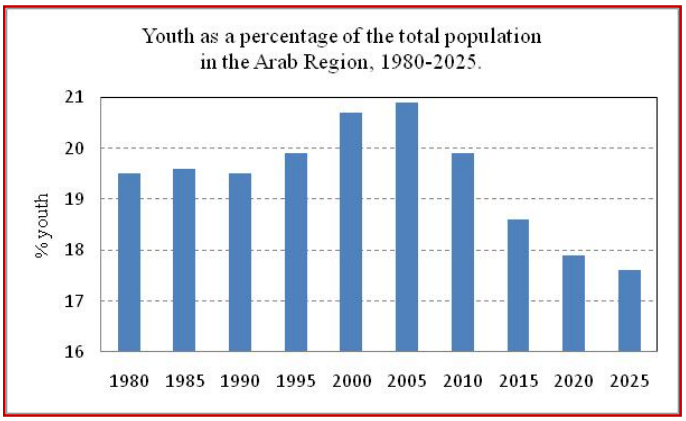
Overview:

One out of every five persons in the Arab Region is in the age bracket 15-24 years and more than half of the population is below the age of 25. The region is currently witnessing a 'youth bulge' as a result of declining fertility rates and slowly rising proportions of elderly. In 2005, the population distribution by broad age groups was as follows: 35% children (0-14 years), 21% youth (15-24 years), 40% working-age (25-64 years) and 4% elderly[1].



Source: ESCWA/PSDS, based on the UN *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision.*

The large youth population has opened up a demographic 'window of opportunity' for increasing savings and investment, increasing per capita income and improving the quality of life. However, this has also imposed several challenges in countries where youth are confronted by social exclusion, unemployment and deprivation, potentially leading to their involvement in violence and social upheaval.

Countries in the Arab region are gradually realizing the importance of targeting youth as a distinct socio-demographic group by formulating national youth policies and plans of action that not only seek to build the individual capacities of youth, but also aim at providing them with necessary opportunities to reach their full potentials in education, health, employment, as well as participation in public and political life.

UN system's response:

In its Resolution 60/2 on 'Policies and programmes involving youth', the General Assembly "requests the United Nations regional commissions to organize, within their existing resources, regional consultations with Member States and youth organizations in order to evaluate the implementation of the World Programme of Action".

Within this framework, youth issues and policies are accorded a special priority within the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and are mainly tackled by the Population and Social Development Section of the Social Development Division. ESCWA's approach to youth issues and policies revolves around four main aspects:

(1) Advocating for the implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY)and encouraging national governments to formulate national youth policies.

(2) Strengthening the individual and institutional capacities of Member States to help them formulate national youth policies and related plans of actions.

(3) Monitoring countries' responses to the WPAY and their progress towards achieving goals and targets on youth development.

(4) Conducting research analysis on the situation of youth in the domains of education, employment, health and participation in public life. This will help in identifying the problems and challenges they are facing and in formulating appropriate youth policies that target them as a distinct socio-demographic group.

[1] UN (2009). *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision.* Can be accessed online at http://esa.un.org/unpp

Progress:

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN THE ESCWA REGION

In assessing the achievements towards youth development, the implementation of the WPAY in Arab countries, seems that despite that Arab member states have made commitments to develop youth policies, to address the diverse needs of youth and to support the young people in reaching their maximum potential, Arab governments, due to persistent structural as well as circumstantial obstacles, are lagging behind in many aspects of the policymaking process. Most of the structural obstacles are due to a considerable dearth of knowledge about the newly emerged paradigm according to which youth are identified as a socio-demographic group with its own and sometimes with unique challenges, and youth are targeted as human resources in a comprehensive agenda for youth policy formulation and implementation. In this context, most countries and areas of the region, regardless of the individual level of national economic development, have had little experience in formulating a youth focused policy and in implementing the newly promoted WPAY. Thus the main challenges faced by young people in countries of the region can be summarized as follows:

1- The social, economic and political exclusion of young people, resulting from the education gap. There are 13 million illiterate young people. Education is still traditional and the gap separating it from that in developed countries is very wide. There is a gap between the (vocational) education available to the poor and the (special and excellent) education available to the rich. The gender gap continues to exist, with a bigger proportion of females, especially in poor families, dropping out of schools. Female education still focuses on the traditional roles of women; Young women face many difficulties as a result of the intersection of working age and gender factor, which limits the areas of their participation in economic life. Studies indicate that only 30% of women of working age participate in the labor market, add to that those who succeed in the transition to remain trapped in low paid jobs in the private sector, formal or informal.

2- Improving levels of education did not coincide with more economic opportunities, thereby contributing to high unemployment levels. The failure to align increased educational opportunities with more economic opportunities. Studies have shown that linkages between outputs of education and demand in the labour market are weak, causing high unemployment. One of the main consequences of globalisation is the speed of change in the quality and composition of skills required by labour markets. Education is rigid and does not respond quickly to the changing requirements of the labour market;

3- The unemployment of young people who are the group that is most affected by the challenges posed by globalisation and the evolution of ICT in the labour market. The World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation issued by the World Bank[2] points out that unemployment is a problem that concerns mainly youth, rather than the population as a whole, since young people constitute about half of the total unemployed population. Unemployment is more likely to increase among young people than among adults by 3.5 times. Globally, youth unemployment stands at about 14 per cent, while in the Middle East it is reported to be 25 per cent. Youth searching for their first job constitute 50 per cent of the unemployed, which is the highest regional percentage in the world. Periods of unemployment among university and vocational training graduates are relatively long (for example, up to 3 years in Morocco);

4- Inadequate availability of ICT tools of globalisation. Data on use of personal computers indicate that there are 18 computers per thousand people in the Arab region, compared with a global average

[2] See: www.worldbank.org.

of 78.3. The Human Development Report 2002[3] indicates that internet users in the Arab countries number 4.2 million, only 1.6 per cent of the population. This is due to several factors, including illiteracy, with the number of illiterates in the region estimated at about 60 million, and the low income levels of the greater part of the population;

In this respect, ESCWA concerted its effort to ensure better understanding of the fundamental reasons for not responding to WPAY. Experience has shown that the task of formulating and implementing youth policy requires the coordination and participation of all concerned institutions, ministries and NGOs. In connection with the WPAY, it may be useful to recall the Secretary General's Report (A/62/61/-E/2007/7)) and UN General Assembly Resolution 62/126 in which the UN encouraged that national governments, with the collaboration of the United Nations System, to design national youth policies with the objective of achieving the proposed goals and targets, and to develop institutional capacity and devise appropriate mechanisms for achieving those goals and targets. In effects, ESCWA has completed the following youth-related activities:

1) Undertaking a Regional Inquiry on ESCWA Countries' Responses to the WPAY, during the months of October and November 2008. This inquiry highlighted the general, structural, institutional and circumstantial challenges facing Member States in their attempts to approach youth issues and to formulate national youth policies.

2) Issuing several publications related to youth issues and policies, such as the Fourth Issue of the Population and Development Report entitled "Youth in the ESCWA Countries: Situation Analysis and Policy Implications" (2009).

3) Conducting a Workshop on "Reinforcing National Capacities in Responding to the WPAY: National Reports and Systematic Documentation of Accomplishments" (Beirut, 17-18 Dec. 2008). The Workshop provided an opportunity for sharing and discussing with national counterparts the results of the above-mentioned Inquiry as well as agreeing on a template/outline to be followed in the preparation of national reports on countries' responses to WPAY.

4) Conducting an expert group meeting on "Reinforcing Social Equity: Integrating Youth into the Development Process" (in collaboration with the Family Development Foundation FDF in Abu Dhabi, 29-31 March 2009). Participants in this meeting analyzed the demographic, economic, social and cultural characteristics of youth in Arab countries. The meeting also included the presentation and discussion of national reports on WPAY implementation.

5) Holding a Roundtable entitled "Youth in the Arab World: Challenges and Opportunities", within the 26th ESCWA Ministerial session. This Roundtable included the presentation of a paper on "National youth policies within the framework of the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY)". A dialogue was then opened between a group of young people (selected from various universities in Lebanon) and ministers and delegates from ESCWA Member States. The dialogue revolved around 6 themes: education, employment, health, and participation in public life, globalization and emerging issues. The Roundtable was concluded with the adoption of the 2010 Western Asia Declaration, under the banner "Renewing the Commitments to Youth Policy is an Opportunity for Development".

The way forward:

[3] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, *Human Development Report 2002: Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World*. Available at: http:hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2002.

Gaps and Challenges faced by ESCWA Countries:

Notwithstanding growing interest in youth at the level of political discourse, response to the WPAY in the Arab region in general and in the ESCWA member countries in particular is still weak, being restricted in most countries to the development of scattered sectoral programmes only partially designed to meet the needs of youth. ESCWA has conducted an inquiry aimed at identifying the constraints that impede the response of member countries to the WPAY and restrict their compliance with the commitments undertaken. The inquiry covered most of the countries of the region and dealt with a range of questions on the efficiency and methodology of planning, the efficiency and quality of interventions, the extent of the availability of institutions working in this field, and competence of workers in planning and policy development. A questionnaire was sent to a group of countries in order to assess their response to the WPAY. ESCWA has requested member countries to support its efforts in implementing the first phase of the proposed project: Strengthening National Capacities to Formulate National Youth Policies and Plans of Action: Responding to the World Programme of Action for Youth, which is a foundational phase that paves the way for later phases in the follow-up and monitoring of the implementation of the United Nations General Assembly resolutions on youth.

The questionnaire focused on the effectiveness of the enabling environment and the availability of the conditions for responding to the WPAY. It consists of four sections, each comprising a set of questions: (a) the general framework; (b) the institutional framework; (c) the structural framework; and (d) the situational framework. Below are some of the main reasons revealed by the inquiry for the weak response and the failure to formulate integrated, effective national policies targeting young people are as follows:

(a) Lack of frameworks for and knowledge of the contemporary concepts and approaches that define the societal and developmental roles of young people and pave the way for youth policy formulation and practical implementation.;

(b) Strategies based on a universal approach to youth development have led to exclusion and marginalisation of several socio-demographic groups, especially youth. As a result, many young men and women suffer poverty, unemployment and exclusion from knowledge and culture, and are more vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV disease (AIDS) and drug abuse. Moreover, the spread of wars and local and regional conflicts contribute to worsening the impact of these challenges on young people;

(c) The environment under which these policies are formulated is characterized by the following:

I. Lack of statistical data and information on youth issues, disaggregated by age, gender and region (urban and rural);
II. Scarcity of research and surveys that identifies and assesses the key factors contributing to the exclusion of young women and men ;
III. Lack of national capacity-building programmes, leading to low level of competency of national counterparts involved in formulating youth policies;
IV. Lack of institutions that coordinate sectoral efforts and ensure the efficient functioning of mechanisms needed for youth development;
V. Weak political commitment to youth issues and the involvement of Governments in other less urgent priorities;
VI. Inadequate legislation and political directions related to youth development;

(d) The inquiry found the following results:

I. Twelve States have separate programmes aimed at empowering young people and developing their capabilities; however, these are concentrated in urban areas and focus mostly on sports;
II. There is an absence of a contemporary national vision on the basis of which the role of youth in development can be defined. Only five countries have developed national youth strategies (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Yemen), but these strategies have not been translated into action plans;
III. Out of the thirteen member countries that filled the questionnaire, only seven (Bahrain, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Yemen) defined youth as the 15-24 year old age cohort, while other countries gave definitions that range between 10 and 35 years;[4]
IV. Most countries lack frameworks for and knowledge of the contemporary concepts and approaches that define the societal and developmental roles of young people and pave the way for youth policy formulation and practical implementation.
V. There is an absence of concrete efforts aimed at identifying the needs and priorities of young people at the national level and at the level of different regions within the country, lack of detailed statistical data on youth disaggregated by age, gender and regional distribution (rural vs. urban), and lack of research on youth;
VI. There is an absence of efforts aimed at building national capacities and enabling decision makers to formulate a youth policy. National cadres suffer from the lack of capacity and financial resources are insufficient to implement activities and programmes for youth.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

ESCWA's strategic response:

ESCWA has formulated a three-year regional project entitled "Strengthening capacities of policy makers in the ESCWA region to formulate national youth policies and plans of action: Responding to the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY)". The Project's expected accomplishments are as follows:
1) Strengthened capacity of policy makers to formulate national youth policies in line with the identified youth priorities.
2) Strengthened capacity of policy makers to formulate a national plan of action for youth that includes a national list of indicators to monitor progress in WPAY priorities.
3) Increased availability and quality of information on both youth policies and youth indicators.
The Project's planned activities include preparing a situation analysis report on youth issues and priorities, formulating a regional list of priority issues and indicators for WPAY monitoring, preparing a regional resource manual on youth policy formulation, organizing several regional meetings and workshops aiming at building the capacity of Member Countries in the area of youth policy formulation, implementation and monitoring, as well as developing a Youth Policies Information System (YPIS) for monitoring the implementation of youth goals and targets.

It would be helpful if you could expand on the role that youth play and how youth organizations are engaged in policy formulation and implementation. Are there any interesting examples of partnerships between youth and government or international organizations in the region?

Evidence-based good practices:

ESCWA will act as the lead entity in the above-mentioned Project, collaborating with the Pan Arab project for Family Health (PAPFAM / League of Arab States) and selected UNFPA country offices in Iraq, Jordan, Syria,

[4] United Nations, ESCWA, *Analyses of the Questionnaire results on Responding to the World Programme of Action for Youth: Conclusions and Suggestions* (In Arabic), Workshop on reinforcing national capacities in responding to the World Programme of Action for Youth: national reports and systematic documentation of accomplishments, Beirut 17-18 December 2008

UAE and Yemen. Including these countries in the Project ensures that ESCWA is targeting the following two groups of countries: (1) countries that have no youth policy yet but are interested in initiating the process of its formulation, and (2) countries that already have a youth policy but need to operationalize it through a clear plan of action. This will provide ESCWA with the opportunity to directly fill the gaps faced by countries and to extract evidence-based good practices and lessons learned, particularly from countries such as Iraq which is currently in the preparatory stages of the formulation of its national youth strategy, having recently conducted a survey to identify youth issues and priorities to be tackled in the strategy.

Policy recommendations for the UN system and Member Countries:

ESCWA believes that UN sister agencies are currently in a position to join efforts and utilize WPAY as a policy framework and practical guidelines for national action and regional/international support to improve the situation of youth. In fact, in its Resolution 60/2 on 'Policies and programmes involving youth', the General Assembly "Urges Governments, in consultation with youth organizations, to develop holistic and integrated youth policies based on the World Programme of Action and to evaluate them regularly as part of the follow-up action on and implementation of the Programme of Action".

The work of the UN system and Member Countries should be guided by the UN General Assembly Resolutions and Secretary-General Reports setting up a series of goals and targets for each of the fifteen WPAY priorities (A/62/61/Add.1–E/2007/7/Add.1 and A/64/61–E/2009/3). They should also build on the proposed set of youth development indicators for monitoring these goals and targets in each priority area.

It is important in this regard to refer to the recent General Assembly Resolution 64/130, issued in February 2010, on "Policies and programmes involving youth" which "*Calls upon* Member States to consider using the goals and targets proposed in the reports of the Secretary-General at the national level as a means of facilitating the monitoring of progress towards the implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth" and which also "*Requests* the Secretary-General to intensify efforts to further develop and propose a set of possible indicators linked to the World Programme of Action for Youth and the proposed goals and targets, in order to assist States in assessing the situation of youth, with a view to allowing it to be considered by the Commission for Social Development and by the Statistical Commission at the earliest opportunity".
Recommendations for Youth organizations and networks and partnerships? Comprehensive strategy?

References are missing

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