**Aging in the Arab region:**

**Realizing the potentials of the second demographic dividend**

# **Introduction:**

Rapidly falling fertility levels accompanied with declines in mortality levels and prolonged life expectancies are contributing to substantial changes in the age structures of many developing countries. As a starter, many countries will experience a youth bulge that if appropriately employed within a supportive and enabling policy environment, becomes a demographic dividend that contributes to the country’s economic growth. As the youth bulge enters their old age, developing countries are projected to encompass substantially large cohorts of older persons, which is commonly referred to a large greying generation. Many studies indicate that these large cohorts of older persons can constitute a second demographic dividend if countries appropriately prepare for their occurrence.

Concerns for the emergence of the older persons’ large cohorts soon have contributed to research efforts that attempt to identify the different options and scenarios for policy and strategic interventions in preparation for their emergence.

Research has two main directions:

The first is the social direction: This direction starts with the welfare model targeting the basic livelihood needs of the older population. At its early stages, it explored different dimensions of the older persons’ lives and recommend actions across separate silos. However, over the more recent decades, the human rights-based perspective of older persons’ wellbeing have gained substantial weight in the research and policy arena. This perspective was well articulated in many of the national, regional and international policy documents. It aims to secure the older population enjoyment of their full human rights in all their diversity and for the duty bearer to fulfill their commitment towards securing these rights. Enjoying full human rights in old age entails a general framework toward a comprehensive and inclusive approach to older persons’ wellbeing. This framework identified the main pillars that need to be addressed for older persons to enjoy their full lives and contribute effectively to their communities’ as well as country’s welfare. These pillars cover ten basic dimensions of older persons’ lives and activities including equality and non-discrimination, autonomy, freedom from violence, abuse and neglect, care and support for independent living, health and disability, access to justice, social protection and social security, work, education and life-long learning, and participation in society.

The second direction was the macroeconomic perspective, led by economists. Concerns for the greying generations and their impact on the country’s economic growth were extensively investigated utilizing the concept of the second demographic dividend. Researchers have embarked on putting different scenarios for the different economic trajectories in developing countries and needed policies to achieve the best economic performance under these projected changes in the age structure. Recognizing that in many developing countries, the first dividend might have not achieved its potentials of wealth and savings that are the base for the second demographic dividend as well as absence of strong institutional supports for older persons, many research efforts focused on identifying policy recommendations that can support achieving the full potential of these greying generations and the second demographic dividend while securing a sustained economic welfare for the whole country. A reading of these recommendations reveals their strong appreciation of the importance of the various dimensions identified under the social perspective to secure economic goals. They called for revisiting the policies and social interventions in discrimination, access to care and support, access health, access to justice, social protection and social security, work and work environment, education and life-long learning, and effective participation in society. It further called for an early initiation and revisions of these policies while adopting of life cycle approach through which policies can well prepare today’s young adults to enjoy secure, healthy and disability free, effective and fully participatory life in their greying age stages.

There is no doubt that these two directions of work pave the way for harnessing the potentials of the current and future greying generations. The right based perspective set the bases for the older population including PWDs to fully enjoy their human rights in the different aspects of life and to have access to the proper mechanisms to counteract any violations of them. Simultaneously, it holds duty bearers the full responsibility and full commitment towards meeting these rights. With this base in place, current and future generations of older persons will be comprehensively equipped with the needed assets to contribute effectively and efficiently in the second demographic dividend.

An important commonality in these two directions was their call for a comprehensive systematic information and evidence base. This evidence-base should not confine itself to the various issues of concerns for older persons, but it needs to also adopt a life cycle approach and provide a full picture of the different stages of individuals’ lives across these dimensions with the aim of serving the revision and initiation of the new policies for current and future older persons.

# **Harnessing the potentials of the Arab greying generations**

Like many developing countries, the Arab region is currently undergoing a rapid pace aging process. According to the United Nations projections (UN 2019)[[1]](#footnote-1), the share of older persons (60 years and older) will be doubled within the next 30 years. With a growth rate 3.8% per year (more than double the growth rate of the total population (1.7%), the share of older persons will increase from 7% in 2020 to 15% in 2050. This is translated in having around 101 million people in this age group. However, there is no doubt that different countries in the region will experience different pace of ageing. By 2050, only two countries; namely Sudan and Somalia are expected to have less than 10% of its population aged 60 years and older. On contrast, ten countries are expected to have 20% of its population aged 60 years and older.

These unprecedented large cohorts of older persons, emerging alongside significant social and economic changes as well as high levels of political challenges in our societies, put substantial pressure on both the societies as well as the families. Additionally, differences in the experience of the first demographic dividend in Arab countries are expected to have some implications on achieving the full potentials of their second demographic dividend which in return would require different policies to secure the welfare of their older persons as well as the whole society. Recognizing these substantial changes in the age structure in the Arab countries and the need not only to secure the wellbeing of those greying generations, but also achieving their full potentials toward the welfare of their countries, the league of the Arab States (Arab Council of Ministers of Social Affairs) and the United Nation Population Fund /Arab State Regional Office launched the Arab Older Population Strategy 2019-2029. The strategy aimed to support the implementation of policies that support healthy and equitable aging within the framework of the ICPD PoA and the SDG 2030 Agenda. It adopted a right based perspective in addressing older persons ‘issues. The strategy called to “secure an inclusive environment for our female and male older persons within which they enjoy their full social and health rights as well as non-discriminatory participation in the society.”

The strategy stressed some procedural objectives that can support the achievement of its main goal. These objectives correspond in many aspects with the main pillars for areas of interventions proposed by both the social right based perspective and macroeconomic perspective. These objectives included:

* Development of the social care and security systems that is adaptable to the new requirement of the rapidly growing older population.
* Enhancing the effectiveness of the social safety nets adopted in the Arab countries with particular emphasis on targeting vulnerable groups among older persons in both urban and rural areas.
* Enhancing the capacities of the health systems in the Arab countries to better serve the older persons with particular emphasis on preventive and curative care as well as their mental and psychological well-being .
* Supporting the role of the civil society in catering for the needs of older persons.
* Adapting the care systems for the emerging needs of older persons with emphasis on gender equity as well as supporting their capacities to secure older persons’ safety, prevention from violence and dignity.
* Revising the legislative frameworks within the Arab countries and adapting them to ongoing changes in the Arab countries and adherence to international conventions.

The strategy also highlighted the information gaps about the older persons in the Arab countries.

In June 2021, the League of the Arab States (Arab Council of Ministers of Social Affairs), the United Nation Population Funds /Arab States Regional Office (UNFPA/ASRO) and the Social Research Center of the American University in Cairo, held a regional webinar “Caring for our older population in the Arab countries: Policies and actions perspectives.” The main objective of the webinar was to offer critical engagement with the current efforts undertaken by many governmental and non-governmental organizations in the Arab countries towards the implementation of the Regional Arab Strategy for Older Population. The webinar was successful in demonstrating that concerns for the rapid aging process in the Arab countries are well articulated. Some countries are formulating their own older population strategy which is consistent with the main pillars of the regional Arab strategy, while others have initiated programs and interventions. The webinar concluded with a call for adopting a right-based perspective as well as a life cycle perspective in addressing the wellbeing and achieving the full potential of our older population. furthermore, the webinar called for improving the evidence base and finding a platform for interaction, share and learn for the different experiences.

# **Objective and theme**

Around the celebrations of the international day of older persons, the United Nation Population Funds /Arab States Regional Office (UNFPA/ASRO) with support from the Social Research Center of the American University in Cairo, and in collaboration with the league of the Arab States (Arab Council of Ministers of Social Affairs) and HelpAge is holding a second advocacy webinar. This second webinar capitalizes on the success of the first webinar by exploring the extent to which the Arab countries are adhering the broad frameworks for harnessing the potentials of their greying generations. The webinar will focus on discussing the following points:

* Positioning the Arab countries in relation to the international and regional aging framework set for harnessing the potentials of their greying generations
* Mainstreaming the human rights approach in addressing old population issues
* Highlighting aspects of human rights violation in the lives of Arab older persons including older people with disabilities
* Displaying tools for improving evidence base and incorporating a life cycle approach

These points respond to the three main conclusions of the first webinar, namely what are the frameworks guiding the policies and interventions in achieving the full potentials of our greying generations, how to mainstream human rights in these policies and how we can build an evidence base adopting a life cycle approach to guide these policies. In answering these questions, the webinar starts with an exploration of the general frameworks that guide the policies in the international arena to harness the potentials of these greying generations and presents some of the on the ground experiences in the Arab countries that adopted some of these policies and their successes. This is followed with an exploration of the right based approach on the currently implemented policies and the introduction of the needed tools to implement of this assessment (HelpAge International). Tools for assessing the right based Dignity and areas of its violations in old age is also discussed and explored to identify points of interventions that can prevent these violations in any shape. Recognizing the major shortcoming in the information base on older persons and the need to adopt a life cycle approach in securing these information bases, the Eastern Mediterranean initiative on aging (Emage) is presented as the first regional effort to address this shortcoming and currently implement in three Arab countries. The initiative adopts and adapts the panel Survey of Health and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) to the Middle Eastern countries. Finally, the webinar will offer an intellectual space for researchers and policy makers to exchange their views, activities, and policies in healthy aging and achieving the potentials of our greying generations through its webpage healthy aging of the SRC SDG \_health\_equity\_arab\_region platform. Official launching of the webpage will be carried out.

# **Organization of the webinar**

The webinar is organized in the following sessions

1. Opening ceremony (10 min)
2. Harnessing the potentials of our greying generations (SRC 15min)
3. Human rights- based approach: assessment and tools (HelpAge 15 min)
4. Older people profiles in five countries (UNFPA 5 mins)
5. Violence against older persons (UNFPA 10 min)
6. Emage Initiative (Emage 15 min)
7. Official launching of Healthy aging webpage (5 min)
8. Open general discussion (25 min)
9. Concluding remarks (5 min)

# **Target audience**

The webinar aims to involve participants from the following groups:

* National governments in the Arab countries in particular representatives of the ministries engaged in the health and social welfare of the older population.
* Representatives of UN organizations interested in issues of older persons.
* Representatives of the League of Arab States
* Help Age network in the Arab region.
* Representatives of nongovernmental organizations working with older persons at the national or international level.
* Academic and research institutes engaged in working with the older population and in guiding policy makers.
* Representatives from the private sector interested in older people issues.

To ensure high level and active participation, an open invitation will be extended to partners and carefully chosen targeted group of experts to share their experience related to the four topics of concern through a short intervention of 3 minutes with particular emphasis on presenting innovative experiences adopted in their countries. Selected interventions will be notified in advance. In addition, a public invitation will be widely disseminated using the SDG platform mailing list.

1. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). *World Population Prospects 2019, Online Edition. Rev. 1* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)