

# Introduction

Most Arab countries will have an ageing population or will have become aged in the next 30 years. This statement would have been unimaginable a few decades ago, when the region was witnessing a massive population boom. Today, several Arab countries have already started the ageing transition and most countries will follow suit in the next 15 years. As a result, the number of older persons (aged 65 and above) is projected to increase from around 21 million today to exceed 71 million in 2050. Their percentage of the population will also increase from around 5 per cent today to more than 6 per cent in 2030 and nearly 11 per cent in 2050.

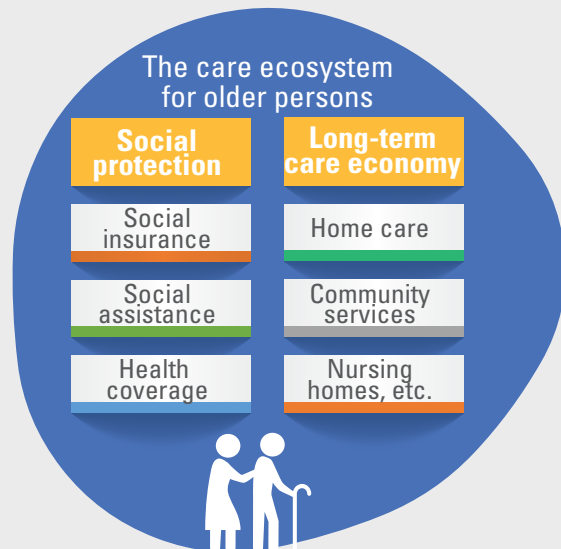
The fast-paced demographic changes, coupled with the alarming situation of older persons today and the projected situation of future cohorts of older persons, are advancing ageing as a priority policy item across the region. The COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating effect on older persons only served to highlight the existing vulnerabilities of older persons and the need to take prompt action to protect them and guarantee their rights. It has proven once again that business as usual and the fragmented policies of yesterday are no longer adequate. A paradigm shift is needed to change the bleak prospects of ageing in the Arab region.

In this context and building on ESCWA's earlier knowledge produced on ageing in the Arab region, as well as the insights gained from its ongoing work with member States, the ninth issue of the Population and Development Report (PDR9) focuses on the care ecosystem for older persons as an entry point to address older persons' priorities and ensure that all people can age with dignity in the region.

The model of the care ecosystem (figure 1) presented in this report is comprised of two distinct yet closely related elements: social protection and the long-term care (LTC) economy. Social protection is defined as

a set of public policies and programmes intended to ensure an adequate standard of living and access to health care throughout the life cycle. Social protection benefits can be provided in cash or in kind through universal or targeted non-contributory schemes, contributory schemes such as pensions and complementary measures. Long-term care is defined as the need for and supply of long-term care support including formal and informal care and services to assist older persons and support their independence. It could include services provided in the community and at home, as well as institutional care.

**Figure 1.** The care ecosystem for older persons



Source: Prepared by ESCWA.

Non-inclusive social protection systems across the region continue to leave large groups of older persons vulnerable to poverty, disease, and heightened dependency. They hinder older persons from fulfilling their potential and being active agents in their societies who can contribute to its development. The underdeveloped long-term care economy is also undermining older persons' autonomy and increasing

their exclusion and isolation. Families, which traditionally are the primary care providers for older persons, are facing increasing difficulties to carry this role due to evolving socio-cultural norms and family structures, urbanization and migration, among other factors. Therefore, Arab countries are compelled to rethink and overhaul their social protection systems and invest further in the nascent long-term care economy for older persons, to adapt to the new reality and prepare to address the needs of their quickly ageing populations.

PDR9 reflects on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and attempts to move from a diagnosis of the status quo towards offering a prognosis and solutions that can guide Arab countries in their efforts to build forward better for older persons and fulfil their commitment to leave no one behind. This report serves as both a call to action and a source of evidence-based policy recommendations to develop the care ecosystem across the Arab region. It reflects ESCWA's commitment to supporting member States in formulating sustainable and inclusive national policies and action plans responsive to older persons. Additionally, it complements ESCWA's efforts to address knowledge gaps on ageing, foster regional peer learning and build the capacity of member States.

PDR9 is rooted in the principles espoused in key international development frameworks, including the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. To the extent possible, the analysis adopts a gender and disability-sensitive lens, and rests on life cycle and human rights-based approaches.

The present report employs a mixed-method approach that complements quantitative statistical analysis with in-depth qualitative data. Using United Nations data helps facilitate comparative regional analyses. Given the significant data gaps and the benefits of honing in on specific country experiences, PDR9 also uses data from national censuses, surveys and administrative sources. In terms of qualitative methods, it uses primary data

gathered through interviews and surveys to inform the case studies presented.

While there is no universally agreed upon definition of older persons, this report defines them as individuals aged 65 years or above. This definition, which shifts from earlier definitions used (based on 60 and above), has been selected in line with the trend in the region and beyond to redefine who is considered an older person given that people are living longer and are enjoying better health. It also aligns with the retirement age used in many countries. Unless otherwise specified, the present report defines the Arab region as comprising 22 countries, the Member States of the League of Arab States.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 1 offers a snapshot of demographic trends in the region and the socioeconomic situation of older persons based on the most recent available data and accounting for the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter is intentionally brief given that the subject has been covered extensively in the previous issue of the Population and Development Report "Prospects of Ageing with Dignity in the Arab Region." The analysis in this chapter reflects the accelerating yet varied pace of ageing across the Arab region, and the alarming situation of older persons, highlighting the urgency of developing context-specific policies that promote ageing with dignity.

Chapter 2 focuses on social protection for older persons in the Arab region. It reflects on different social protection schemes across the region, focusing on their functions of providing income security and access to health care. The chapter considers the coverage of contributory and non-contributory social protection schemes (social insurance, social assistance and health coverage) in Arab countries. Going beyond coverage, the chapter looks at the adequacy of social insurance and assistance schemes. Chapter 2 also explores what Governments are doing to ensure the sustainability of social insurance schemes, and how those reforms affect the coverage and adequacy for older persons. Finally, the chapter looks at the economic cost of filling the coverage gap today, looking at the cost of social assistance packages in selected countries.

Chapter 3 explores the long-term care economy in selected Arab countries. The chapter explores the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on older persons' living arrangements and care needs. Chapter 3 expands on two dimensions of the long-term care economy, providing services in older persons' own homes and building infrastructure for residential nursing care homes. It offers examples of care models outside the region before presenting three case studies of the Syrian Arab Republic, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. It also deliberates on the costs of developing an integrated long-term care economy.

Chapter 4 presents a roadmap for building forward better for older persons. While recognizing that each country will need to tailor these recommendations to their unique context and priorities, this chapter offers general guidance and specific forward-looking and phased recommendations of action items for Arab countries to consider. Chapter 4 focuses on four critical dimensions for reform: data, the lifecycle approach, social protection and the long-term care economy. Taken together, these reforms can help create care ecosystems that both protect and empower older persons to lead dignified lives.

The key takeaway messages from this report are:

- The demographic transition is a reality in the region that requires quick and proactive policy reforms to empower and protect older persons.
- Large groups of older persons today are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, exclusion and abuse. If no action is taken today, the potential for ageing with dignity in the Arab region is bleak.
- Reform of social protection systems is a priority to ensure the well-being of older persons and needs to go beyond coverage, to ensure an adequate standard of living in old age.
- Advancing the long-term care economy for older persons is of utmost importance considering changing social and cultural norms and trends.