





# Arab Human Development Report 2016

Youth and the Prospects for  
Human Development in a Changing Reality



50  
YEARS

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*Empowered lives. Resilient nations.*

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## Foreword by the Administrator, UNDP

Last year, world leaders adopted *the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* as a vision for transforming global development over the next fifteen years to build a more peaceful, prosperous, sustainable, and inclusive future. The Agenda asserts that young women and men are critical agents of change, and are central to achieving sustainable development.

Published at a time when countries are developing in earnest their plans to implement *the 2030 Agenda*, the *“Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality”* strongly echoes this assertion. It calls on Arab States to invest in their youth, and to empower them to engage in development processes. This is a critical and urgent priority in its own right, and it is a prerequisite for achieving tangible and sustainable progress on development and stability for the entire region. The report makes two key arguments for investing in young people in the region:

First, that while young people between the ages of fifteen and 29 make up nearly a third of the region’s population, another third are below the age of fifteen. This “demographic momentum” will last for at least the next two decades, and offers an historic opportunity which Arab countries must seize.

Second, the report underlines that the wave of protests which has swept through a number of Arab countries since 2011 with youth at the forefront has led to fundamental transformations across the entire region. Some countries have seen new national constitutions, free and fair elections, and a widening of the public participation sphere for previously excluded groups. Elsewhere, however, systems which had maintained stability came under serious challenge, with protracted conflict ensuing. This report emphasizes that empowerment and engagement of youth at this important juncture in the history of the region is essential for laying new and more durable foundations for stability.

The report explores the many challenges which youth in the Arab region continue to face. Many continue to receive an education which does not reflect the needs of labour markets. High numbers of young people, particularly young women, are unemployed and excluded from the formal economy. Young people without livelihoods find it difficult to establish an independent home and form their own family units. The risk for these young people is that instead of exploring opportunities and discovering future prospects, they experience frustration, helplessness, alienation, and dependency.

It goes without saying that young people across the Arab States have been severely affected by the recent crises. Large numbers of them were swept onto the frontlines of conflicts they did not start. Many died, and many more have lost family members and friends, livelihoods and prospects, and hope in the future. In the face of such challenges, some have joined extremist groups.

In response to these challenges, the report argues for youth empowerment from a human development perspective. This defines the goal of development as the expansion of the choices and freedoms available to people to live in ways they want and value.

Youth empowerment requires enhancing the capabilities of young people. Delivery systems for basic services, particularly in education and health, must be improved. The opportunities available to youth must be expanded – through economies which generate decent work and encourage entrepreneurship, political environments which encourage freedom of expression and active participation, and social systems which promote equality and act against all forms of discrimination.

In 2030, the Arab States will look back to assess what they have achieved over the fifteen years of the SDGs to fulfill the promise of peace, prosperity, and sustainable development for future generations.

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We hope that this report will galvanize decision makers, other key stakeholders, and young people themselves across the Arab States' region to ensure greater participation of youth in development. Without such participation, it will be difficult to secure progress and ensure sustainable development.

The United Nations Development Programme is committed to supporting and facilitating progress in the Arab States' region towards a more prosperous and stable future. We will continue to work closely with our partners in all Arab States, the regional and sub-regional institutions, and sister United Nations agencies and other international partners. We look forward to the discussions which we hope this report will stimulate, and to supporting innovative and practical recommendations which come from those.



[Helen Clark](#)  
*Administrator*  
United Nations Development Programme

## Foreword by the Regional Director, a.i., UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States

Coming five years after the events of 2011, widely referred to as “the Arab Spring,” the publication of this report follows a period of extensive debate over the transformations that had occurred since in many Arab countries and in particular over the part that young people may have played in those transformations. Some considered the contribution of young people as a glimmer of hope for a new renaissance that would lead the region towards a better future, whereas others considered it a seditious influence dragging the region into chaos and jeopardizing its future.

Events of 2011 inspired the thematic focus of this report on youth in the Arab region. Yet, publishing it five years after has spared the report’s research outlook and its analyses from falling prey to the intellectual clamour and reactive posturing that usually accompany the examination of defining moments of change, such as the ones that have swept the region since 2011. This temporal distance has allowed us a calm and reflective approach to evaluating the pulse on the street, monitoring developments and analysing premises and effects, particularly regarding the reaction of official circles to the wave of change, amidst continuing popular efforts to expand opportunities for change and to shape a better future.

The events of 2011 in the Arab region have refocused attention on the pivotal role of youth (by which we mean young women and young men) in society. Numerous analysts have linked the wave of protests, spearheaded by young people with many significant transformations that have changed and are continuing to change political, economic and social foundations in several countries in the Arab region.

The *“Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality”* seeks to make a balanced contribution to a renewed and broad debate involving key relevant stakeholders about the best means of engaging youth in development in the region. It seeks to engage young people themselves in that debate with all other stakeholders over the issues it presents.

### **Youth empowerment key to future development in Arab countries**

The report argues that young people are not a problem or a burden on development; they are rather a key resource for resolving the problems of development in the region. It concludes that Arab states can achieve a huge developmental leap and ensure durable stability if they put the empowerment of their youth at the top of their urgent priorities and harness their energy to advance development processes.

From that perspective, the report calls on Arab states to adopt a new development model that focuses on enhancing the capabilities of young people, unleashing their energy and expanding the opportunities available to them, thus allowing them more freedom to shape their futures, and contributing actively to development in their societies and countries.

### **Numbers matter**

Most recent statistics indicate that two-thirds of the Arab region’s population is below thirty years of age, half of which falling within the 15 - 29-year age bracket. This age category defines “youth” according to the report, which estimates the number of young people in the region at over one hundred million.

This unprecedented demographic mass of young people at the prime of their working and productive abilities constitutes a huge potential for advancing economic and social development if given the



opportunity. The report points out that this demographic window provides a genuine opportunity over the coming two decades that the region must urgently seize.

### **Disempowerment of youth sows the seeds of instability**

The report asserts that today's generation of young people is more educated, active and connected to the outside world, and hence have a greater awareness of their realities and higher aspirations for a better future. However, young people's awareness of their capabilities and rights collides with a reality that marginalises them and blocks their pathways to express their opinions, actively participate or earn a living. As a result, instead of being a massive potential for building the future, youth can become an overwhelming power for destruction.

Events in the region since 2011 have demonstrated the ability of young people to initiate action and catalyse change. They demonstrated young people's awareness of the serious challenges to development posed by current conditions, and their ability to express the dissatisfaction of society as a whole with those conditions and its demands for change. These events also revealed the depth of the marginalisation that young people suffer and their inability to master the instruments of organised political action that could guarantee the peacefulness and sustainability of such change.

Events since 2011 have proved also that employing a predominantly security-based approach to responding to demands for change without addressing the root causes of discontent may achieve temporary stability and ward off cycles of protest, but does not reduce the possibilities of their recurrence—it may lead to the accumulation of these demands and their re-emergence more violently.

### **Enhancing capabilities and expanding opportunities: the duality of youth empowerment**

In practice, empowering youth requires, on the one hand, introducing changes to the political, economic and social environment that causes their exclusion. Such changes must increase opportunities for young people to engage in the spheres of official politics; stimulate a macro-economy capable of producing decent work for young people and enhancing their entrepreneurship; and entrench the principles of justice, equality and equal opportunity in society, challenging all discriminatory practices based on identity, belief, ethnicity or gender.

On the other hand, youth empowerment requires serious investments in improving the basic services necessary for enhancing young people's capabilities, particularly in education, health and other social services.

In our Arab region, which is experiencing an unprecedented escalation of conflicts that undermine gains of development, and in some instances reverse progress, the pursuit of empowerment must be rooted in serious and rapid efforts to establish security, peace and social stability, ensuring the full and active participation of young people in such efforts.

### **Three levels of reform**

The empowerment of the youth requires reforms at three levels. The first pertains to redirecting macro-policies that regulate the social contract between the state and its citizens and the macro-economic structure to ensure inclusiveness and widen opportunities for all, including young people, in a fair and non-discriminatory manner.

The second level focuses on sector-specific policies, particularly in the fields of education, health and employment, and aims to ensure the availability and quality of the services that will enhance young people's capabilities, hence widening their freedom of choice.



Finally, the third level relates to national youth policies, which must transcend partial and short-term approaches attempting to “find solutions to the problems of young people,” which are at time superficial and ineffective. Instead, youth policies must interact effectively with the first and second levels of suggested reform and enhance coordination amongst all stakeholders to ensure a greater role and wider participation of young people in formulating public policies, scrutinizing budgetary allocations, and monitoring accountability for the implementation and progress towards achievement of national priorities.

### **A new generation of Arab Human Development Reports**

In this iteration of the Arab Human Development Reports series, we seek to test new methods to widen the debate over human development in the Arab region, especially with two key audience categories of the report—government stakeholders including decision makers dealing with youth issues, and young people themselves.

With decision makers in mind, we have decided to limit the publication of the hard copy of this report to its executive summary, in which we have included the most important propositions and messages derived from the rich information and analyses in the report’s chapters. We present this executive summary as a “policy paper” that goes beyond a mere descriptive presentation summarizing the report’s chapters to focus on the most significant policy options and avenues for action. Our hope is that the impact of the report will not be limited to serious debates amongst officials concerned with youth issues, but that its proposals will motivate practical action and concrete measures.

In keeping with new patterns of knowledge consumption, particularly amongst young people – the other key audience of the report – we are publishing the full report only in a digital version posted on our website on the internet. In addition to making the digital version of the full chapters of the report available for downloading as customary, we were keen to support their content with interactive and data visualization tools, to allow for a wider dialogue and sharing of ideas, particularly those contributed by young people. To increase circulation and engagement, we are also making the digital version of the report mobile-friendly through an interactive application. We hope that this will contribute to widening the active participation of young people alongside all other concerned stakeholders in discussing the issues raised in the report, expounding its ideas and engaging in implementing them.

I express my gratitude to Sima Bahous, Assistant Secretary-General, Assistant Administrator and Director of the United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Arab States through August, 2016, under whose leadership this report was undertaken. I also thank the researchers who have put together this important analysis, which will remain a touchstone for years to come.



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