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Disability and Sustainable Development Goal 11 in the Arab Region

Today, an estimated 55 per cent of the world's population lives in cities. The number of urban residents worldwide is expected to grow by 2.5 billion to reach almost 7 billion by 2050.¹ Cities shape the way people move and interact, serving as facilitators for economic growth, social cohesion and environmental progress.

The dynamic structure of a city can promote or hinder the wellbeing of its inhabitants, and the urban population is a decisive determinant of a city's health. The healthiest cities are those where the urban setting and resident community assume symbiotic roles to achieve an inclusive and sustainable environment. Active participation, intersectoral cooperation and societal equality all contribute to an integrated social space, which is the ultimate incubator for sustainable development.²

Home to some of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, the Arab region has a rich urban history dating back thousands of years. It is particularly urbanized when compared with the rest of the world: by 2020, an estimated 74 per cent of the population in Arab countries will live in cities; while in Qatar and Kuwait the proportion is expected to be as high as 99 per cent and 100 per cent, respectively.³





“Right to the city” and the Sustainable Development Goals

In recent decades, conflict and crises in the Arab region have forced millions to flee their homes, resulting in a large population of displaced persons. The ability of urban centres to manage unprecedented levels of population growth is critical to the development of a healthy public sphere, and varies widely across the world.

Many Arab cities have struggled to handle the negative effects of rapid urbanization, including overburdened infrastructure, insufficient housing and increased air pollution. Vulnerable groups, such as women, children, elderly persons and persons with disabilities, are often unable to integrate into the formal economy and public sphere, which limits their ability to realize their “right to the city”.

The concept of the “right to the city” first advanced by French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, highlights the city as a democratic and pluralist space where all inhabitants enjoy equal rights, opportunities and provisions.⁴ It is described in the New Urban Agenda as a “vision of cities for all, referring to the equal use and enjoyment of cities and human settlements, seeking to promote inclusivity and ensure that all inhabitants, of present and future generations,

without discrimination of any kind, are able to inhabit and produce just, safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, resilient and sustainable cities and human settlements to foster prosperity and quality of life for all.” The vision further delineates the responsibility of Governments to ensure basic provisions, namely adequate, non-discriminatory housing; universal access to quality sanitation; and equal access to public goods and quality services, such as health, education and infrastructure.⁵ The right to the city is critical because it concerns marginalized populations, who are both underrepresented in local decision-making bodies and underserved by public services and utilities, such as persons with disabilities who face physical, social and psychological obstacles to public participation.

Adopted in 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” intended to further human progress and development in social, economic and environmental spheres, facilitating the transition to an inclusive and vibrant future. Consisting of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, the 2030 Agenda addresses issues critical to urban centres, including education, environment, housing, poverty, energy, human rights and health. SDG 11 aims to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”.



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Within SDG 11, targets 11.2 and 11.7 are specifically intended to address the issues of urban accessibility for vulnerable populations. Target 11.2 focuses on providing “safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons”, while target 11.7 aims to “provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities”. Those targets aim to enhance social cohesion and secure equal opportunity for all inhabitants, allowing them to realize their full human potential by making two critical elements of the public sphere, transportation and communal spaces, safe and accessible.

Transportation and mobility

Democratic ownership of a city is realized when all its inhabitants can exercise their right to freely access public spaces, including parks, streets, sidewalks and government buildings. In the Arab region, persons with disabilities often face societal stigma, isolation or institutionalization, hindering their ability to effectively interact with the urban environment. Accessibility barriers for persons with disabilities in public spaces and transportation systems can be either physical (stair access, high curbs and narrow doorways) or intangible (ostracization, harassment and stigmatization). Lack of accommodation and accessibility augments the operational limitations of persons with health conditions: according to the bio-psycho-social model, disability is a result of the societal and environmental elements that hinder an individual (with a health condition) from interacting fully with his or her surroundings.⁶ In that sense, two people with the same medical condition could have vastly different capabilities depending on their environments, making the city an active determinant of an individual’s ability to participate fully in society.

Several Arab cities have made impressive strides towards urban inclusivity. The “My Community... A City for Everyone” initiative was launched in



Dubai in 2013 to make the emirate more inclusive and completely accessible to persons with disabilities by 2020.⁷ Launched by Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Crown Prince of Dubai, the initiative focuses on improving physical accessibility and on raising awareness of disability to alleviate societal stigma by promoting equal opportunities, maintaining social cohesion, building social capital and eliminating social exclusion. The campaign is carried out in conjunction with the Dubai Disability Strategy 2020, launched in 2015 to provide equal rights and services to persons with disabilities by addressing disability through the five main pillars of education, health care, employment, social protection and universal accessibility.⁸

One of the most visible tenants of the initiative is the transformation of transport methods to accommodate persons with disabilities.⁹ The Dubai Road and Transport Authority (RTA) is a regional pioneer in that regard, outfitting metros, public buses, taxis, marine transport and roads to fit the needs of persons with disabilities. Metro facilities include wheelchair-accessible ticket booths, lifts and special handrails, Braille and tactile guiding paths, audio-visual cautionary signs and designated parking near main station entrances for persons with disabilities, while marine transport includes wheelchair-designated areas and trained crew assistance.¹⁰ RTA trains its employees to provide



better services to persons with disabilities; for example, in 2016, it had more than a dozen staff members specializing in sign language.¹¹

Spatial, social and economic inclusion are all critical to building sustainable urban environments, which requires providing affordable access to critical infrastructure such as water, housing, electricity and transportation, in addition to giving all inhabitants equal rights and opportunities to participate in economic growth. The level of mobility and autonomy of persons with disabilities in cities is directly linked to the inclusivity of their surroundings. Features such as ramps, accessible transportation and audible pedestrian signals can significantly alleviate the level of disability of an individual by eliminating common environmental barriers. For persons with disabilities, mobility can be an equalizer, allowing autonomous access to health care, jobs, schools, leisure and markets.¹²

Facing already overburdened infrastructure, many Governments in the Arab region have not been able to prioritize transportation inclusivity in line with target 11.2 because of capacity or budget limitations. In a 2016 study, the Middle East ranked fifth of eight regions worldwide in the sustainability of urban public transportation.¹³ Researchers looked at environmental, social, economic and system effectiveness indicators in seven Middle Eastern

cities¹⁴ and found that, compared with other regions, they were especially lacking in the social and environmental realms.¹⁵ The main sub-indicators used to measure the social sustainability of public transportation were system accessibility, average user trip distance and affordability, all of which can disproportionately affect persons with disabilities, many of whom struggle with mobility and disability-related financial burdens.¹⁶ A study by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and the Ministry of Social Affairs found that 76.4 per cent of Palestinians with disabilities did not use public transportation because of a lack of accommodating facilities, while a survey by the Moroccan Ministry of Family, Solidarity, Equality and Social Development revealed that 74.3 per cent of Moroccans with disabilities were either unable to access public transport or found difficulty in accessing it.¹⁷ In the Gaza Strip, the charity Interpal is working to counter those issues by mobilizing a fleet of 10 wheelchair-accessible vehicles that transport persons with mobility disabilities to school, work and hospital on a pay-as-you-can basis.¹⁸

While the Arab megacity of Cairo, the largest urban centre in the region, has made significant strides towards improving urban infrastructure in recent years, accessibility to public spaces and transport requires further development.¹⁹ The Cairo metro, opened in 1987, has step gaps between the carriages and the platform that



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hinder persons with wheelchairs, and many buses lack wheelchair ramps.²⁰ Some of the most popular sites in Egypt, including Luxor, Aswan, the inside of the pyramids and Muizz Street, are inaccessible to persons in wheelchairs, and pavements and public buildings are generally difficult to navigate without assistance.²¹ However, inclusivity initiatives in the private and non-governmental sectors have been increasing in number. For example, in 2017, the Helm Foundation, an Egyptian non-governmental organization, launched an awareness campaign to highlight accessibility issues and raise money to make the area around Cairo University more disability-friendly. The campaign also addresses the intangible side of accessibility, such as stigma and a lack of public dialogue, which can be as prohibitive to an inclusive environment as physical barriers.²²

The Moroccan Government has taken steps to improve physical inclusivity around the country. In 2017, 17.5 kilometres of boulevards in Marrakech were modified to make them accessible to persons with limited mobility, as were two public buildings and five public spaces.²³ Several other Moroccan cities have incorporated accessibility into their future infrastructure and transportation programmes, while others have identified their accessibility needs to potentially follow the example of Marrakech.

Green and public spaces

Green spaces in urban areas offer health benefits by reducing the ambient air temperature and improving air quality. Natural landscaping offers additional benefits to persons with disabilities. For example, trees can serve as directional cues to persons with visual impairments, and green spaces between the pavement and street can act as buffer zones for visually impaired pedestrians. Similarly, several studies have demonstrated that exposure to green spaces has mental health benefits for persons with dementia and children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).²⁴ Green spaces also help alleviate both individual stress and environmental pollution, two problems that affect persons with disabilities in particular.²⁵

Nonetheless, public spaces can facilitate interaction only if they are accessible. There are few public spaces in the Arab world, especially green areas and parks, contributing to high levels of spatial inequality. According to UN Habitat, public spaces in 2016 constituted a mere 2 per cent of Middle Eastern cities, compared with an average of 12 per cent in Europe.²⁶ This can be attributed partly to a lack of urban planning in the face of rapid urbanization, which has seen the growth of informal human settlements on the outskirts of cities, often unserviced by public infrastructure. In other areas, private development has encroached on public spaces, with officials prioritizing the monetary capitalization of land value over potential social and environmental benefits.

In the Arab region, particularly in the Arabian Peninsula, green spaces are expensive and resource-demanding. Traditional grassy green spaces require critical water resources in what is the most water scarce region in the world.²⁷ A study of 12 zones in the Greater Doha area of Qatar found that only two fulfilled the researchers' public park standard of 8 square metres of green space per 1,000 inhabitants, short of the World Health Organization's relatively low standard of 9 square metres per 1,000 inhabitants.²⁸

The 2016 study also found that Doha's green spaces were primarily concentrated in the higher-end seaside and central business districts, highlighting the common issue of spatial inequality in urban greenery.



Long distances between green spaces and residential areas are especially challenging for persons with disabilities, who often have limited mobility. Spatial inequality is being combated in some cities with accessibility standards, which delineate maximum travel distances between dwellings and public green spaces; however, retroactive greenification is especially challenging in cities struggling with a crowded and unplanned urban landscape.²⁹ An example of positive greenification can be found in Ramallah, whose municipal government aims to build a safe park in each neighbourhood, in cooperation with private and non-governmental partners.³⁰ An early success in the project was the construction of Al Bayyara, a park built on previously barren and trash-laden land in the densely populated neighbourhood of Ein Munjid.³¹ Similarly, the Garden of Nations was constructed in Al Masyoun, Ramallah, providing a public green space that includes outdoor art pieces from partnering countries.³² Incorporated into the 2,200 square metre park is a hill made by planting grass over a pile of unused debris, exemplifying ingenuity in recycling resources while removing potential hazards from public areas.³³

Intersecting accessibility

Both location and gender are compounding factors of disability in the Arab region, as women and

persons in rural areas often have more limited access to resources and services than those living in urban centres.³⁴ Armed conflict and war in the Arab region have simultaneously stalled cities' efforts to become more inclusive and augmented the prevalence of disability, because of deteriorating health-care quality and increased conflict-related injuries. According to an Iraqi veteran, in the 1980s and 1990s, some neighbourhoods in Baghdad were being outfitted with ramps to accommodate persons disabled in the Iran-Iraq war.³⁵ Much of that progress was destroyed after 2003, and universal accessibility is not currently prioritized by the Government. Once renowned for its greenery, Baghdad has fewer public spaces than it did before the war, and those which remain are often perceived as not being fully inclusive as they are sometimes delineated along sectarian or political divides.³⁶ Persons with disabilities are at a particular disadvantage in such situations, since Governments facing strong pressure to address social rehabilitation and urban reconstruction might be slow to address the needs of persons with disabilities and other vulnerable segments of society.

Adhering to the targets of SDG 11 will be crucial in the coming decades, as Arab countries continue to face high rates of urbanization. It is therefore imperative that Governments outline fully inclusive sustainable urban strategies, with an emphasis on including social groups that have previously been sidelined. The implementation of targets 11.2 and 11.7 will not only be beneficial for vulnerable populations, including persons with disabilities, but also for society as a whole. In an inclusive and navigable environment, persons with disabilities can contribute their full potential, thereby furthering national progress and development.

Good practices and recommendations

Several Arab countries have made significant strides to improve the inclusivity of persons with disabilities in urban spaces in the region, in line with SDG 11. Arab cities can look to successful initiatives within the region for ideas of how to become more inclusive, including the following:

1. Utilize civil society when government capacity is limited: invest in social organizations that



can use resources more efficiently to address specific targets. Inclusionary measures should target persons without disabilities in awareness campaigns about persons with disabilities, which can help alleviate stigma and promote a popular consciousness of acceptance and inclusion. In Egypt, the non-profit organization Helm, in partnership with the Vodafone Egypt Foundation, has worked to improve accessibility for persons with limited mobility in the country. Under the Ramp Project, Helm has installed international standard-compliant ramps in over 100 facilities, simultaneously raising awareness about the challenges persons with limited mobility face on a daily basis.³⁷

2. Be proactive: legislate accessibility standards for all new buildings and transport methods to avoid having to retroactively outfit them later. In 2017, four Moroccan cities (Rabat, Tangier, Oujda and Casablanca) added accessibility standards for persons with limited mobility into their plans for future urban transport infrastructure projects.³⁸ Plans to improve accessibility in streets, pavements, public buildings and public transport were recently delineated in Jordanian Law No. 20 of 2017.³⁹ The plans include implementing accessibility standards on all public roads and buildings, installing tools that alert persons with visual impairments of road marks and potentially hazardous sites, and training traffic police and employees in the public transportation sector on how to communicate effectively with persons with disabilities, all to be completed within five years.
3. Utilize popular feedback: disability service counters, such as those managed by the Dubai Road and Transport Authority, can help prioritize efforts that are most important to the public by providing easy and accessible methods for persons with disabilities to communicate with public service providers. Similarly, Accessible Qatar, a website and smart phone application, enables persons with disabilities in Qatar to check the level of accessibility of various public and touristic locations, utilizing user-submitted ratings and reviews.⁴⁰ Input from persons with disabilities

is imperative to making sure efforts are as beneficial and efficient as possible.

4. Ensure balance: appreciate environmental limitations and consider the provision of green spaces with realistic conditions, while recognizing the importance of green spaces to fostering inclusion and mental and physical health. Minimum spatial and accessibility requirements for green or natural spaces per urban inhabitant can encourage the incorporation of parks into the design of new neighbourhoods and the rebuilding of those destroyed by conflict. Distance standards to such areas would promote spatial equality, and encourage the inclusion of persons with mobility challenges.⁴¹ Al Legtaifiya Park in Doha is an example of an inclusive public space: the park, built in 2017, has wheelchair-accessible play equipment that allows children of all levels of mobility to play together.⁴²

Conclusion

The right to the city is defined as “more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city... the freedom to make and remake our cities.”⁴³ SDG 11 aims to make cities hubs for innovation, cooperation and economic and social progress for all residents, regardless of age, nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion or ability. In an age of unprecedented urbanization, it is imperative that nations work proactively to build urban centres that are sustainable and inclusive of all members of society. Arab countries face regional instability, climate-related stressors and above-average rates of urbanization, all of which place a burden on infrastructure and public resources. Consequently, ESCWA member States must prioritize urban accessibility to all persons, particularly those in vulnerable positions, so that everyone can contribute to society at their full capacity. Targets 11.2 and 11.7 are instrumental to removing the physical, environmental and societal barriers that hinder the full public participation of persons with disabilities, given that safe, accessible and affordable transport and public spaces are critical to the development and maintenance of sustainable cities.



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