

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE ARAB REGION



Shared Prosperity Dignified Life



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Introduction

The protracted shutdown resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible impact on global economic, political and social stability. In the Arab region, the pandemic could not have hit at a worse time for 110 million young people (aged 15-29), who suffer from pre-existing structural inequalities. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, young people in the Arab region were already reeling from discrimination, exclusion, restricted access to services, high unemployment, and from the devastating effects of ongoing conflict in some countries. ESCWA has assessed the impact of COVID-19 on young people, and is proposing policy recommendations to mitigate the socioeconomic fallout of the pandemic.



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Impact Assessment

Socioeconomic repercussions



Prolonged confinement will inevitably increase youth unemployment. Working young people will face challenges in re-entering the job market since they already suffer from structural obstacles in accessing decent jobs, compounded further by an estimated 2.7 million young people who join the workforce in the Arab region annually. Arab youth unemployment is the highest worldwide and the fastest growing, increasing from 19.5 to 23 per cent between 2012 and 2020. Unemployment among young Arab women is more than twice that of young men, reaching 42.1 per cent.



Millions of young Arabs are at risk of plunging deeper into poverty, especially young people living in rural areas and those with disability, as well as young women who will be impacted differently as they often earn less and save less. A staggering 85.1 per cent of young working-age Arabs are in the informal sector, with limited or no access to social and health insurance or credit facilities. Women are more likely to be employed in the informal sector, which puts them at greater risk of falling into poverty.



The post-COVID-19 job market will demand a new set of skills, which may not be held by the majority of the 1.5 million young people who enter the informal sector yearly. Young people living in underprivileged areas are at risk of being left behind, and their prospects of receiving training are currently non-existent given the protracted shutdown, which is further depriving young people of opportunities to learn and gain key skills. Such problems are further aggravated by the fact that over 25 million Arab youth are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Technology and education repercussions



Close to 100 million students are currently out of school in the Arab region. While many education systems have resorted to distance and e-learning methods, they raise many challenges for both teachers and pupils, and prolonged closure is detrimental to the schooling of youngsters, particularly those in vulnerable situations. This situation will particularly impact girls, who have less access to computers and technology at home. The majority of enrolled students – 47 million – have been significantly affected, since they require training and assistance to switch to online learning.



The negative impact of school closures will be felt disproportionately by poor and vulnerable children, especially girls who have higher dropout rates (19.1 per cent for females compared with 15.9 per cent for males) because they leave school to help their poor families, and risk child marriage, pregnancy, exposure to domestic violence and poverty. The situation can be particularly dire for adolescents, youth with



Unemployment

23% of Arab youth
42.1% of young Arab women



Informal sector

85.1% of young working force



NEET

25 million of Arab youth are not in education, employment or training



Schooling

100 million students are out of school in the Arab region



Students repatriation

480,000 Arab tertiary students had to be repatriated

disabilities and those living in conflict countries. Around 480,000 Arab tertiary students studying abroad have had to be repatriated, with no end in sight to the current lockdown.



Aside from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, only 51.6 per cent of households in Arab countries have Internet access, and connectivity remains a challenging issue in the region, making distance learning difficult despite significant efforts to ensure that children keep learning. In contrast, mobile-cellular subscriptions reached a penetration rate of 103.1 per cent in 2018, and 64 per cent of social media users are under 30 years old.

Health repercussions



The prolonged lockdown will exacerbate substance abuse, self-harm and mental disorders among young people, especially since severe depression is already a leading cause of morbidity among young men aged 15-24 and young women aged 20-24 in the Arab region. School closures and lack of access to recreational, sports and social venues, in addition to job losses and pay cuts, pose a serious threat to those already struggling with mental health issues and may lead to life-threatening situations, especially in the absence of schools which usually provide much-needed counselling services.



Youth volunteers with such services as the Red Cross and Red Crescent are at higher risk of being infected. In the absence of universal health coverage, especially for those with no income, they face life-threatening risks. The lockdown and home quarantine risk increased violence against young people, especially adolescent girls and young women. The current situation makes it more difficult for abused girls and young women to access services such as hotlines, shelters and other types of assistance.

Policy Response

1. Governments should revise national youth strategies to ensure greater inclusion and participation, develop special plans for youth reintegration into the education system and the job market, and invest in new forms of remote formal and informal education, training and vocational capacity-building.
2. Governments should invest further in youth technology entrepreneurship, and encourage education institutions to do the same. Online entrepreneurship is expected to be the next frontier for accessing decent jobs following the containment of the pandemic. Developing an incentive package for online entrepreneurship is key to success.
3. Governments should channel more innovation and brainpower towards scaling up volunteer initiatives. Services such as the Red



Internet access

51.6%

only of households in Arab countries have internet access



Mental health

COVID-19 has serious effects on people with mental health issues



Violence against youth

increased especially against adolescent girls and young women



Cross and Red Crescent, and similar outfits on the pandemic frontline, need to be strengthened through official support for a culture of volunteerism.

4. Governments should ensure equity in access to learning for students from under-privileged backgrounds by providing printed assignments to learners who do not have access to the Internet or computers, and forge partnerships with post office services to deliver worksheets to be completed at home.
5. Governments should harness mobile technology to disseminate information and plans, and create special applications to reach social media-savvy young people in remote areas and in confinement.
6. Governments should consider the importance of increasing the quantity and quality of digital access and further reduce costs across the region while ensuring gender parity for online access and mobile use.
7. Governments should encourage the establishment of a community of social media influencers who play a key role in disseminating information, so as to broaden the spread of information and reach remote areas.
8. Governments are called upon to provide specific health coverage for COVID-19, and include it as part of universal health coverage for young people and eventually the entire population. This initiative should also include special counselling and psychosocial programming for distressed young people. Social protection programmes need to pay special attention to young people, especially those working in the informal sector.
9. Governments in the region should work with parents to develop accessible programmes to ensure communication between parents and young people on the effects of isolation, social distancing and school closures, and the resulting distress and complications. It is vital that parents and young people discuss these issues, especially in the absence of schools.



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