and a 2022–2023 integrated household budget survey. Somalia also embarked on a population and housing census and MICS in 2024.

- In the **Sudan,** the National Strategy for Promoting Statistics 2021–2025 plans to undertake surveys and censuses, including the MICS, an agriculture and livestock census, a national household budget and poverty survey, and a labour market survey. The strategy seeks to improve the availability and quality of administrative data in education and health, in line with SDG indicators. The Central Bureau of Statistics has established a special unit for the SDGs.

◆ **Some Arab countries have launched policies and measures to upgrade conventional approaches to data collection by national statistical offices,** including through the use of innovative technologies and tools such as AI, remote sensing, satellite imagery and machine learning techniques. The use of such technologies has not yet resulted in an SDG data revolution, however. In several countries, mainly Gulf Cooperation Council countries, **research centres build on AI-based technologies and machine learning techniques to explore and mobilize the potential of non-traditional data sources** to support the effective use of data and overcome SDG data challenges, including by analysing large and complex data sets. AI is also used to model future scenarios and make predictions about how different factors might impact the SDGs.

Advanced technologies offer significant potential for enhancing the effectiveness of data collection and analysis but need to be accompanied by strong data protection laws. Non-consensual monitoring of social media activities and tracking mobile phone data pose threats to privacy and liberties. The unregulated use of data could feed into surveillance and censorship, potentially leading to abuses of power and violations of human rights. Beyond data protection laws, robust safeguards are crucial for transparency in data collection practices, including in terms of individual consent and independent oversight mechanisms. Ethical guidelines are essential to balance technological advancement with privacy protection and the preservation of individual rights.

There is a growing recognition of the need for open data initiatives, including through data policies aiming to increase transparency; foster innovation; enable citizens, researchers and businesses to utilize data for various purposes; and encourage Governments to release data to the public in accessible formats. Some Gulf Cooperation Council countries have developed open data portals. The National Open Data Portal of **Saudi Arabia** allows people to access, download and use the data of ministries and government agencies. The recently established Saudi Data and AI Authority has developed the National Strategy for Data and AI.

Some countries have launched policies and measures to adjust data collection methodologies in time of crisis. National statistical offices introduced innovative data collection practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, adapting data collection tools and using administrative data.[102] In several countries, e.g., **Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Palestine** and **Tunisia,**[103] national statistical offices launched electronic and telephone surveys on household living conditions during COVID-19 lockdowns to overcome series interruptions and disruptions in data availability.[104] Innovative approaches, including high-tech tools and geographic information systems, have proven efficient in bridging SDG data gaps when it was not possible to conduct conventional statistical surveys. **An increasing number of initiatives to support cooperation among various stakeholders involve non-state actors who can have a decisive role in bridging SDG data gaps.** New partnerships involve national institutions, the private sector and scientific organizations in selecting and mobilizing the most efficient technologies for data collection and processing.

National statistical offices that conducted phone surveys during the COVID-19 pandemic encountered difficulties such as a lack of representation, particularly for random digit dialling, and weak response rates.

Illustrating the potential of multistakeholder partnerships as an SDG accelerator, the **Giga Sudan** initiative mobilizes high-tech and innovative data solutions. It used satellite imagery for geolocalizing schools in remote areas, which improved access to digital learning and helped sustain learning continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic and a period of political and economic instability. Giga Sudan has demonstrated that high-tech innovations can be more time-efficient and cost-effective than conventional ways of collecting data. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) implements the project in partnership with the Government and other stakeholders, including the private sector and telecom operators.

C. Regional dimensions

Regional collaborations and partnerships are promoting the harmonization of data standards and methodologies among countries. In that context, United Nations regional organizations provide technical support and capacity-building to enhance data quality and availability at the national and regional levels. Support includes various tools[105] to improve institutional statistical environments, the coordination and management of data flows, the production of comparable data from different sources and data-sharing.

- The **United Arab Emirates** hosts the **Regional Hub for Big Data**[a] in support of the United Nations Global Platform, facilitating projects using big data and data science for official statistics and SDG indicators, and sharing knowledge on newly developed methods, algorithms and tools. It provides training on big data and data science for statisticians in the region.

- Household surveys, such as the flagship MICS,[b] remain an essential component of the data ecosystem, complementing population and housing censuses. The MICS supports Governments to collect data on up to 40 SDG indicators. Globally, over 350 of these surveys have been conducted since 1995, including over 40 in Arab countries. Several Arab countries regularly conduct the surveys once every four to five years **(Algeria, Iraq,** the **State of Palestine** and **Tunisia).** Others have more recently joined the programme **(Lebanon, Libya, Morocco** and **Yemen),** including high-income Gulf Cooperation Council countries **(Oman** and **Qatar).**

  MICS are nationally owned and government-led, with global and regional experts supporting countries with data processing and sampling. They provide a platform for enhancing cooperation on data between countries and regional and international organizations, including the League of Arab States and United Nations entities. The data of MICS are a key source for regional studies such as the recent Second Arab Multidimensional Poverty Report.[c]

  There are considerable opportunities for further strengthening regional collaboration and capacity on household surveys to address SDG data gaps and maximize the use of household surveys for evidence-based policy making, including by:

  - Aligning survey methodologies and indicator definitions across the region and adopting international best practices for household surveys and SDG indicators.
  - Sharing and learning from cross-country experiences through regional and global platforms.
  - Promoting public access to anonymized survey data, and encouraging research on regional priorities.
  - Building capacity on new approaches to household surveys, including the use of digital technologies in data collection for improved efficiency.
  - Reaffirming the importance of household surveys as part of long-term budgeted national statistics plans.

[a] See the UN Big Data Regional Hub in the UAE.

[b] See the UNICEF webpage on the MICS.

[c] ESCWA, 2023.



Endnotes

1. An estimate of needs for only high- and middle-income countries in the region, based on calculations using the ESCWA Financing for Development SDG Costing Simulator, put the financing gap at approximately $700 billion annually between 2023 and 2030; the actual figure would be significantly higher if accounting for the financing needs of least developed and conflict-affected countries.
2. ESCWA, 2022b.
3. See World Bank data, Foreign direct investment, net inflows (BoP, current US$) – Arab World, accessed on 21 November 2023.
4. ESCWA, 2022b.
5. Ibid.
6. ESCWA, 2018.
7. See the United Nations on Integrated National Financing Frameworks.
8. See the Integrated National Financing Frameworks Facility, What Is an INFF?
9. Ibid.
10. UNDP, 2020.
11. UN Women, 2019.
12. Rame and Seiwald, 2019.
13. See the International Budget Partnership, Open Budget Survey 2021 – Country Results.
14. ESCWA, 2022b.
15. PwC, 2022.
16. ESCWA, 2022b.
17. Ibid.
18. ESCWA, 2022b.
19. Countries include the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia, in addition to the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.
20. ESCWA, 2023a.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Information derived from PwC tax summary profiles, Corporate tax credits and incentives, accessed on 28 November 2023. See also OECD, 2023a.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. See World Bank data, Foreign direct investment, net inflows (BoP, current US$) – Arab World, accessed on 21 November 2023.
27. ESCWA, 2022b.
28. Ibid.
29. ESCWA, 2023a.
30. Ibid.
31. OECD, 2021.
32. See ESCWA on Financing Development in the Arab Region.
33. ESCWA and UNCTAD, 2022.
34. United Nations, 2023a.
35. United Nations, 2023b.
36. The Global Indicator Framework for the SDGs includes an indicator on fixed Internet broadband subscriptions (indicator number 17.6.1). However, it is useful to report on mobile Internet broadband subscriptions because broadband offers high-speed Internet and is always connected, thus eliminates the need for dial-up.
37. The Government AI Readiness Index covered 193 countries in 2023. It was developed by Oxford Insights and was first published in 2020. The index is based on 39 indicators that assess government readiness, technology sector capabilities, and data and infrastructure. For more information, see Oxford Insights, 2023.
38. ESCWA, 2023; ITU, 2023d.
39. For more information, see UNEP, 2023.
40. ESCWA, 2019.
41. ITU and UNESCO, 2022.
42. Recent data are available for Iraq and the State of Palestine. See ITU, 2023a.
43. Microsoft, 2022.
44. The E-Government Development Index is calculated by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs for all 193 United Nations Member States. The index comes out every two years as part of the United Nations E-Government Survey; 12 editions have been published since 2001.
45. Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.
46. DESA, 2022.
47. The system was developed by ICARDA, INRA and MIT. See Affordable and Sustainable Irrigation for Farmers.
48. Strategy&, 2021.
49. McKinsey, 2016.
50. See the United Arab Emirates National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence and Telecommunications and Digital Government Regulatory Authority, 2021.
51. ITU, 2023b.
52. Tunisia, Ministry of Communication Technology, 2023.
53. ESCWA, forthcoming.
54. Egypt, Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2022.

55. UNCTAD, 2022.
56. ESCWA, 2019, forthcoming.
57. The Moroccan Retail Tech Builder programme is jointly implemented by the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, the OCP Foundation and Mohammed VI Polytechnic University.
58. See the Morocco, Ministry of Tourism, Handicrafts and Social and Solidarity Economy (2023) for a list of e-commerce platforms.
59. Affordable broadband is priced at less than 2 per cent of gross national income per capita (ITU, 2021).
60. The Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania and Somalia.
61. The Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Communication Technology, 2021.
62. World Bank, 2021.
63. United Nations, 2023.
64. ESCWA, 2019.
65. Wamda, 2023b. Countries include Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.
66. Wamda, 2023a.
67. Wamda, 2023b.
68. UNCTAD, 2022.
69. League of Arab States, 2023.
70. The technology to be used is the "open radio access network"; it will be deployed within, or over, existing legacy systems.
71. Joseph, 2021; International Teletimes, 2022.
72. Ooredoo, 2023.
73. The Arab Internet Governance Forum was established by ESCWA and the League of Arab States.
74. ESCWA, n.d.
75. MENOG, 2023.
76. ITU Arab Regional Cyber Security Center, 2023.
77. ESCWA, 2022b.
78. The national statistical office is usually in charge of collecting, processing, and disseminating data on a wide range of demographic, social, economic and environmental topics through population and housing censuses, surveys, registers and other administrative files, providing the bulk of the official statistics for the country.
79. Geospatial data are about objects, events or phenomena that have a location on the surface of the earth. The location may be static in the short-term (e.g., the location of a road, an earthquake, children living in poverty) or dynamic (e.g., a moving vehicle or pedestrian, the spread of an infectious disease). Geospatial data combine location information (usually coordinates on the earth), attribute information (the characteristics of the object, event or phenomena concerned) and often also temporal information (the time or lifespan at which the location and attributes exist). Stock and Guesgen, 2016.
80. Big data refer to large data sets, collected by companies and organizations, that are too large or complex to be processed by traditional methods and that cannot be comprehended when used in small amounts only.
81. See General Assembly resolution 68/261 on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.
82. As of 2024, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have completed the 2020 census round (which spans from 2015 to 2024). Djibouti, Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Somalia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates have plans for a census in 2024. Lebanon, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen are unlikely to meet the timeline for the 2020 census round.
83. The fundamental principles of official statistics were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in January 2014. They recognize that reliable and objective information that adheres to certain professional and scientific standards is crucial for decision-making. See General Assembly resolution 68/261 on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. See also a brief description of the 10 principles.
84. See the Doha Declaration on Modernization of Official Statistics in Support of the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030.
85. ESCWA, 2021.
86. Jordan, Libya, Mauritania, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.
87. Jordan, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.
88. A national reporting platform (SDG platform) is a publicly available website or web portal for dissemination of indicators and national data for monitoring the SDGs. Platforms are essential to monitor and report progress. They create pathways for sharing transparent information, and provide policymakers with tools to evaluate and adjust development strategies based on high-quality and trustworthy data. See: ESCWA, 2020.
89. Such platforms have not been developed in the Comoros, Djibouti and Mauritania.
90. See more on Bahrain and the SDGs and its open data portal.
91. See more on Kuwait and the SDGs.
92. Open data are openly accessible, exploitable, editable and shared by anyone for any purpose.
93. See more on Qatar and the SDGs and its Third National Development Strategy.
94. See the UAE SDG Data Hub.
95. See more on the Tahat data initiative.
96. See Egypt SDG Observatory.
97. See Jordan SDG portal.
98. See the UNICEF webpage on the MICS.
99. See more on the ESCWA workshop on using SDMX for SDG data reporting.
100. See Tunisia SDG platform.
101. See the Iraq SDGs Platform by Anas Khaleel.
102. ESCWA, 2022a.
103. See, for instance, the Microdata Catalog of the Economic Research Forum; the World Bank's High Frequency Phone Survey in Iraq; UNICEF experiences with phone-based surveys in Egypt; and the State of Palestine on COVID-19 impacts on households.
104. Face-to-face contact with respondents to statistical surveys needed to be suspended to limit the spread of the virus.
105. See for instance the Arab SDG Gateway and the Arab SDG Monitor, which hosts 19 national reporting platforms to enhance country reporting and track SDG performance.

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The Arab Sustainable Development Report (ASDR) is a quadrennial flagship publication produced by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in collaboration with other United Nations entities working in the Arab region. It supports the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the regional and subregional levels.

Building on the ASDR 2020, which identified structural barriers and recommendations for overcoming them, the ASDR 2024 analyses policy directions in priority areas for achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the 22 Arab countries. It identifies opportunities for achieving SDG progress as well as gaps where more, or different, efforts are needed. The ASDR 2024 highlights potential regional action to achieve the 17 SDGs, with an emphasis on the financing landscape and challenges. The report also addresses national policies to ensure leaving no one behind and secure the human rights and well-being of all in a safe and peaceful Arab region.

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unicef for every child

World Health Organization

UNDP

WFP World Food Programme

UNIDO UNITED NATIONS INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION

UNFPA United Nations Population Fund

ILO International Labour Organization

UN VOLUNTEERS

UN environment programme

UNITED NATIONS ESCWA Shared Prosperity Dignified Life

UN-HABITAT

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UNODC

UNDRR UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction

UN WOMEN United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

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