



# Population and Development Report Issue No. 9

Building Forward Better for Older Persons in the Arab Region

Executive summary



Shared Prosperity **Dignified Life**





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## **VISION**

ESCWA, an innovative catalyst for a stable, just and flourishing Arab region.

## **MISSION**

Committed to the 2030 Agenda, ESCWA's passionate team produces innovative knowledge, fosters regional consensus and delivers transformational policy advice. Together, we work for a sustainable future for all.



# Executive summary

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. While the number of older persons, aged 65 and above, in the Arab region increased by 16 million in the last 50 years, it is projected to increase by over 50 million in the next 30 years, reaching 71.5 million by 2050. Several Arab countries have already started the ageing transition and most countries will follow suit in the next 15 years.



The Arab region will on average take **36 years** to complete the ageing transition, defined as the share of **older persons** in the population doubling **from 7 to 14 per cent**.

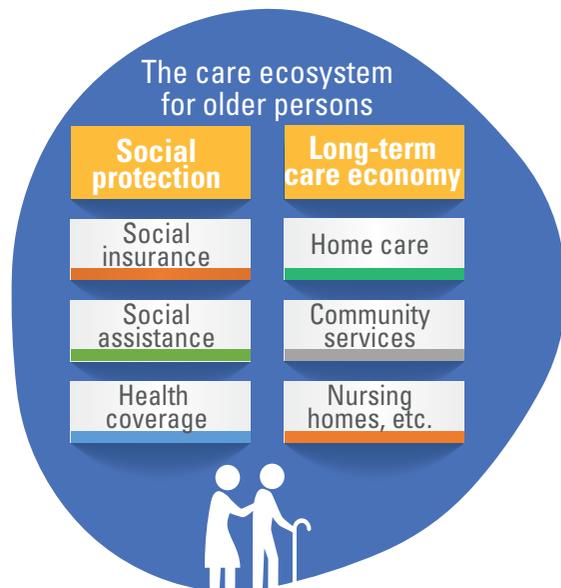
If prepared for, this demographic trend can provide the basis for transformative change and ageing with dignity. Otherwise, the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of older persons will be compounded, and future cohorts of older persons will be further marginalized.

Population ageing carries important economic and social implications. Adequate housing, quality and accessible healthcare and education are all important prerequisites for ageing with dignity, however significant gaps exist in Arab countries in these areas. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the existing vulnerabilities of older persons.




Two out of every three older persons are illiterate in six Arab countries.

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 care ecosystem is comprised of two distinct yet closely related elements: social protection and long-term care (LTC).



## Social protection

While the number of old-age pensioners covered by a selection of social insurance schemes in the region has increased, in 2020 only 38 per cent of older persons above retirement age in the region received a pension, less than half of the world average of 78 per cent. Although the proportion of older women receiving pensions is steadily increasing, the gender gap is significant, with male pension coverage rates being five times higher than female coverage rates in some Arab countries. Meanwhile, men in the Arab region do not consistently receive higher pensions than women.



Pension levels have increased, both nominally and at purchasing power parity, during the last two decades. Nevertheless, many pension schemes in the Arab region lack indexation mechanisms to ensure that pensions automatically increase to compensate for inflation. Instead, benefits are raised sporadically and with little predictability. Additionally, there is great inequality among pensioners, often with a considerable difference between pensions received by older and younger retirees.

As regards to health care, many countries have made considerable progress in extending legal health coverage to older persons, although in some Arab countries up to 70 per cent of older persons are still not covered by health insurance. Moreover, health care services may be inaccessible and/or of poor quality.

## Long-term care (LTC)

LTC services go beyond meeting medical needs to providing means for older persons to live autonomously, continue participating in social, economic, and public spheres and receive support as their care needs change over time. Families across the Arab region, which have traditionally served as the primary care providers for older persons, are finding it increasingly difficult to carry this role due to evolving socio-cultural norms and family structures as well as urbanization and migration, among other factors.



Despite the continuing reliance on families for care and support, formal LTC markets are emerging in the Arab region. With culturally sensitive and high-quality LTC services in place, the burden on families is shared and reduced, and significant labour power is released for the benefit of individuals and the broader economy. Furthermore, LTC provision is reliant on human interactions and relationships and is one of few sectors that will continue to rely on human labour despite technological advances. Given the nascent state of the LTC economy across the region, Arab countries will require additional funding to initiate, pilot and expand new LTC services and markets.

The experiences in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Arab Republic confirm that, while families remain the primary providers of LTC, formal LTC markets are beginning to take shape. The case studies also identified a strong preference among older persons for home care services over residential care, consistent with other research from the region.

## Building forward better

The report calls upon countries to seize the demographic window of opportunity and reflect on the recent lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the protection and empowerment of older persons. Arab governments are starting to make progress in this pursuit. Nonetheless, more

is needed. Any successful strategy or initiative will require careful matching of priorities with resources and capacity. Differences within and between countries should be carefully considered when building forward better. The four dimensions below provide the foundations for a holistic approach. Taken together, these recommendations will help Arab countries to build forward better for older persons.

### Data



Build comprehensive, integrated, and inclusive data systems that provide the necessary data to inform evidence-based policy making.

### Life cycle



Adopt a life-cycle approach to address needs of older persons today as well as taking proactive measures to address the anticipated needs of future cohorts of older persons.

### Social protection



Increase coverage, ensure adequacy, and strengthen sustainability of social protection systems that empower older persons to age with dignity.

### Long-term care



Develop responsive, diverse, and sustainable LTC services to ensure high-quality, personalised care and support for older persons.

For a more detailed look at policy recommendations, see the PDR policy brief series, Available at: <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/population-development-report-9-policy-brief>.





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The present report 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 care ecosystem is comprised of two distinct yet closely related elements: social protection and long-term care (LTC). This report sheds light on the status quo in the Arab region, characterized by weak social protection systems and underdeveloped long-term care systems. The COVID-19 pandemic has further heightened the vulnerability of older persons and revealed the limitations of the care ecosystem. To support member States, the report provides a one-of-a-kind roadmap to building forward better for older persons. It calls upon countries to seize the demographic window of opportunity and reflect on the recent lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the protection and empowerment of older persons.

