YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN MENA CITIES:

A Crisis and an Opportunity

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UN◉HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

Youth Development in MENA Cities: A Crisis and an Opportunity

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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BACKGROUND

Currently the population of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region exceeds 432 million people in 2007, half of them children and youth under 24 years of age. The region has the youngest population of any region in the world, and the second highest urbanization rate with an annual urban growth rate of 4% in the past two decades, second only to Sub-Saharan Africa. Over half the populations of Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq are under 25 years old, while over 60 percent of Pakistan's and Afghanistan's populations are under 25 years old. Over the last few decades, school enrolment rates have risen markedly throughout the region for both young men and women. Yet, the recently released Arab Human Development Report finds that youth unemployment presents the biggest challenge to all Arab countries, which have nearly double the global rate. A projected 51 million new jobs will have to be created by 2020 to absorb youth into the labor force. Unemployment

432 million +

population
Middle East and North Africa (MENA)
in 2007

also often affects women more than men, with unemployment rates for Arab women being higher than those for Arab men, and among the highest in the world. Data from 2005 shows that the youth unemployment rate for men was 25 percent compared to 31.2 per cent for women. In the region, the female youth unemployment went from a high of approximately 59 per cent in Jordan, compared to 35 per cent for males, to a low of 5.7 per cent in UAE, compared to a male unemployment rate of 6.4 per cent.

Kuwait. Photo © UN-HABITAT

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN MENA CITIES: THE CHALLENGE

It is within this context that MENA governments at all levels must grapple with how to deal with what has been described as a demographic "youth bulge". A "youth bulge" is defined as a high proportion of 15-to-29 year olds relative to the adult population. Within the research literature this youth bulge has often been described in negative terms, especially in regards to the MENA region, being linked to the failure of states and a breeding ground for terrorism (NIC, 2008). Recent research has shown that youth bulges may be associated with increased risk of violence and conflict, and that those involved in terrorism are getting more "youthful", with the average age of those detained on terrorism charges was 26, and dropping to approximately 20 by 2006. Though the research has tended to be focused at the state level, evidence from conflicts such as the post-election violence in Kenya demonstrate that youth violence, most often male youth violence, is often played out at the city level, most often in the slums of major cities.

Though it must be recognized that much of this research on the youth bulge in MENA has come from Western countries undertaking research from an anti-terrorism and security perspective, the concern for the MENA region should be no less diminished. Disenfranchised youth from whatever nationality tend towards violence and other negative, non-productive activities, rather that working towards positive change for themselves and their communities. On the positive side, the "youth bulge" has been described as a "window of opportunity" where the youthful labor force coincides with fewer dependents, thus providing an opportunity to maximize the rate of investment, economic growth, and employment. For the MENA region, this window of opportunity runs from1995 and is expected to last until 2045.

Arguably the level of government that is impacted directly by the youth bulge is local governments. A parallel trend to the youth bulge is the expansion of cities globally, where 2007 marked a turning point in human history where for the first time, the world's urban population equaled the world's rural population, and the number of slum dwellers exceeded the one billion mark. Population projections suggest that virtually all growth over the next 30 years will be concentrated in urban areas.

youth
bulges

may be associated with increased risk of violence and conflict

TABLE 1: **Average annual Arab urban population growth rates (%) by country, 2000-2005 (UNDP, 2009)**
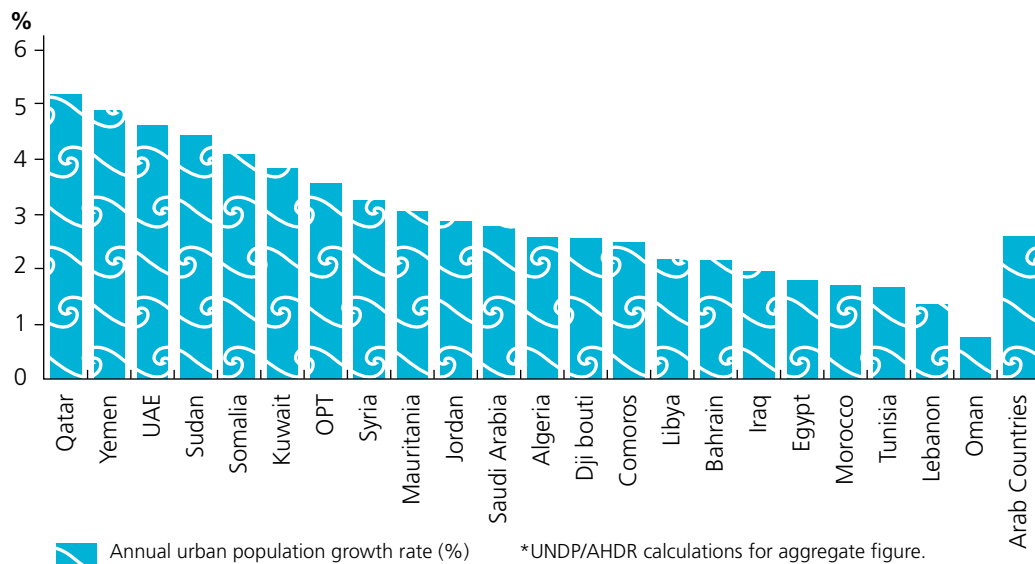
Source: *United Nations Population Division 2006, 2007.*

TABLE 2: **Projected Arab population aged 15-24 up to 2050 (UNDP, 2009)**

Thousands

Year 2000   Year 2010   Year 2050   * Medium variant estimation.
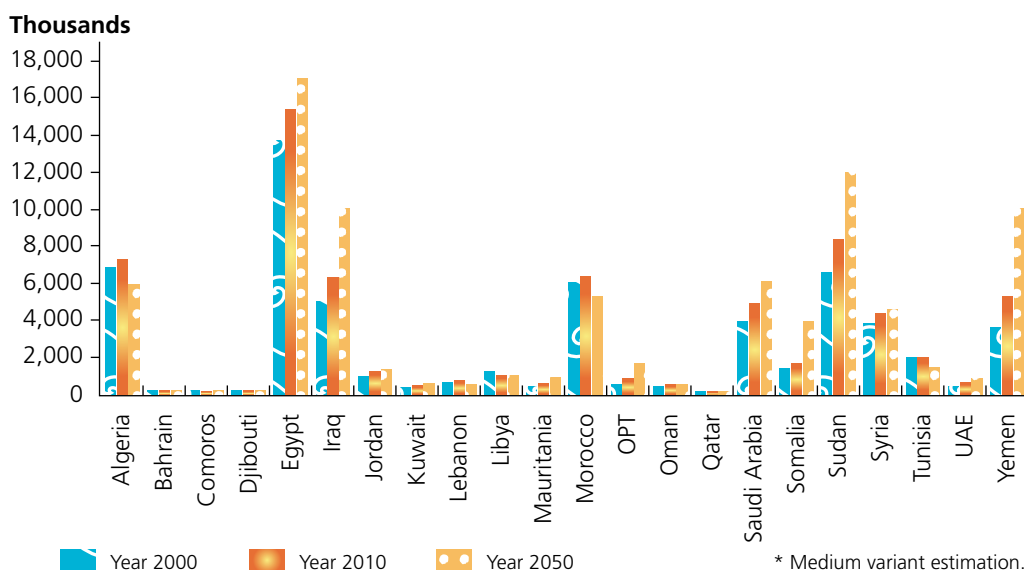
Source: *United Nations Population Division 2008.*

The above tables highlight both the rapid urban and youth expansion in the MENA region. This is mirrored globally, where by 2030, it is estimated that 60% of the world population will live in cities and that 60% of these urban residents will be under the age of 18. Not only does rapid age segregated urbanization threaten to destabilize cities through violence, urbanization also poses serious threats to the health of children and youth, especially due to the degradation of water and poor sanitation increases the risk of disease.

UN-HABITAT and other international agencies have focused on what interventions could both prevent this cycle of violence, and how the youth bulge could be used as a positive force for development. Uniquely, UN-HABITAT has focused on the role of cities in capturing the energy of the youth bulge. The following section outlines the possible interventions that can be made, with a focus on what can be implemented in cities and slums.

Pakistan. Photo © UN-HABITAT

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN MENA CITIES: THE OPPORTUNITY

It has been posited that one of the reasons for the success of the Asian Tigers in the 1960s was due to their investment in education. Similar arguments have been made in regards to the MENA region in the 21st century. The 2007 World Development Report: Development and the Next Generation (WDR) states that the situation of young people today presents the world with an unprecedented opportunity to accelerate growth and reduce poverty. The WDR finds that the best way to support youth is to support them in their transition from child to adulthood. Another key area that has been identified that can facilitate the success of youth has been the provision of youth space within cities (Dhillon 2008; Ragan and Munyati, 2009). The following sections will further expand upon the concepts of youth in transition and youth and urban space.

Palestine. Photo © UN-HABITAT

Palestine. Photo © UN-HABITAT

YOUTH IN TRANSITION

The WDR focuses on youth in transition, moving from childhood through to the economic independence of adulthood. The WDR presents three strategic directions for policy makers that provide a valuable framework for understanding how to capitalize on the youth bulge opportunity: *broadening opportunities, developing capabilities* and *providing second chances*. Broadening opportunities refers to the chances that youth have to access high quality education and health services, and the chance to voice what they want those services to be, and participate in delivering them. Developing capabilities refer to first recognizing, and then increasing youth's capacity to make decisions. Second chances refers to interventions that enhance youth's resiliency, encouraging them to try again when faced with bad luck or bad choices.

To broaden youth's opportunities there is a need for governments to both continue the focus on universal primary education, but as well ensure that there is quality educational opportunities at the secondary level, as well as tertiary education through training and upgrading of job skills. A recent study suggests that conflict is more prevalent in societies where secondary education is low. This suggests that the need to provide secondary education is key to healthy, non-violent communities.

Expanded opportunities are also needed in the area of access to health care for youth. This is urgently needed because, in regards to sexual health, young people are often without access to sexuality education and sexual health services. For example, more than 10 million youth globally are currently living with HIV/AIDS. For women, more than 40 percent of young women have their first child before their second decade, and they are more likely than adults to die or experience complications from childbirth. One way to expand quality services to young people is through designing these services in a peer-to-peer format, where youth are key players in the delivery of the service itself. The impact of the peer-to-peer services has been shown to be better than that of non-peer delivered service.

Lastly, in regards to opportunities, there needs to be meaningful role for youth in governance. This can be actualized within places such as the One Stop Centres, but as well needs to be embedded within the decision making structures of government, especially in local government which is the closest and most accessible form of government to youth. One form of engagement in governance piloted by UN-HABITAT has been the engagement of youth in urban planning, allowing youth a say concretely in the physical and social environment they live within.

Linked to opportunities is the increase in capabilities of youth and second chances. To expand youth's capabilities there needs to be a focus on increasing the capacity of young people, through such things as micro-credit, and the provision of information in the areas of health and lifestyle choices. The provision of second chances is linked to those youth who have faced unlucky or unfortunate circumstances, such as treatment programs for those who have contracted HIV/AIDS, rehabilitation programs for those who have had run-ins with the law, and retraining programs.

YOUTH AND URBAN SPACE

Dedicated youth spaces in urban centres have been shown to be key to both the physical and emotional wellbeing of youth. Studies in developed countries have suggested that the provision of urban space can raise youth's self-esteem, help them form close and healthy bonds with their peers and become aware of social issues which directly affect them. Youth spaces also can positively impact key issues such as health, for example lowering HIV/AIDS infections.

Though there has been research done on the need for urban youth spaces in the developed world, there has, as of yet, been little research done with youth outside the Western world. One study done in Accra, Ghana, found that informal urban street spaces for young men were "significant to them, full of positive meaning and emotion". The young men consolidated and formalized these spaces into youth clubs as a way to be recognized as "responsible actors in their communities." These spaces and the

attempt to formalize them come up against the community belief that young men gather only to deliberately cause problems. The stigmatization of youth in the developed and developing world as incapable, lazy, or threatening is seemingly one of the greatest barriers to youth gaining space in cities.

An example of provision of youth space in the MENA region can be found in Amman, Jordan. Amman won the 2007 World Leadership Award for Town Planning for its "Greater Amman Master Plan" which was the first comprehensive city-planning strategy in the region, and included green, pedestrian-only spaces and youth recreational areas. It is conjectured that youth space in MENA cities can "promote inclusion, greater equality and quality of life, and lay the foundation for new social contracts with young generations of citizens". The reflection of youth needs within this plan also underlines the need and ability of cities to consult youth on plans such as this.

Kuwait. Photo © UN-HABITAT

UN-HABITAT BEST PRACTICES

UN-HABITAT has recognized the need to address the youth bulge issue. In doing so it has developed programs which address the key issues of space and youth to adult transition: two of these programs are the One Stop Youth Resource Centres and the Youth Empowerment Program: Moonbeam Youth Training Centre.

The One Stop Youth Resource Centres are pilot centres based in three East African cities: Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; Nairobi, Kenya and Kampala, Uganda. The One Stop Nairobi was the initial centre and was launched on International Youth Day, 2003 as a partnership between the City of Nairobi, international and local NGOs, the government of the Netherlands and UN-HABITAT. The focus of the Centre was to be a place that "empowers the youthful generation to have ownership of the development process and be agents of transformation in the city." Operationally, the One Stop focused on improving the livelihoods of youth in Nairobi through the provision of "youth empowering services" such as employment training, counseling, recreation and cultural activities and as a place for youth and other stakeholders to network (Wilkinson, 2008).

The One Stop Centres address both the transitional and spatial needs of urban youth. In a preliminary study undertaken on the Centres, they were found to address the education and training needs of youth; provide information on important issues such as job and health information; and provide a space from which youth could become more involved with their local community and government. The next phase of the One Stop program is the expansion of the model beyond East Africa.

The Youth Empowerment Program (YEP) is a program established by UN-HABTIAT and the Government of Finland. The goal of the Youth Empowerment Programme is to improve the livelihood of youth living and working in slums and informal settlements through the provision of practical training in construction, business development and information communication technology that will lead to income generation activities. The training courses are linked to the construction of UN-HABITAT's training facility in Mavoko, just outside the City of Kenya, Nairobi, to give students hands-on experience in construction. Graduates of the YEP training will be assisted in taking on apprenticeships and attachments with private sector construction companies as well as within ongoing construction projects by UN-HABITAT's Kenya Slum Upgrading Programme.

Unique to both the One Stop and YEP programs are the engagement of local government in the design and delivery of the programmes that address the transitional and spatial needs of urban youth.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are policy recommendations for local government based on the current research on the needs of youth globally and in the MENA region and UN HABITAT best practices and policies.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION 1

In regards to research and policy level, it is important to examine the costs of youth unemployment and identify the factors affecting it. From there, there needs to be developed measures to improve youth employability, with the identification of key economic sectors designed to increase employment opportunities for youth.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION 2

The creation of pro-active policies to create adequate employment opportunities for the growing labour force in the region, together with complementary policies to ensure that education and training are better geared towards the needs of the modern labour market. In addition, there is an urgent need to identify key economic sectors or industries required to increase the absorption capacity of human capital in general, and youth in particular.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION 3

Operationally, cities should build urban youth centres and within them programmes for youth that provide for their transitional needs. These centres should provide job training and support entrepreneurial activities. The centres as well should support the social and physical needs of youth, providing space for recreation, and services in areas such as sexual health, and HIV/AIDS prevention and care.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION 4

The development and implementation of youth programmes, such as the Youth Empowerment Programme, focused on shelter related vocations. These programmes should include life skills and entrepreneurship training, and be linked to apprenticeships with local businesses and the housing industry.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION 5

The engagement of girls and young women in the MENA region is key to its ongoing success and growth. To do this, there needs to be developed programmes and the provision of urban spaces, either within new or established youth centres, for young women and girls. The programmes should be designed around the needs of young girls and women.

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