



The Arab region is ageing at a fast pace. The number of older persons is projected to increase from 20.8 million in 2020 to 71.5 million by 2050. Their percentage of the population will also increase from 4.8 per cent today to 6.2 per cent in 2030, and 10.6 per cent in 2050.



Countries in the Arab region are not ageing at the same pace, but most Arab countries will begin their ageing transition in the next two decades.



Lack of data disaggregated by age, sex, social status, living arrangements among other indicators is a significant limitation hindering countries' ability to produce evidence-based policies that are responsive to older persons.



National development plans and strategies of Arab countries should consider the changing demographic trends to better prepare for future generations.

## 1

# Snapshot of ageing and older persons in the Arab region

## A. Overview

Although the Arab region is characterized by a youthful population by global standards, the region needs to brace for a historic demographic transition. The proportion of older persons is set to more than double in the next 30 years, from around 5 per cent to nearly 11 per cent of the total population. The quickening pace of aging can be explained by a combination of declining childbearing and increasing longevity. Despite the unique demographic dynamics in each country, there are common socioeconomic implications of ageing that need to be considered across the Arab region.

This chapter offers a snapshot into the demographic trends and patterns of ageing across the region. The chapter is intentionally brief as the subject was covered extensively in the eighth edition of the [Population and Development Report \(2018\)](#). This chapter offers updates to the data that has been released since publishing the previous report.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter highlights the importance of ensuring the availability of reliable, accessible, and updated data to inform tailored responses to ageing across the region. In addition to presenting updated data on ageing-related indicators, namely fertility, mortality and migration, this chapter includes updated data on indicators related to the well-being of older persons including social protection, living arrangements, health and education.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the health and overall well-being of older persons, data in this regard remains limited. Anecdotal evidence shows how the pandemic has compounded pre-existing

vulnerabilities of older persons. Besides the direct effect on the health of older persons, the pandemic resulted in increased isolation of older persons especially during lockdowns, with consequences for their mental health. It has also reiterated the importance of the care ecosystem in supporting older persons' resilience.

## B. Definitions, methodology and limitations

This report defines older persons as the population over the age of 65. This is a departure from previous PDR reports and this change was made for the following reasons:

1. The ageing transition is demographically defined as those above the age of 65.
2. The retirement age in most Arab countries is closer to 65.
3. The global trend in the region and beyond is to push the brackets of who is defined as an older person given that people today are leading longer and healthier lives.

However, depending on data availability, some of the data in the present report are from sources that define older persons as individuals aged 60 and above. This discrepancy is noted in the chapter where relevant.

Data on demographic trends used in the present chapter are primarily taken from the World Population Prospects: The 2019 Revision produced by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). Demographic data were analysed for each

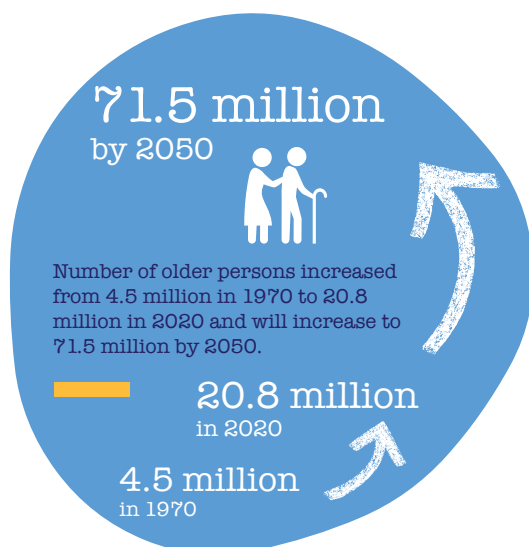
of the 22 countries in the Arab region.<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that caution is required when considering demographic projections in the region, as they rest on several assumptions relating to demographic determinants including mortality and migration, both of which have witnessed significant changes in their trends in some countries in recent years due to increased human mobility, as well as increased mortality in countries witnessing conflict for example.

Data on socioeconomic indicators were collected from a variety of United Nations agencies, including the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

## C. Demographic trends, patterns and prospects of ageing in the Arab region

### 1. The Arab region is ageing at an increasing pace

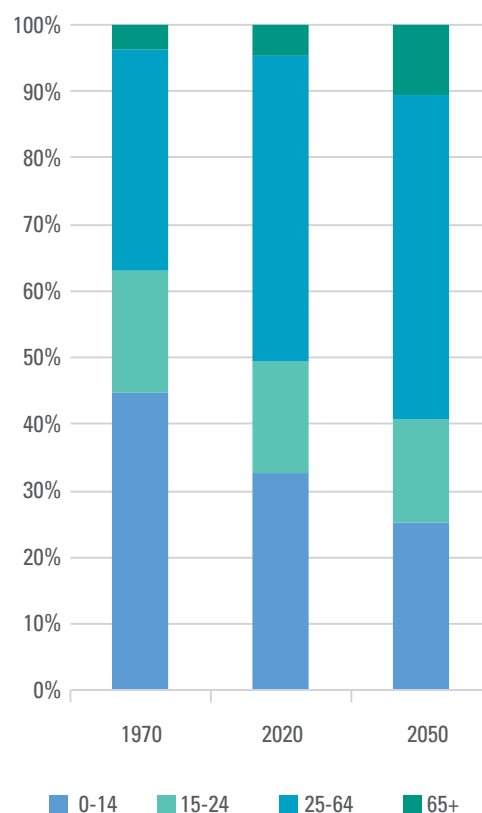
The number of older persons in the Arab region increased considerably in the last 50 years, from 4.5 million in 1970 to 20.8 million in 2020. This trend is set to continue with the number of older persons projected to triple to 71.5 million by 2050.



In proportional terms, the most significant shift is yet to come. In 1970, older persons made up less than 4 per cent of the population of the Arab region, which increased slightly to less than 5 per cent in 2020. However, the share of older persons is expected to more than double by 2050, to nearly 11 per cent.<sup>4</sup> Figure 2 visually depicts this demographic shift.

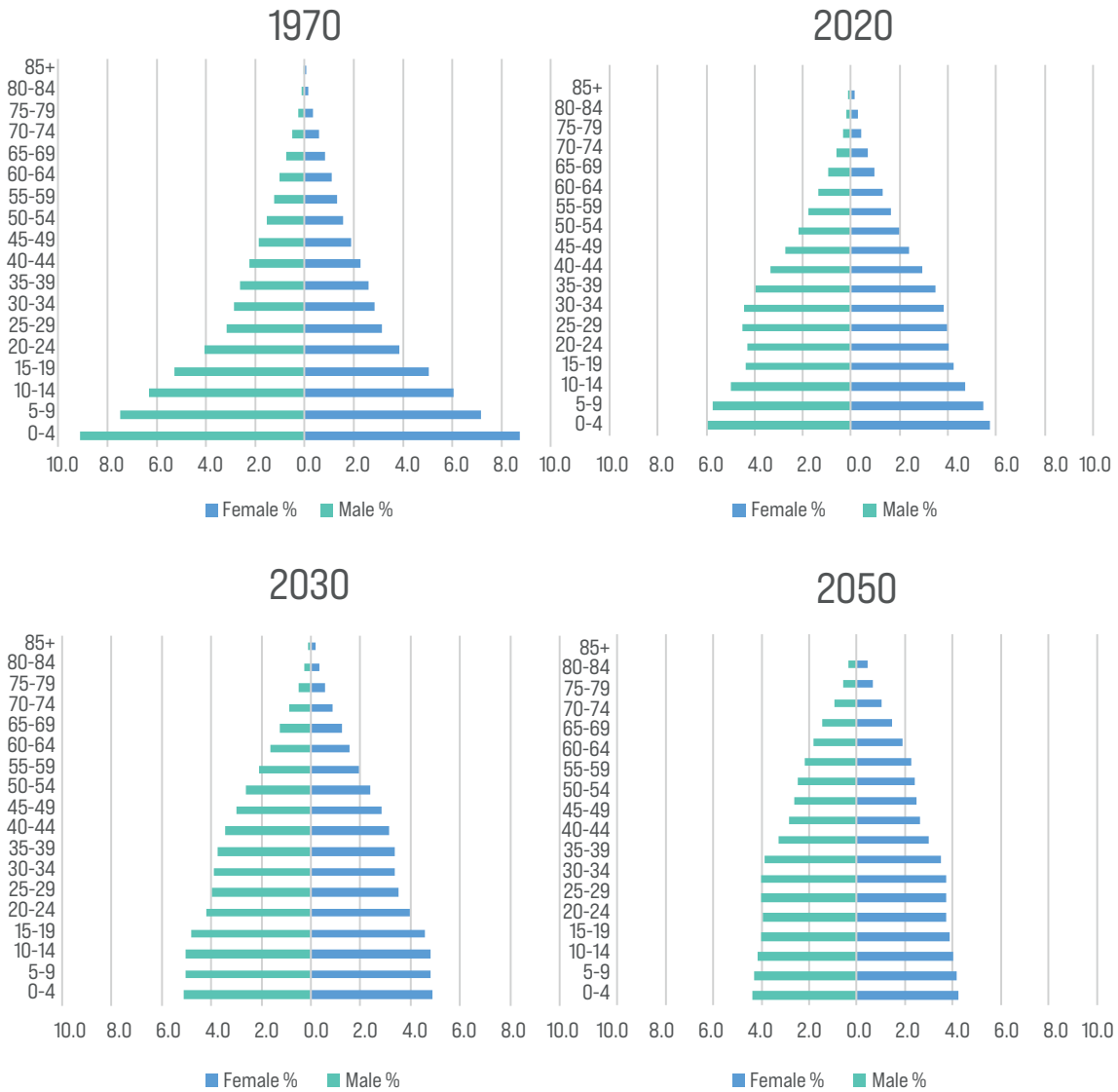
Looking at the demographic shift, figure 3 presents the change in the regional age pyramid from 1970 to 2020 and projects what the age pyramid will look like in 2030 and 2050. While the pyramid has flattened considerably in the last 50 years, the projected flattening that will occur in the next 10 and especially 30 years is even more stark.

**Figure 2.** Age structure in the Arab region (1970, 2020 and 2050)



Source: ESCWA calculations based on data from DESA, 2019a.

**Figure 3.** Age pyramids for the Arab region (1970, 2020, 2030 and 2050)

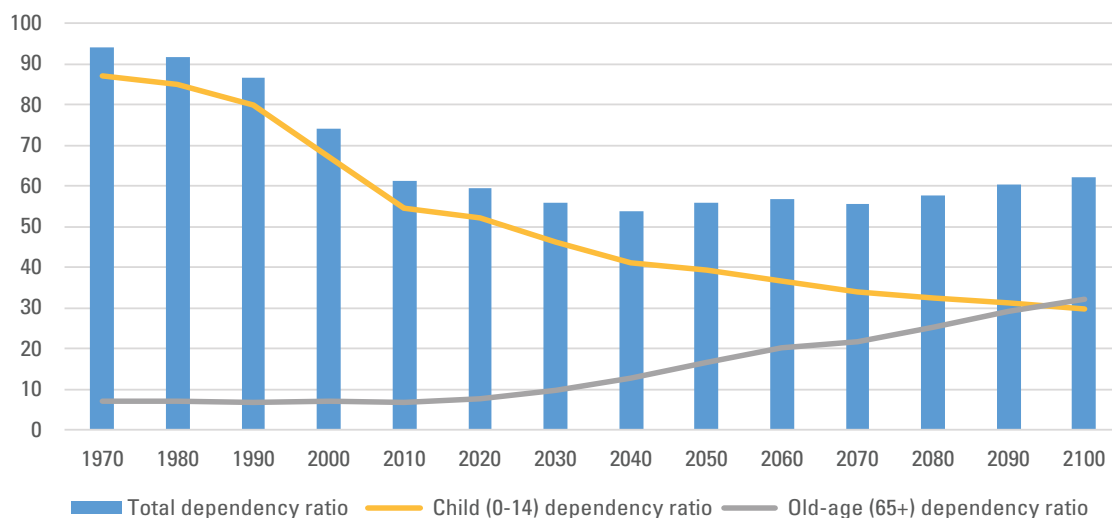


Source: ESCWA calculations based on data from DESA, 2019a.

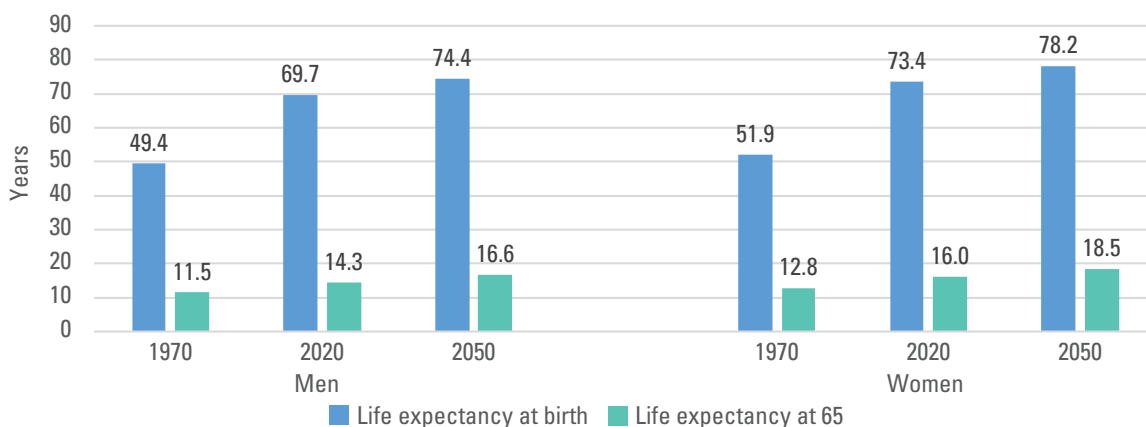
The Arab region is relatively young, as there are approximately more than ten times as many young people in the region than older persons today. But by 2050, this reality will change significantly as the number of older persons could make up around a quarter of the number of young people.<sup>5</sup>

Examining the dependency ratios of older persons and children help shed further light on

demographic shifts from another perspective. A high dependency ratio indicates that the economically active population and the overall economy face a greater burden to support and provide the social services needed by children and older persons who are often economically dependent. Figure 4 depicts the evolving dependency ratios as the demographic transition advances.

**Figure 4.** Dependency ratios in the Arab region (1970-2100)

Source: ESCWA calculations based on data from DESA, 2019a.

**Figure 5.** Life expectancy at birth and at age 65, by sex, in the Arab region (1970, 2020 and 2050)

Source: ESCWA calculations based on data from DESA, 2019a.

The decrease in dependency ratios, as a result of reduced fertility rates, indicates a demographic window of opportunity characterized by an increased proportion of working age population. During this period, societies could benefit from a higher number of producers relative to the number of consumers, thus constituting a demographic dividend that could be reaped before the dependency ratios increase again around 2045 due to the growing proportion of older persons.

## 2. This ageing trend is the combined result of declining fertility and rising life expectancy

The average number of children per woman dropped from 7 in 1970 to 3.3 in 2020 and is projected to further decrease to 2.5 by 2050.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the average number of years a 65-year-old man in the Arab region could expect to live increased from 11.5 years in 1970 to 14.3 years in 2020. Arab women's life expectancy at age 65 grew even more significantly from 12.8 years in 1970 to 16 years in 2020. Figure 5 shows that this positive trend is projected to

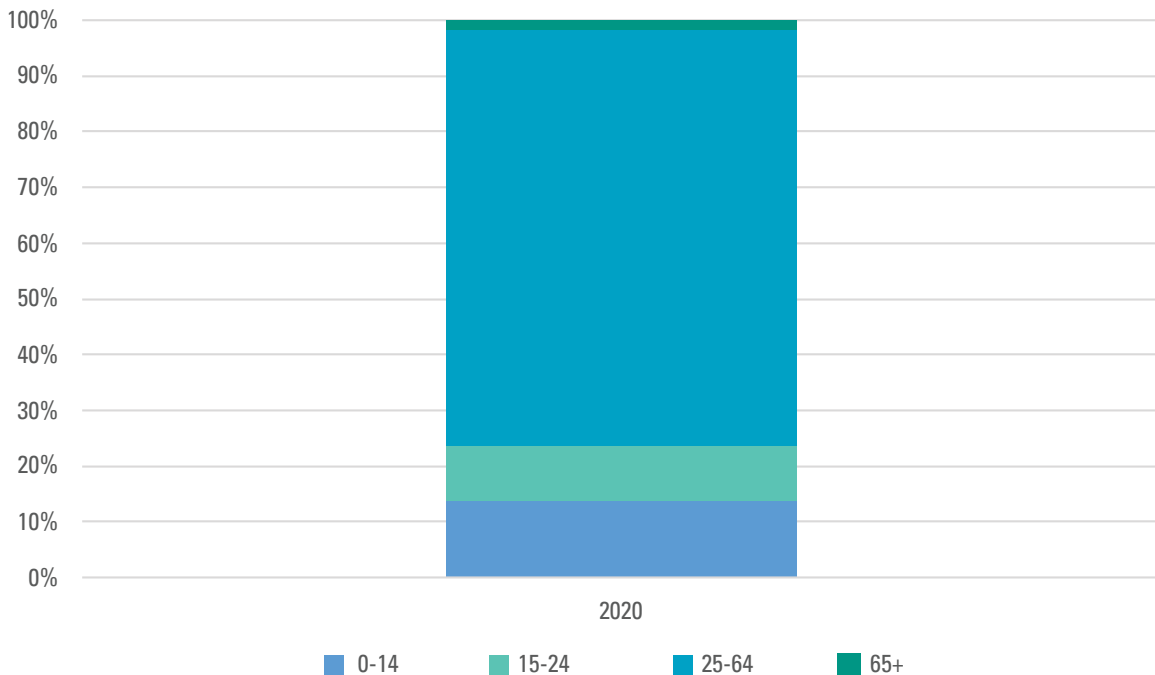
continue and Arab men's life expectancy at age 65 could reach 16.6 years by 2050, while women's life expectancy at age 65 is projected to reach 18.5 years.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Migration is a major determinant of population ageing

Migration is a major determinant of population ageing, particularly in the Arab region that continues to host increasing numbers of migrants and refugees. In 2020, Arab countries hosted around 41 million

migrants and refugees, 15 per cent of the global total. Migration is particularly important in GCC countries, where migrants make up as much as 53 per cent of the population. Most migrants tend to be of working age and seldom remain beyond retirement age (figure 6). Therefore, their presence is stalling the ageing transition, which is expected to start in most GCC countries in the next 10 to 15 years. The increasing efforts to reduce dependency on migrant workers and nationalize the GCC labour force could therefore accelerate the pace of the transition.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 6.** Age structure of migrants in GCC countries (2020)



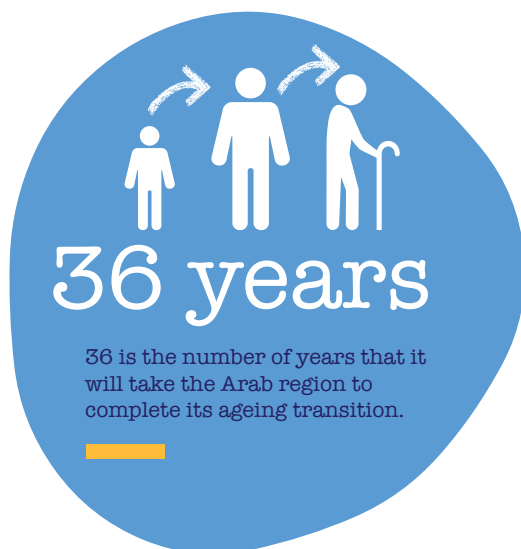
**Source:** ESCWA calculations based on data from DESA, 2020.

This dynamic is also relevant in non-GCC countries, especially those hosting high numbers of refugees. For example, the projections of Lebanon's ageing transition changed significantly over the past few years<sup>9</sup> given the high influx of Syrian refugees and their higher fertility rates, which delayed the onset of the ageing transition. In addition to impacting demographics in the host country, the countries of origin) can also have their age compositions greatly affected by sudden outflows of their population due to conflict and instability.

### 4. Countries in the Arab region are not ageing at the same pace, but most Arab countries will begin their ageing transition in the next two decades.

The 'ageing transition' is calculated based on the proportion of persons in a population aged 65 and above, which is in line with demographic research methodologies on population projections. A population is defined as 'ageing' when the share of persons aged 65 and above is between 7 per cent

and 14 per cent of the total population. The 'ageing transition' refers to the period in which the share of older persons shifts from 7 per cent to 14 per cent.



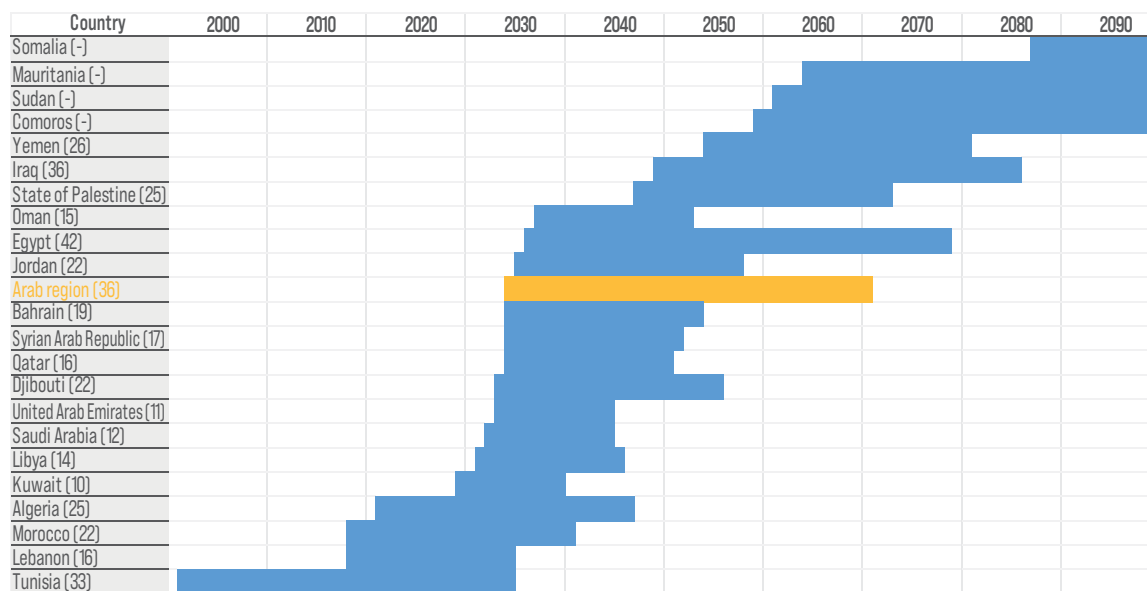
The Arab region is ageing much faster than regions that experienced this phenomenon before. For example, the ageing transition in European countries

lasted between 50 to 150 years while the average for the Arab region is estimated at 36 years (figure 7).

There is substantial variation in how long the ageing process will take across Arab countries. For example, the GCC countries are expected to age very rapidly, as the ageing transition is projected to last only 13 years in the GCC subregion.<sup>10</sup> This can partly be explained by the aforementioned important role played by migrants in the demographic composition of GCC countries. The projected pace of ageing ranges from 10 years in Kuwait to 42 years in Egypt.

The Arab region is projected to start its ageing transition in 2034. Yet, there is considerable variation in the timing and pace of ageing across the region. One group of countries (Tunisia, Lebanon, Morocco and Algeria) have already begun their ageing transition. The majority of Arab countries will begin their ageing transitions in the 2030s. Meanwhile, five Arab countries (Yemen, the Comoros, the Sudan, Mauritania and Somalia) are only expected to enter the ageing transition in the second half of the 21st century.

**Figure 7. Ageing transitions in Arab countries (2000-2100)**



**Source:** ESCWA calculations based on data from DESA, 2019a.

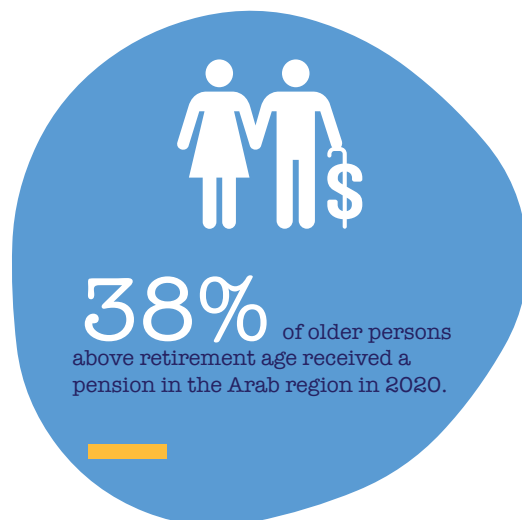
**Note:** The estimated duration of the ageing transition is shown in brackets. The starting year of the ageing transition is the year the proportion of older persons reaches 7.0 per cent, rounded to one decimal place. If the share is above this (i.e. 7.05 or above), the preceding year is used as the starting date.

## D. The socioeconomic situation of older persons in the Arab region

Population ageing carries important economic and social implications for Arab countries and societies. Social protection, adequate housing, quality and accessible health care and education are all important prerequisites for ageing with dignity, however significant gaps exist in Arab countries in these areas.

### 1. Non-inclusive social protection puts older persons at risk of being left behind

The right of older persons to income security is enshrined in human rights charters and international labour standards as well as international agreements such as MIPAA. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the inadequacies of current social protection systems and reiterated the case for serious structural reform.<sup>11</sup> One way to guarantee income security is through an adequate pension, yet this right is still unfulfilled in the Arab countries. In most Arab countries for which data is available, only military personnel and workers in the public sector and the formal private sector are entitled to social security benefits.<sup>12</sup> On average, only 38 per cent of older persons above retirement age received a pension in the Arab region in 2020.<sup>13</sup> Even among those who are covered, they may not receive an adequate income to guarantee them a dignified life. This will be further discussed in chapter 2.



### 2. The trend of population ageing in the Arab region coincides with an important shift in the living arrangements of older persons

Over the last 30 years, the percentage of older persons who live with a child or a young person (below 20) has fallen sharply in several Arab countries. At the same time, the percentage of older persons living alone or only with a spouse has risen considerably.<sup>14</sup>

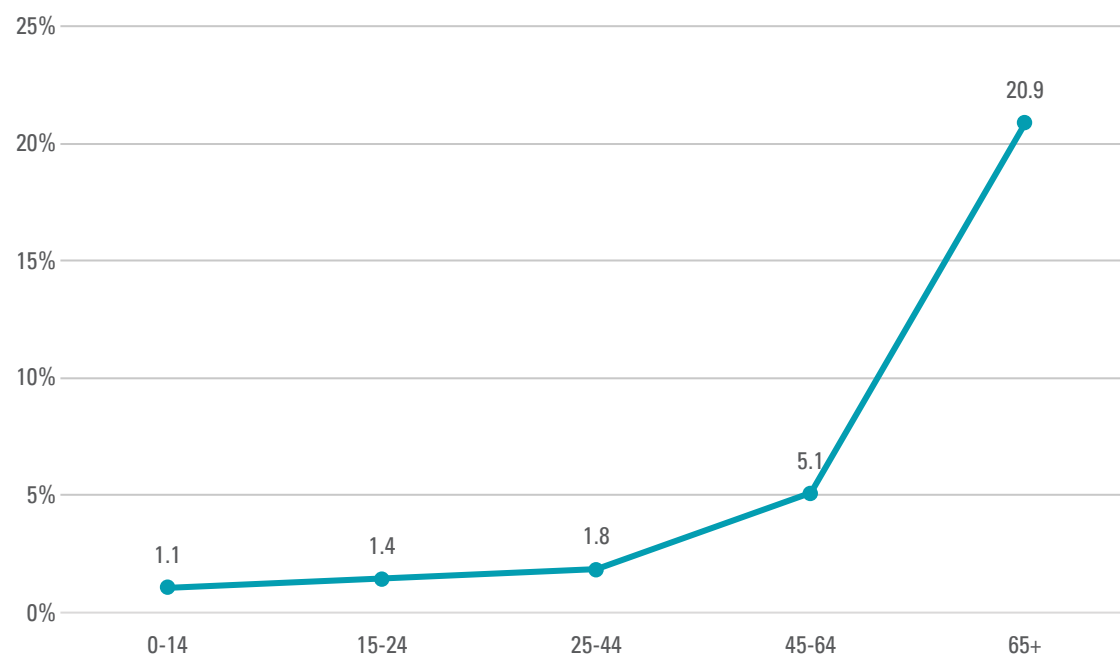
In countries where data is available, gender variation exists in older persons' living arrangements.<sup>15</sup> In Egypt, the latest data available from 2014 shows that 26.6 per cent of older women are living alone compared to 16 per cent living in a couple. By comparison, older men are more likely to be living in a couple (36 per cent) compared to living alone (7.4 per cent). This pattern holds among the older age group (80 and above) as well, within which 26.7 per cent of women are living alone compared to 12.3 per cent of men. Similarly, in Jordan, data from 2017 reveal that while 19 per cent of females aged 80 and above live alone, only 4.5 per cent of males aged 80 and above live alone.

The mortality data from the COVID-19 pandemic suggests a link between living arrangements and susceptibility to mortality risk. Indeed, global findings identify older persons who either live alone or in an institution to be at higher risk from death due to the pandemic compared to older persons living with a spouse or family member.<sup>16</sup> While this link may not be strictly causal it demonstrates the importance of older persons' living arrangements on their health and well-being.

### 3. Old age is generally correlated with a higher prevalence of disability

Figure 8 shows the disability prevalence rate by age group at the regional level. In the Arab region, the disability prevalence rate among the population aged 0-64 is below 5 per cent in every country where data is available, while it is consistently significantly higher in the 65+ age group, reaching up to 31 per cent.<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 8.** Disability prevalence by age group in the Arab region

Source: ESCWA, Disability in the Arab Region 2018.

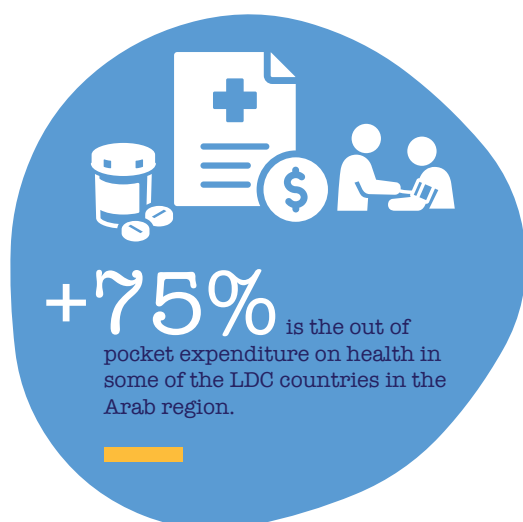
At the same time, persons with disabilities are more likely to face unaffordable health expenditures, making them particularly vulnerable to diseases and compounding their risk of falling into poverty.<sup>18</sup> Based on data from WHO, out of pocket expenditure as a percentage of total health expenditures varies among Arab countries from as low as less than 7 per cent in

Oman (5.78 per cent) and Qatar (6.86 per cent) to more than 70 per cent in the Sudan (75.52 per cent) and Yemen (76.42 per cent).<sup>19</sup> While these figures reflect the expenditures incurred by the general population, it is expected that such expenditures will constitute a compounded burden on older persons given the absence of adequate income security.

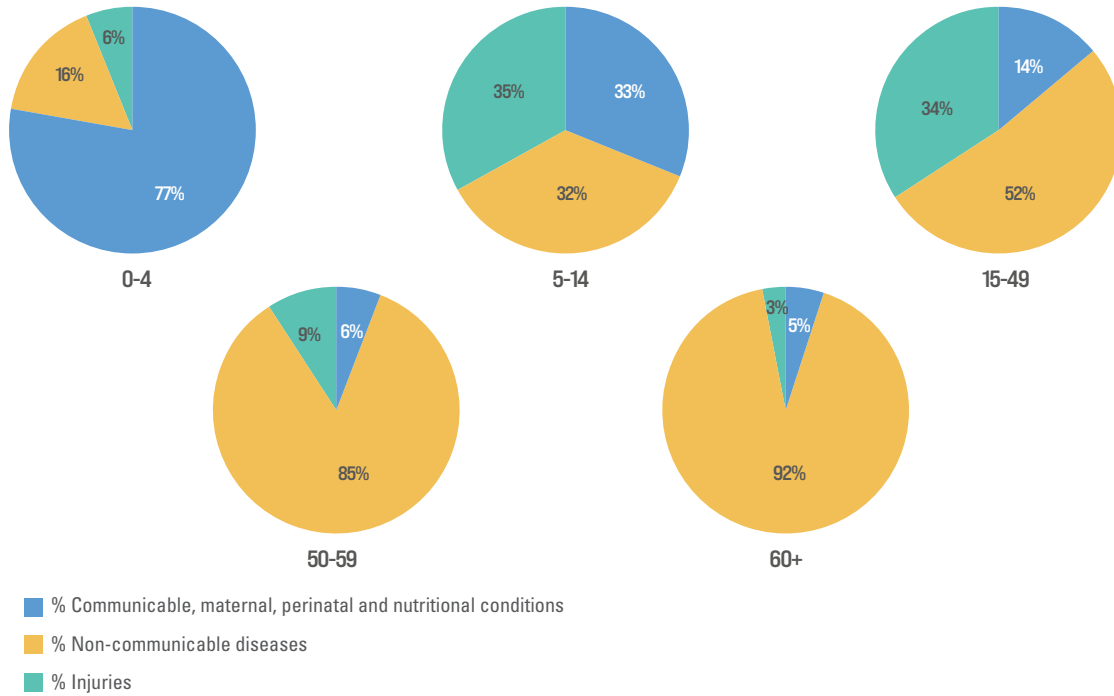
#### 4. Non-communicable diseases are the leading cause of death among older persons in the Arab region

The main causes of death vary considerably across the lifecycle as figure 9 shows. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are increasingly the leading cause of death as people age, with a marked jump from 52 per cent in the 15-49 age group to 85 per cent in the 50-59 age group.

Indeed, NCDs appear among the ten top causes of death in all Arab countries.<sup>20</sup> WHO<sup>21</sup> estimates that in 2019 more than 3 million persons aged 60 and above died from non-communicable diseases,



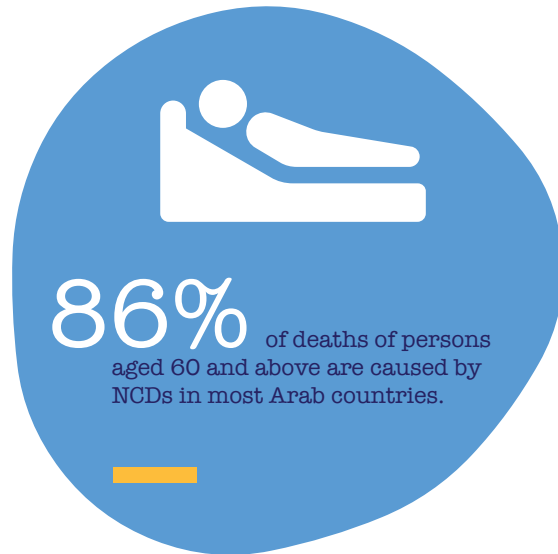
**Figure 9.** Cause of death as a percentage of all deaths, both sexes, in the Arab region (2019)



**Sources:** ESCWA calculations based on data from WHO, 2020. Global Health Estimates 2019: Deaths by Cause, Age, Sex, by Country and by Region, 2000-2019. Note: Data on the State of Palestine was not available.

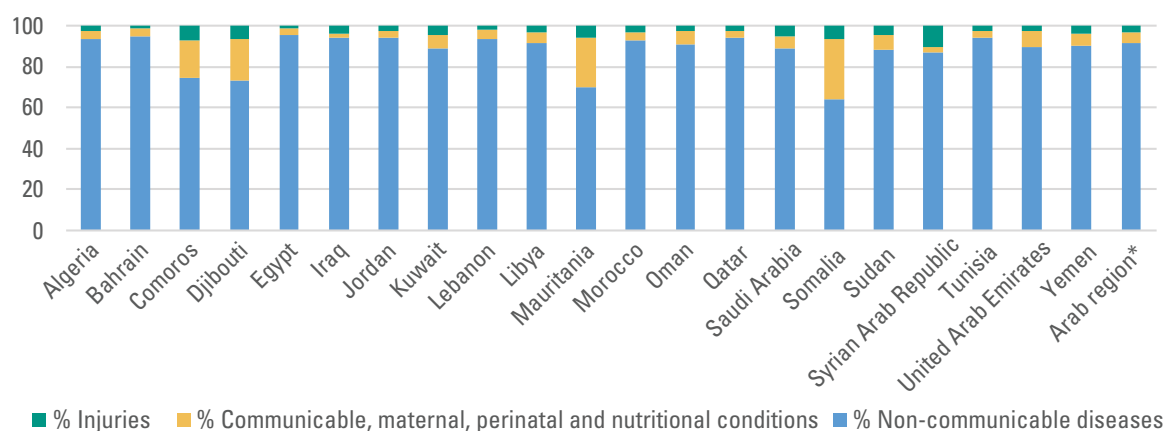
**Note:** Data on the State of Palestine was not available.

76 per cent of whom were between 60 and 69.<sup>22</sup> For persons aged 60-69 and those 70 and above, deaths from non-communicable diseases constitute more than 85 per cent of all deaths in most Arab countries except for the Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania and Somalia, where communicable diseases are responsible for more than 25 per cent of deaths in both age groups (figure 10). The four main non-communicable diseases affecting older persons in the Arab region are cardiovascular diseases (including heart attacks and strokes), cancer (referred to as malignant neoplasms), chronic respiratory diseases (such as chronic obstructed pulmonary disease and asthma) and diabetes. Among these, cardiovascular diseases are the major cause of death in all Arab countries where data is available. It is worth mentioning that diabetes constitutes more than 15 per cent of deaths in Bahrain and Qatar among people aged 70 and above. Among the 60-69 age group, this number ranges from around 10 per cent in the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Qatar to as high as 22 per cent in Bahrain.



The COVID-19 pandemic further heightened the vulnerability of older persons in the Arab region. The mortality risk of COVID-19 increases with age, and older persons have a higher risk of suffering from acute symptoms and health complications.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 10.** Cause of death as a percentage of total deaths for persons 60 years and above in Arab countries (2019)



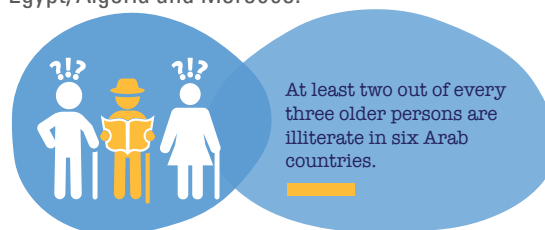
**Sources:** ESCWA calculations based on data from WHO, 2020. Global Health Estimates 2019: Deaths by Cause, Age, Sex, by Country and by Region, 2000-2019.

**Note:** Data on the State of Palestine was not available.

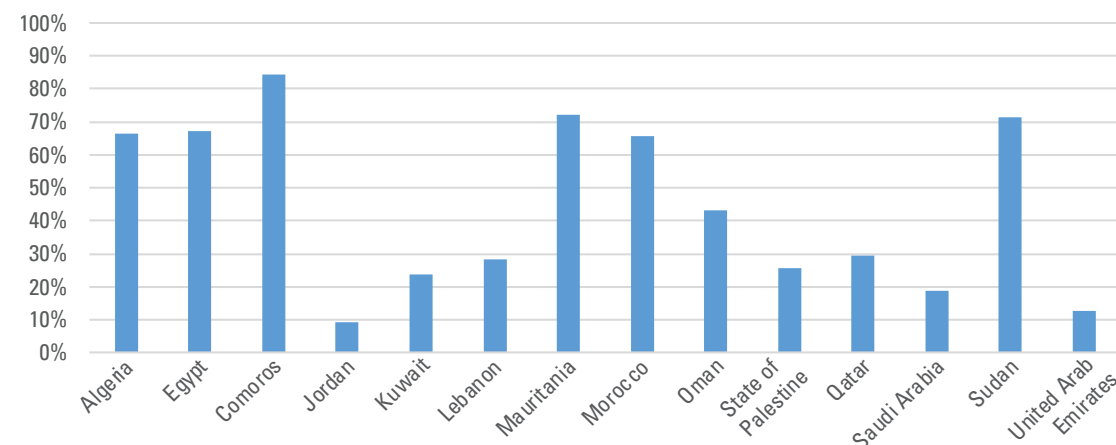
## 5. The vulnerability and the risk of poverty of older persons is increased significantly by a lack of formal education

SDG 4 includes a call for lifelong learning opportunities for all, yet the Arab region is lagging in meeting the educational needs of older persons. Indeed, illiteracy among older persons above 65 is widespread in the Arab region. Figure 11 shows the illiteracy rates of older persons across 14 Arab countries. Among the 14 Arab countries for which

data is present from 2017 onwards, at least two in every three older persons are illiterate in six Arab countries: The Comoros, Mauritania, the Sudan, Egypt, Algeria and Morocco.<sup>24</sup>



**Figure 11.** Illiteracy rates among older persons in selected Arab countries (2020 or latest year available)



**Sources:** UNESCO, 2021a.

**Note:** The data is taken from 2017 for Egypt, Mauritania and Qatar; 2018 for Algeria, the Comoros, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman and the Sudan; 2019 for the United Arab Emirates; 2020 for Kuwait, the State of Palestine and Saudi Arabia.

Illiteracy particularly affects older rural women, of whom only less than 10 per cent are literate in some Arab countries.<sup>25</sup> Illiteracy has many ramifications, including increased financial vulnerability and limited access to health services and social support. Additionally, older persons tend to have lower rates of access to technology and digital literacy,<sup>26</sup> which limits their access to information in a growingly digitized world. It also limits their potential to benefit from new technologies and innovation.

A UNESCO review of trends in adult learning and education in Arab States found that adult literacy programmes are increasingly common across the region.<sup>27</sup> Yet, other important areas of learning for older persons such as continuing education and professional development may be overlooked.

## 6. Older persons' contributions are often overlooked, and they are subject to ageism

Older persons enrich their families, economies, and societies but their contributions are often overlooked or underappreciated. Despite the strong tradition in the region for families to care for older persons, there also

continue to be negative stereotypes portraying them as dependents and without lack agency and capacity.

Older persons support their families through financial and instrumental support such as taking care of grandchildren and other older adults and helping with domestic chores. Many older persons continue to work beyond retirement age and have a wealth of knowledge and experience that they transfer to the younger cohorts and enrich the workplace including in education, medicine, media and artisanal professions, among others. Older persons can also play an active role in the transmission of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage to the younger generations.<sup>28</sup>

A shift in mindset to a more progressive one that recognizes the social and economic contributions of older persons is critical to break the negative stereotypes and combat ageism. While there is no definitive data on ageism in the region, global data suggests that one in two people holds ageist attitudes towards older persons and it is likely that these rates are even higher in low-and lower-middle-income countries.<sup>29</sup>

### Families

Older persons support their families through financial and instrumental support



### Economies

The labour force and economy benefit from the mentorship, experience and knowledge of older persons who work beyond retirement age



### Societies

Older persons can be bearers of culture and tradition and pass down their cultural heritage to the younger generations

