

# UN report on Middle East catalogues widening inequality

Robert Stevens  
12 September 2002

The United Nations Development Programme has issued its annual Human Development Reports which survey the various regions of the planet. For the first time, the 2002 study includes a report on the Arab states, covering a total of 22 countries. With a population of 280 million, stretching from the Maghreb to the Gulf, the region encompasses 5 percent of the world's population.

The foreword to the report seeks to present a positive view of the findings. It asserts that overall the "Arab states have made substantial progress in human development over the past three decades. Life expectancy has increased by about 15 years; mortality rates for children under five years of age have fallen by about two-thirds; adult literacy has almost doubled—and women's literacy has trebled—reflecting very large increases in gross educational enrolments, including those of girls. Daily caloric intake and access to safe water are higher, and the incidence of dire poverty is lower than in any other developing region."

Reading the document, however, makes for a rather different interpretation. First, it is striking that in a region with so much oil wealth there exists widespread poverty, with tens of millions lacking access to basic health facilities, education, housing and secure employment.

The report on conditions in Iraq, moreover, makes chilling reading. It highlights the criminal and barbarous character of the West's intervention, both militarily and economically, against this small, impoverished country—much of which has been carried out under UN auspices.

Social inequality is increasing within the Arab countries. The UN report illustrates that the mass of people have not benefited from the vast oil wealth generated over decades by many of the Middle Eastern states. By 1998, the real income of an Arab citizen, adjusted for purchasing power parity, had fallen on average to 13.9 percent of an OECD citizen.

The UN reports, "While the Arab countries have the lowest level of dire poverty in the world, it remains the case that one out of every five people lives on less than \$2 per day, according to World Bank estimates for the Middle East and North Africa." Elsewhere the report notes that a further 2.5 percent of the population are living on or below the \$1 per day income benchmark for "dire poverty".

Using figures collated on a number of countries in the region for the period between 1970 and 2000, the report is able to statistically verify the growth of inequality. The report states: "In Jordan, the share of the poorest 20 percent decreased from 7.3 percent in 1986/1987 to 6 percent in 1992. In Iraq, the value of the Gini coefficient [the coefficient ranges from 0 to 1, 0 representing perfect equality and 1 total inequality] increased from 0.370 in 1993 to 0.508 in 1998

implying that the gap between the higher and the lower income group had widened. The rural-urban divide is exemplified by Yemen, where the study shows that, in 1992, rural household income was less than two thirds (64 per cent) of that of urban residents."

In contrast, in Egypt between 1980 and 1981 and between 1990 and 1991, the "income share of the richest rose from 27 percent to 28 percent in urban areas and from 21 percent to 28 percent in rural areas".

The Gulf States are particularly dependent on a large immigrant population as a cheap labour workforce. Excluded from citizenship, and denied formal democratic rights, they are often not included in official census data and surveys, yet are the most affected by poverty and lack of essential services.

The number of foreign workers in the six Gulf States increased fivefold, from 1.1 million in 1970 to 5.2 million in 1990. They now constitute over two-thirds of the total population.

In Saudi Arabia 35 percent of the population are immigrant workers. Expatriate workers account for 61 percent of the total workforce of Oman, 83 percent in Kuwait and 91 percent in the United Arab Emirates. In the UAE migrant workers are prohibited from bringing their family members into the country with them unless they earn at least 3,000 Dirhams a month (US\$816), but most of these workers are employed in menial, low paid jobs and struggle to earn a third of that amount. The UAE and some other Arab countries have also passed legislation barring immigrants from owning any property, no matter how long they have lived in the country.

The UN report warns that "persistent inequality, of income or of capabilities and opportunities, inevitably places strains on social cohesion in the long run."

However, the report takes as given the patently undemocratic and repressive setup that exists in much of the Middle East, based on religious obscurantism and enforced by feudal-type ruling dynasties, which in turn are largely kept in power through Western patronage.

Unemployment throughout the Middle East is also among the highest in the developing world according to the survey and stands at about 15 percent across Arab countries. This equates to an unemployed army of around 20 million people and it is estimated that these numbers are swelling each year as a further 6 million people enter the labour market.

The report also warns of indications that even greater levels of joblessness are impending. "Assuming that new labour-market entrants create a modest annual increase in the labour force of 2-3 percent a year, 50 million new jobs will be needed by 2010 ... if unemployment is to be reduced to a manageable level by the year 2010, a minimum of five million jobs will have to be created every

year.”

The figures on illiteracy are quite staggering. About 65 million adult Arabs are illiterate, two-thirds of them women. Illiteracy rates in the Middle East are much higher than other poorer countries around the world and this trend is increasing. According to the document, “Ten million children between six and 15 years of age are currently out of school; if current trends persist, this number will increase by 40 percent by 2015.”

The overall adult literacy rate in the region is 62 percent compared to a global average of 79 percent. In terms of combined school enrolment in basic education, the average rate in the Middle East of 60 percent is lower than the global average of 64 percent. Average years of schooling, 5.2 years, are also lower than the global average of 6.7 years.

The number of children enrolling in pre-school education actually fell in the period from 1980 (4.8 percent) to 1995 (4 percent). The report also cites the fact that limited access to education continues for many into secondary and tertiary education. During the 1990s enrolment increased in secondary and tertiary education by 54 percent and 13 percent respectively. This compares with 106 percent and 60 percent respectively in the industrialised west. On the basis of current trends the Middle East is not expected to match the enrolment figures of the latter for at least 30 years.

Education expenditure per capita on education has steadily decline over the past 15 years. In 1980 Arab countries’ education expenditure per capita “dropped from 20 percent of that in industrialised countries in 1980 to 10 percent in the mid-1990s”.

The document identifies this decline in public spending on education as a byproduct of strategic changes in the economy and “the macroeconomic difficulties in which many Arab countries found themselves after the mid-1970s, together with the ensuing structural adjustment programmes, which put substantial pressure on spending, including rates of growth of education expenditure.”

Access to the information technology sector and the Internet in particular is very low. The number of Internet hosts per 1,000 people is lower in the region than in any other area of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa. Although 5 percent of the world’s population live in the Middle East, the region accounts for just 0.5 percent of Internet users. A growing factor in the limited access to the Internet is the restrictions placed upon it by the ruling regimes in the region. In Bahrain, for example, the Bahrain Telecommunications Company has a state monopoly on Internet access and there have been protests against its censorship of the Internet in recent months.

Health spending in the majority of Arab states is between 3 percent and 4.5 percent of GDP, lower than what the UN classifies as a “middle-income-country” average of 5.7 percent. Per capita health expenditure in some states is as low as \$11, while the public share of total health expenditure ranges from as low as 21 percent to as high as 87 percent in different states.

The populations in most Arab countries generally live longer than the world average life expectancy of 67 years. The report reveals, however, that disease and disability reduce life expectancy by between 5 and 11 years depending on economic and social circumstances and geographic location. There is also a high level of maternal mortality ratios resulting in Arab women having lower life expectancy than the world average.

The UN report cites a statistical survey showing that nearly one in five people over the age of 15 suffers from or experiences a long-standing illness or disability. Female long-standing illness exceeds

that of males by more than 6 percent and can be up to 8.5 percent higher, according to the data.

HIV is also a serious health problem in the region, with even conservative estimates citing that more than 400,000 people in the Eastern Mediterranean are thought to be carrying the virus.

The report cites the stunted growth of children as a growing phenomenon in the Middle East. In some states the number of children growing up stunted form a higher percentage than those attaining normal height. This is particularly the case in populations that have experienced extreme poverty and war over an extended period, including Yemen, Iraq and Sudan.

Anthropometry measures show that stunted growth among children is as high as 52 percent in Yemen, 44 percent in Mauritania, with rates in Comoros and Iraq above 30 percent. In Egypt, Kuwait, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic and the UAE, levels of stunted growth are recorded at levels of between 15 and 25 percent.

Among the greatest human tragedies in the region is the plight of children and youth in Iraq. As a result of the imperialist war on that country in 1991 and the ongoing crippling economic sanctions, the younger generation has been and continues to be systematically brutalised.

Under the heading, “Children in Iraq: human development under siege”, the report states, “The situation throughout Iraq remains one in which the child’s right to survival and health care as decreed by the Convention on Rights for the Child remains subject to overwhelming risks to life and health generated by the economic hardship.”

Death, disease and severe malnutrition among children are now commonplace in Iraq. The report gives a harrowing breakdown of this catastrophe. “The increase in mortality reported in public hospitals for children under five years of age (an excess of some 40,000 deaths yearly compared with 1989) is mainly due to diarrhoea, pneumonia and malnutrition. In those over five years of age, the increase (an excess of some 50,000 deaths yearly compared with 1989) is associated with heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, cancer, liver or kidney diseases.”

Malnutrition in Iraq “was not a public health problem in Iraq prior to the embargo,” says the report. “Its extent became apparent during 1991 and the prevalence has increased greatly since then: 18 percent in 1991 to 31 percent in 1996 of children under five with chronic malnutrition (stunting); nine percent to 26 percent with underweight malnutrition; three percent to 11 percent with wasting (acute malnutrition), an increase of over 200 percent. By 1997, it was estimated about one million children under five were chronically malnourished”.

The study continues, “In 1989, the Iraqi Ministry of Health spent more than US\$500 million for drugs and supplies; the budget is now reduced by 90-95 percent ... the health system is affected by lack of even basic hospital and health centre equipment and supplies for medical, surgical and diagnostic services.”

*The report can be found at:*  
<http://www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr/english.html>



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**