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**REGIONAL DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS:**  
**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL REPERCUSSIONS**  
**FOR AGEING POPULATIONS**

By

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**EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON DEVELOPMENT OF POLICIES AND  
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**Regional Demographic Trends: Economic and Social Repercussions  
for Ageing Populations**

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The various countries constituting the Western Asia region as subdivided within the United Nations framework include a diversity of states, loosely and rather arbitrarily thrown together for pragmatic reasons. They are diverse in political terms as well as in economic terms and natural resources, including some of the richest but also some of the poorest of nations. The development process - structurally, economically, socially is at different stages in the various States.

They are naturally diverse in topography as well as in population size and in the extent to which each of their populations is experiencing growth. What interests us particularly here is the extent to which populations are ageing. We again find that there is considerable diversity - both in the extent to which these populations have seen any significant changes in the proportion and number of their elderly citizens as well as in the rate of growth of these elderly populations.

Over the past 40 years, an outstanding characteristic has been a general relative decline in PERCENTAGES in the 60+ group (representing the aged arbitrarily here) of populations.

This can be accounted for by the high fertility rate and generally declining infant mortality rate (phase 2 of the Demographic transition) that has typified several states in the

region, such that relatively more younger additions have been made to populations than have persons entered the ageing category. This is destined to change drastically over the next 30 years or so and with one exception (Yemen - still in phase 2) most countries will see a dramatic rise in the percentage of older persons within their populations in the first quarter of the next century. In terms of proportions, the UAE by far exceeds the pack (in terms of projected increase) so that by the year 2025 almost 1 in every five persons in that country will be aged 60 or more compared to the present figure of less than 1 in 20 persons.

However percentages can be misleading. Indeed, the actual NUMBERS of elderly persons have been steadily increasing in ALL of these states over the past 40 years. The coming 30 years will see this rise continue exponentially so that governments are now no longer able to ignore the very real issues and implications of their ageing populations. In some countries the extent to which this growth phenomenon is being experienced reaches staggering proportions. Egypt's case is particularly outstanding, where an estimated 8 million more elderly persons are expected to swell the existing figures. No state is exempt from these large increases in absolute numbers of elderly persons. The smallest today - Qatar will itself see its 13000 elderly grow to 101000. The changing fertility and mortality rates are not the only figures worth watching. This is a region of intense migratory movements, both within each country as well as across countries in and out of the region.

The mass movements from rural to urban zones have considerably affected the ageing sector of the population - both those groups who are left behind as well as those forced to come to grips with a new and alien environment in the large cities. Admittedly, several of the native populations in this region have not seen these phenomena in large scale while influxes of new migrants seeking employment have been a common trend over recent decades. These factors play a significant role in the social and economic

make-up of ageing populations in the region.

This region has more than geography in common among its member states. All have in common a religious heritage in Islam, which itself strongly recommends to its faithful to care for parents and elders as can be found in the Holy Koran.

The whole family, through its younger members are urged to play a fitting role to those who prepared the way for the new generations and this civic sense pervading across the Western Asian States augurs well for those persons within them fortunate enough to enter into later stages of life. It also makes our work in recommending appropriate preparation and care that much more possible for with the complicity of the very best among informal carers - the family members, governments and non-government agencies will be able to find a stronger basis for action.

However, if we are to analyze openly the traits of the region, we cannot omit the fact that several countries are characterized by relatively little orientation to ageing as a modern day phenomenon deserving priority consideration within the fundamental social development underway. There is scarce attention matters within policy formulation by all related governmental departments. This lack of attention is mostly due to the relative novelty of the phenomenon on any large scale within the region and perhaps because of the traditional certainty that events would not disrupt the strong bonds of mutual family care and support. These "events" have led to the following newer trends:

- a) more and more older persons living alone as widows/widowers without any family to care for them.
- b) the actual number of persons reaching old age who are unmarried or otherwise without children due to infertile marriages have increased even though in the region the proportions might be small.

- c) the heavy urbanization and internal migration has left behind numerous older persons isolated in rural areas.
- d) small family size is becoming popular, women are working increasingly and there are proportionately less informed carers available.
- e) the quality of life has increased but then so has the economic burden to maintain such a life and consequently there is less reserve economic capacity to deal with oddon problems such as new disabilities.
- f) specific services required for elderly persons such as health facilities like rehabilitation centers, geriatric units, community nursing, and social support services for family members have not increased to the same extent as have the populations aged and therefore the need for these services has outgrown their supply (and continues to do so).
- g) as educational training continues to become better and achieve wider coverage among countries in the region, older persons who have not benefitted from such an education are a different lot from the newer generations. This different background in educational attainment often poses a serious threat of becoming the basis for a society-based "generation gap" with all that this implies.

These trends which most would recognize as true to varying degrees within each of their countries have resulted in consequences on society today and the outlook on all that pertains to this "ageing" world.

Younger family members are proportionately fewer and this is clearly visible in the dependency ratios for those aged 65 and over (see charts). In some countries such as Egypt and the UAE there will be far fewer younger person available for each older person. Other countries in the region experiencing a great rise in this dependency ratio over the next 30 years include Kuwait, Qatar and Lebanon.

Families are therefore finding increasing difficulty to cope with caring for needy elderly members, especially in the face of government services and support which are either lacking or not developing and expanding rapidly enough. In many of the ESCWA countries NGOs are having a particularly hard time and government support for these bodies has not been so far forthcoming in many cases.

There are important economic considerations of the demographic changes underway. Economic support, it must be remembered, is an essential factor in the health status of elderly persons and is integrally related to their social support network. But many elderly persons enjoy years of good health-physical as well as mental - and their obvious potential to generate their own income, besides contributing in the economic development of their society needs early recognition. Indeed, activity-rates published for ESCWA countries have shown a considerable amount of economic activity among elderly persons, gauged as "activity rates". Unfortunately, the trend here, given the existing policies prevalent today, is for there to be a reduction in such activity rates among all countries in the region - despite the increase in actual number of elderly persons.

Work beyond official government retirement age is often an economic necessity, besides a motivating factor for an active life, although existing policies do not always recognize this. In some countries of the region, pension coverage is not complete, especially for those outside government or military employment. It is particularly true for woman, rural workers in some areas, and migrants, while in some countries inflation tends to play havoc with any formal pensions or lifetime savings.

Governments have obviously got their hands full in enhancing preparedness for the growing numbers of elderly members of their societies. While it may be difficult for many of the desired changes and improvements to take place initially, some groups would appear to be at higher risk and therefore require priority

concern, although this varies substantially from country to country:

- a) remote rural elderly persons.
  - among whom younger persons have emigrated to urban areas where formal services may be scarce, where economic support schemes may be most lacking.
- b) newly urbanized elderly persons
  - recently 'dislodged' from their lifetime habitat finding housing difficulties, encountering re-orientation difficulties and especially where economic means are lacking.
- c) elderly widows
  - having been spouse-dependent for a lifetime, lacking pension schemes, living increasingly longer with possibly insufficient means.
- d) newly disabled and their families.
  - where government support schemes, especially within the community through families, often lags behind real needs.

Our task during these 3 days of discussions appears relatively clear. Governments must be urged to give greater priority consideration to aspects of ageing within the developmental process of the country as a whole.

Policies must be devised to promote and support the activities of non-governmental organizations within this field.

Families are an especially important target group for governmental support if appropriate care is to be preserved. Community services will of necessity have to be developed further in each of the countries.



Active ageing must be facilitated by appropriate employment policies and an encouragement for participation in the work force. Active ageing also implies governments' continuing obligation to further education (including occupational) including basic literacy among older persons, as well as providing specific leisure facilities and incentives for travel among elders.

Health care services obviously need to keep pace with demographic changes. Thus primary health care facilities need be geared to an ageing client with staff having appropriate training. Rehabilitation facilities are particularly lagging behind and require updating.

For this, training of support staff is essential among all members of care teams in order to ensure the necessary interdisciplinary assessment and care. Prevention is particularly in need of emphasis to ensure the greatest quality of life among older citizens.

Above all, governments and community leaders have a role to play in influencing the attitudes and behaviour of members of society to their deserving seniors. This is an essential starting point for an overall adjustment to demographic change and its consequences.



