## Request by: United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva

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**Submission of UN ESCWA, Beirut** 

Opening Clause of ESCWA’s position on human rights of youth in the Arab region

In the Arab region, youth encompasses a broad group including children, young adolescents, youth and, even working-age adults. National definitions of youth widely vary among Member States and, may extend from as young as 13 years up to 32 years.

Whilst ESCWA reiterates its continued commitment towards achieving social and economic development of all youth, living in its region, regardless of their sex, race/ethnic background, status, religion, and, pledges to safeguard all their human rights as stipulated by international instruments, global and regional frameworks, and SDGs,

it is noted with concern that there is an urgent need for policy-makers, parents, educators, communities and all walks of society to acknowledge that discourse on the human rights of youth is indivisible and cannot be separated from achieving human development. Charter of the United Nations and Universal Declaration of Human Rights, along with other various marked milestones culminating in the endorsement of Human Rights Council Resolution 35/14 on youth and human rights, in its 35th Session on 22 June 2017, must be taken into full account and, respected when addressing youth issues, designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating youth programmers and policies as well as intervention measures. In addition, fulfillment of 2030 Agenda and SDGs will also seek to uphold the rights of youth in the Arab region within ESCWA mandate.

Main challenges that youth face today and which infringe their human rights: Exclusion, violence and wars

Introduction

In the Arab region, youth represent a critical and significantly large socio-demographic group whose safety and wellbeing will underpin sustainable development efforts and SDGs-related outcomes. From a demographic perspective, youth bulge is a highly pronounced characteristic of the region as nearly 60% of the its total population is under 30 years. Projections into 2030 and 2050 indicate that many countries, most of which are low-income and least developed, will still have significant proportions of their populations comprised of young men and young women living increasingly in urban settings and prone to vulnerability as a result of poverty and conflicts.

Human development of youth, a basic human right in itself, is questioned in the Arab region due to declining standards of health and education services and most notably high unemployment rates, the highest in the world. This grim situation resulting from decades of development deficits affects today nearly 72 million young men and young women in the Arab region, is not as a matter of fact the only threat; more than any time in its modern history, the region is inflicted with all sorts of conflicts and violence that rip apart societies, claim innocent lives of young people (whether civilians or recruited by force into military groups) , disrupt their learning journey, put them at immense life-threatening risks, and throw many into unknown and unsafe routes of irregular migration and non-abating displacement perils.

1. From exclusion into participation (policies, programmes and good practices)

At policy level, youth participation in decision-making has been gaining currency in the Arab region among many Governments, civil society and youth themselves. Few Governments in the region have been proactive in engaging young people in the consultation aspect of policy-making to solicit informed insights from young people themselves through national surveys.

In this context, ESCWA implemented, between 2015 and 2017, an inter-regional DA project (led by ESCAP and in partnership with ECA and ESCWA) to enhance the participation of youth in decision-making processes in 3 countries: Jordan, Kuwait and Tunisia. Throughout the project’s phases, regional consultations and national workshops, ESCWA has brought together young people, youth-led and youth-focused NGOs and official representatives from relevant ministries and departments to explore together how youth can have more voice and impact in public life and policies that directly affect them. A full-fledged training programme was developed and rolled out in the participating countries, a substantial Manual on youth participation in public life and decision-making in the Arab region was designed in collaboration with youth, and also a broad range of knowledge products were prepared and compiled into an inter-regional online toolbox[[1]](#footnote-1), including a policy brief on youth and SDGs, with a special focus on SDG-16.

Although ESCWA recognizes such positive development as an encouraging practice and step in the right direction, it further seeks to identify and encourage the creation of sustainable channels for participation through fostering trust building between young people and the State and, advocate for full respect of young people’s human rights who constantly demand that their space is more widened and want more autonomy.

1. Ending all form of violence against youth, including discrimination

The popular uprisings in many countries across the region illustrated the extent to which young people are excluded from the benefits of development and economic growth, but they had also revealed blatant violations and abuses of human rights of young people in public, who want to enjoy freedom of expression and information, and freedom of peaceful assembly and association, all of which are enshrined in the UN Charter and other instruments, but are not still enjoyed by youth in most countries in the region, should they want to express their voice in public. Social media has become their refuge and virtual means of empowerment. Yet, despite this outlet, there are some prevailing legislations on freedom of expression that may punish young people for using social media to express their opinion. The freedom of association and youth rights to establish such entities, are widely curtailed in the region.

Moreover, the gender-based violence and sexual abuses that viciously targeted and harmed many young women, and their families, as they exercised their right to peacefully demonstrate in the public spheres was an eye opener to a dark side of violence, yet only very few Governments reacted promptly by enacting legislation to penalize sexual harassment in public. The region is also witnessing an increasing pattern of enshrining the rights of women in constitutions and recognize gender equality in all areas of life as a fundamental pillar.

Many girls and young women in the Arab region are still discriminated against, whether in legal codes (unequal legal status before law, deprivation of mothers’ from passing on their nationalities to their children, freedom of movement, inheritance, and various discriminatory provisions in family laws). Practice of FGMs remain common in some Arab countries, so are forced and early marriages, and in many criminal codes, rapists can still get away with their crimes if they marry the victims, although some countries have recently enacted legislation to end impunity.

c. Issues of concern: youth in conflicts

**The shadow of wars and conflicts cast perhaps the principle concern with regard to grave human rights violations of young people in the Arab region that ESCWA particularly draws attention to and, hence emphasizes the urgent need to protect and safeguard the rights of all youth at high risk, living in or are affected by conflict, terror, occupation and humanitarian crisis situations. Wartime and terror threatens right to life itself and, survival becomes a daily preoccupying concern. Youth had lost their lives, been injured and displaced. Others were recruited into military forces, and many faced arbitrary detention, torture and forced disappearance. Incidents of extreme violence, such as public executions, rape and slavery, all amounting to war crimes or crimes against humanity were observed with deep concern in many parts of the region where conflicts and terror prevailed. There are also many young people who are stateless, ipso facto wars, (amongst other reasons) and become immediately prey to both exploitation and deprivation.**

d. Proposed measures that can be taken at the International level to facilitate/support the realization of young people’s human rights

1. At policy level: Encourage and foster global debate on the evolution of a **Convention on Rights of Young People**;
2. Enhance the capacity of youth to engage with **international human rights mechanisms** and build their knowledge and skills in this area.
3. Encourage wide dissemination of **UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (illustrated version)** in public and private institutions (schools and universities) and other spaces in the Arab region that deal with youth or youth related issues and, make available translated versions of the illustrated Declaration into Arabic.
4. Integrate international human rights standards in school and university **curricula**.

1. http://yptoolbox.unescapsdd.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)