

We need better data to protect older populations amid COVID-19 pandemic

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A week ago, a media outlet approached my office for an interview to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on some of the most vulnerable among most populations, older persons with pre-existing health conditions. Upon reviewing the interview questions with the team, we came to realize the challenging task at hand. There was not enough data available to provide a full and realistic picture, which could reflect the realities of our elders around the world, and more specifically, the Arab world.

General statistics are available; however, we haven't done our due diligence when it comes to data that prioritizes the needs and vulnerability of older persons. The world hasn't reached a unanimous definition of older persons, due to different cultural norms.

I pondered the thought for a week, and I started to question how governments plan and prioritize the delivery of health services during a crisis of this magnitude. It is not easy making such decisions when you have many vulnerable segments in societies, girls, women, pregnant women, persons with disabilities and migrants. However, I will focus on older persons since it was the true inspiration of this quest, and the numbers tell a revealing story.

We know that Arab populations are getting older. Most Arab countries will reach the peak of their demographic dividend before 2030, which will have serious implications for the labor markets, pension requirements, social security systems, and health and social care costs.

Over the past few decades, trends of age structure in the Arab region were driven by a combination of increasing life expectancy and declining fertility rates. The total population in the region is expected to nearly double and a half by 2050, raising the number of older people from 281 million people in 2000 to a staggering 659 million.

UNFPA, the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency, predicts that the percentage of people aged 65 and above in Arab countries will jump from 6 percent in 2000 to over 15 percent in the next 30 years, and a 60 percent increase from 2015 to 2050.

The trend is clear, and cannot be reversed in the short term. And the way forward is to view population aging as an opportunity for Arab countries to realize the value of older persons as societal capital and a resource for their families, communities and the economy. A serious challenge is the scarcity of available data for the older age group, which is required to support evidence, based social policies and actions.

Older people can go a long way toward contributing to the socio-economic development of the Arab region. That's why we need to safeguard them – especially after the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In normal circumstances, older persons are highly vulnerable, and they are more vulnerable during conflict or in humanitarian contexts, such as the ones that affect many Arab countries. Older persons often lack access to social support networks or income opportunities, and are subject to discrimination and abuse.

Older women, in particular, are at high risk of discrimination, social exclusion and denial of the right to inherit property. Women also tend to live longer than men, and may experience deepening poverty as they age.

COVID-19 has accentuated the vulnerability of older persons in Arab countries. Aging is commonly associated with morbidities such as hypertension, cardiovascular diseases and diabetes, making older people more susceptible to hospitalization and death.

Data is still limited on the number of cases by age and sex in the Arab region, but recent World Health Organization figures for Egypt and Iraq suggest that about two-thirds of reported COVID-19 cases are among adults aged 20-59, almost one in four cases (24 percent) in those aged 60 and above, and just 9 percent in young people age 19 and below. In resource-poor settings, limited health care facilities and the lack of ventilators and oxygen supply can significantly add to death rates among older persons with the disease.

A common challenge here is data gaps. To really understand which groups are most vulnerable to COVID-19, we need additional and more disaggregated data and information to compare numbers by employed vs. unemployed or by household type (living alone, couples without children, living with extended family).

UNFPA Arab States Regional Office and The League of Arab States, issued an advocacy brief “Ageing and COVID-19 in the Arab region: Leaving no one behind” to help understand more about COVID-19's and older people. The brief noted, “In resource-poor settings, limited health care facilities and the lack of ventilators and oxygen supply can significantly add to death rates among older persons with COVID-19.” It also adds that aging is commonly associated with morbidities such as hypertension and diabetes, making older people more susceptible to hospitalization and death

More disaggregated data can tell us more about who is most in need of better access to social protection and to mobile and virtual (health, education and financial) services during enforced physical distancing and/or isolation.

At the regional level, UNFPA is supporting policy dialogue, capacity building, data collection, research and advocacy to make sure older people are part of national country plans. UNFPA facilitates the development of evidence-based policies to ensure that older people's issues are addressed.

In this regard, a major achievement is the Arab League's support to the 2020-2029 Regional Ageing Strategy. Endorsed in 2018 by The Council of Ministers of Health and Social Affairs, the strategy is built around five main themes.

- The status of older persons and their social and living conditions.
 - Health conditions of older persons.
 - Social, economic and cultural participation of older persons.
 - Older persons living amid war and conflict.
 - The role of the media in improving the image of older persons and raising awareness about their issues.
- The approval of the regional strategy is a good first step, but not enough. UNFPA is seeking the support of governments to put in place national plans to implement the strategy. Let's protect the rights of older persons, and truly leave no one behind.

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