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Measuring Urban Poverty in the Arab Region: Localizing Global and National strategies

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Urban Poverty in the New Sustainable and Urban Development Agendas



The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015.¹ It is a plan of action focusing on people, the planet and prosperity, as well as sustained peace and global partnerships. It contains a declaration by heads of State and other top government officials; 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 accompanying targets; the means of implementation; and follow-up mechanisms.

The 2030 Agenda stresses that eradicating poverty, including extreme poverty, “is the greatest global

challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development”². SDG 1 on ending poverty in all its forms everywhere includes several targets, to be achieved by 2030, not only aimed at eradicating extreme poverty but also at halving the proportion of people “living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions”³. This target is significant because it blends global efforts to eradicate poverty with national ownership of those efforts. Another target under SDG 17 on strengthening the means of implementation emphasizes the importance of respecting national

space and leadership in the formulation and implementation of policies for poverty eradication.

SDG 11 specifically addresses cities and human settlements, with particular emphasis on ensuring that they are inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Other SDG targets also refer to different aspects of sustainable urbanization.

The United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), held in Quito, Ecuador from 17 to 20 October 2016, adopted the New Urban Agenda, comprising the Quito Declaration on Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements for All and the Quito Implementation Plan for the New Urban Agenda. The United Nations General Assembly endorsed

the New Urban Agenda in December 2016.⁴

Similarly to the 2030 Agenda, the Quito Implementation Plan reiterates that poverty eradication poses the greatest global challenge for sustainable development. It recognizes other related obstacles, such as growing inequality and the multiple dimensions of poverty, including the growth of urban informal settlements. It also calls for strengthening data collection, analysis and dissemination at the national and local levels to allow effective monitoring of progress in implementing the New Urban Agenda, including its poverty eradication priorities. It ultimately aims to promote “evidence-based governance, building on a shared knowledge base using both globally comparable as well as locally generated data.”⁵

Urbanization and Urban Poverty in the Arab Region

The Arab region is urbanizing at a fast pace. As table 1 shows, the percentage of the total population living in urban areas rose from 25.3 per cent in 1950 to 58 per cent in 2015, and is expected to reach 62.3 per cent in 2030. This great urban population

growth is taking place even in predominantly rural countries, such as Yemen, whose share of the urban population rose from a mere 5.8 per cent in 1950 to 34.6 per cent in 2015, and is expected to exceed 43 per cent in 2030.

Table 1. Percentage of the population in Arab countries at mid-year residing in urban areas in selected years

Location	1950	2010	2015	2020	2030
World	29.6	51.6	54	56.2	60
Arab region	25.3	56.5	58	59.4	62.3
Algeria	22.2	67.5	70.7	73.4	77.4
Bahrain	64.4	88.5	88.8	89.1	90.0
Comoros	6.6	27.9	28.3	29.0	31.5
Djibouti	39.8	77.0	77.3	77.8	79.2
Egypt	31.9	43.0	43.1	43.8	46.7
Iraq	35.1	69.0	69.5	70.2	72.4
Jordan	37.0	82.5	83.7	84.8	86.6
Kuwait	61.5	98.3	98.3	98.4	98.6
Lebanon	32.0	87.2	87.8	88.4	89.6
Libya	19.5	77.6	78.6	79.6	81.8

Mauritania	3.1	56.7	59.9	62.6	66.9
Morocco	26.2	57.7	60.2	62.6	67.0
Oman	8.6	75.2	77.6	79.7	82.8
Palestine*	37.3	74.1	75.3	76.4	78.8
Qatar	80.5	98.7	99.2	99.5	99.7
Saudi Arabia	21.3	82.1	83.1	84.1	85.9
Somalia	12.7	37.3	39.6	42.0	47.3
Sudan	6.8	33.1	33.8	35.0	38.8
Syrian Arab Republic	32.7	55.7	57.7	59.7	63.8
Tunisia	32.3	65.9	66.8	67.9	70.6
United Arab Emirates	54.5	84.1	85.5	86.8	88.5
Yemen	5.8	31.7	34.6	37.5	43.2

*Including East Jerusalem.

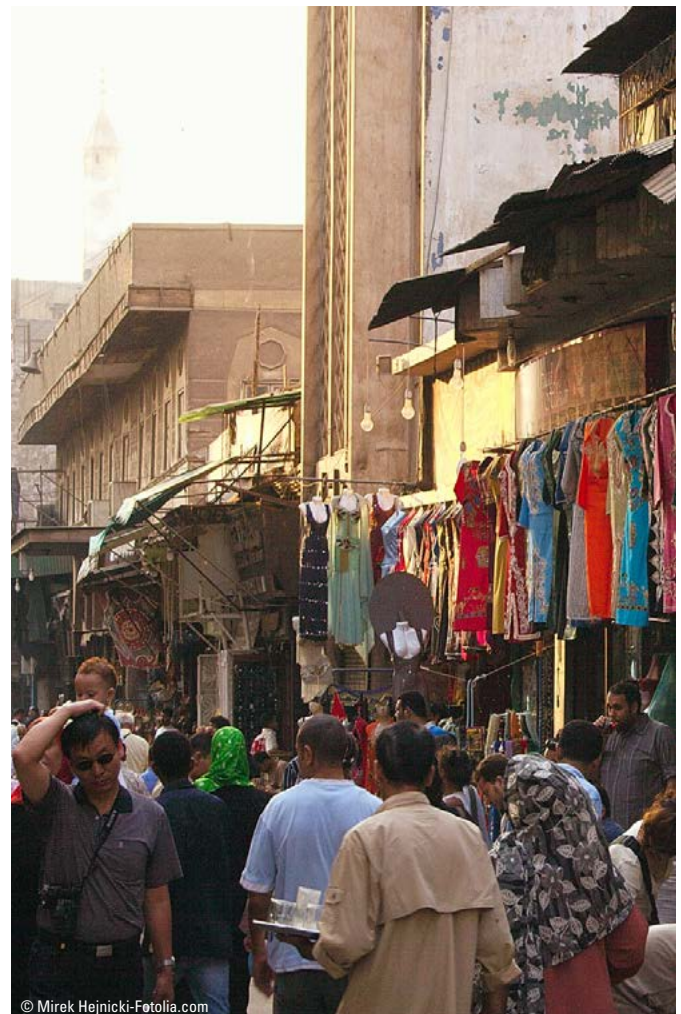
Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, 2014. Custom data acquired from <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/>.

Arab cities have become the main national engines of economic and social development in the region, a major source of employment opportunities, and a potential geographical unit for poverty reduction. However, many Arab cities have also experienced a growth in informal settlements and the informal sector, exacerbated by rising numbers of displaced persons seeking refuge in urban areas because of conflicts in the region.

Although most Arab countries reduced extreme poverty during the timeframe of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), conflict and wide-scale displacement to urban areas have contributed to increased relative poverty or absolute poverty since 2010, according to national measurements.⁶ Estimates show that the average poverty incidence in the Arab region, based on national poverty lines, rose from 22.7 per cent in 1990 to 23.4 per cent in 2012.⁷ This calls for the development of local indices that can measure poverty and deprivation at the city level.

Localizing Urban Poverty Measurement Strategies

Since 2010, ESCWA and the Arab Urban Development Institute (AUDI) have developed a multidimensional



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household-based Urban Deprivation Index (UDI) to measure poverty and deprivation at the city level. UDI was originally developed to monitor the poverty MDG (MDG 1) at the city level, but it can easily be redesigned to help urban authorities in the Arab region respond to the implementation of

several SDG targets, including those addressing poverty elimination (SDG 1); and inclusive urban development (SDG 11). For example, target 1.2 of SDG 1 calls for halving “the proportion of men, women and children living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions”;

Table 2. Conceptual framework of the Urban Deprivation Index

Dimension	Area (or sub-dimension)	Indicator
1. Housing and services	1.1 Overall condition of the residence: location of residence and overall condition, overcrowded	1. Residence is improvised, a shack or a single room. Occupant density exceeds two persons per bedroom
	1.2 Availability of services in the residence	2. Residence is not connected to the private electric source
	1.3 Health environment in the residence: availability of cooling and heating system	3. Residence does not have a cooling or heating source, and the source of heating is below the threshold
2. Education	2.1 Head of household and spouse educational level	4. Head of household or spouse is illiterate or did not complete primary education
	2.2 Enrolment of children in compulsory education	5. Household includes a child aged 4-15 not enrolled in school
	2.3 Completing secondary education	6. No household member has a high school diploma
3. Health	3.1 Protection: access to health insurance	7. Household members are not covered by health insurance
	3.2 Lack of capacity to obtain healthcare	8. A household member fell sick during the previous six months and did not go to a doctor, or complete treatment, for economic reasons
	3.3 Child and mother health	9. Last child in the household was born outside the hospital
4. Economic status	4.1 Productive work: employment and stable income	10. Household does not have a bank account
	4.2 Ownership of assets	11. Household does not own a private car
	4.3 Well-being and diversity of choices: ability to spend money on leisure	12. Household has not been to restaurants or coffee shops for the past two months, not even once

Source: A. Nehmeh, Urban Deprivation Index: The Methodology and Results of Field Survey in Tripoli, Lebanon, p.92.

and target 11.1 of SDG 11 aims to “ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums” by 2030.⁸

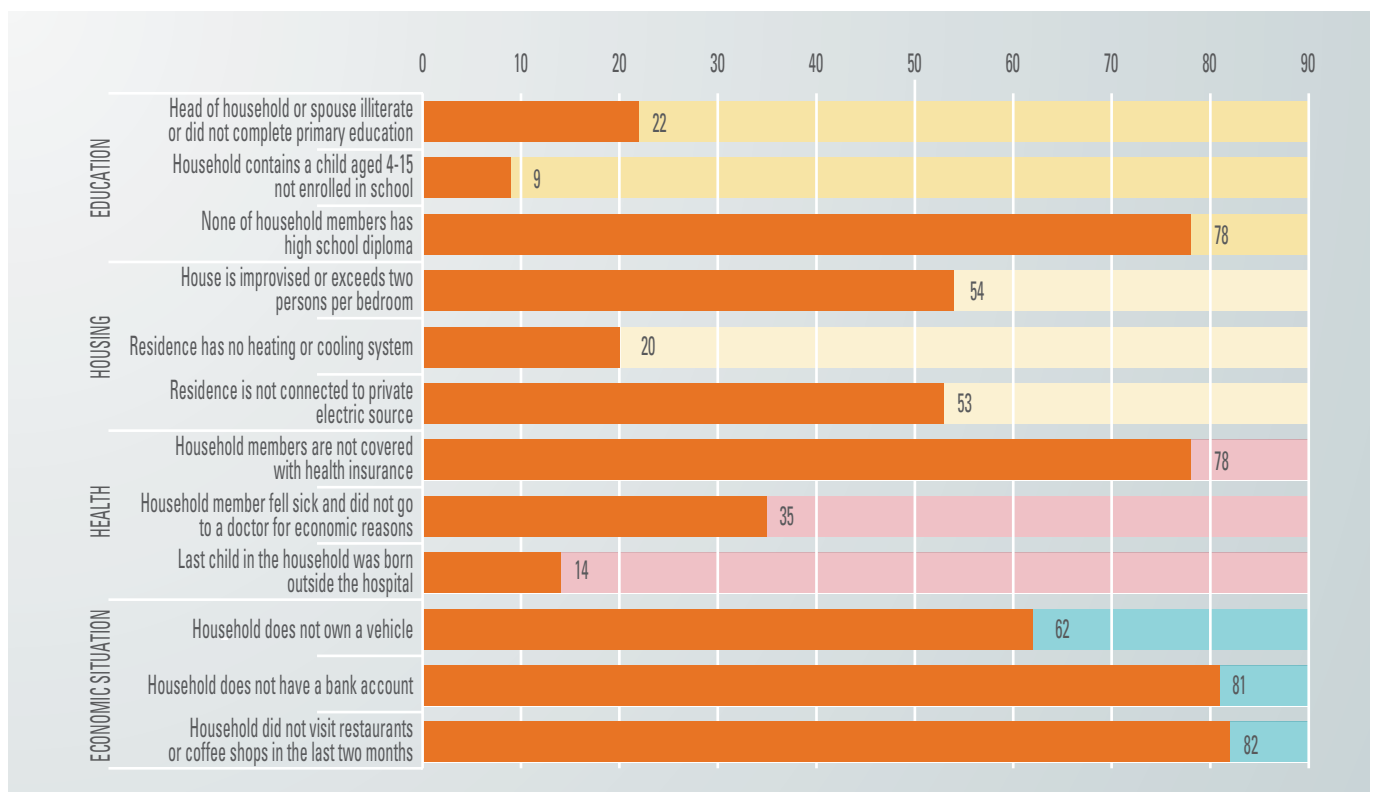
For the UDI to be practical for local authorities throughout the Arab region, it is designed to be simple, inexpensive and easy to understand and use; be relevant to measuring household and individual poverty; assess poverty at the neighbourhood level and provide a measure of disparities between neighbourhoods in a city; and be useful for the formulation of local policies by local actors.⁹ The UDI conceptual framework is based on the following four equally weighted dimensions: economic status, health, housing and services, and education. Three sets of indicators have been identified within each dimension (table 2), which will be revised as UDI is tested in pilot cities to develop a comprehensive methodology.

ESCWA and AUDI have tested UDI in three Arab cities, namely Tripoli (Lebanon), Tunis (Tunisia), and

Nouakchott (Mauritania). While only preliminary work was carried out in the last two cities, in Tripoli the study was completed and published in 2014.¹⁰ The Tripoli field survey was conducted by ESCWA and AUDI in December 2011 and included 1,500 households, only six of which failed to reply. The results are available for both the city as a whole and its eight neighbourhoods, allowing for the geographical targeting of urban poverty-reduction strategies.

Aggregate results show that 61 per cent of households living in Tripoli are deprived and 28 per cent are very deprived. Overall, 79 per cent of households are deprived in the economic situation indicators; 40 per cent in housing and services; 36 per cent in health, and 26 per cent in education. The figure below disaggregates deprivation by the 12 indicators of these four dimensions. It shows, for example, that 81 per cent of households do not have a bank account, and 78 per cent are not covered by health insurance or do not have a member with a high school diploma.

Percentage of deprived households by individual indicators



Source: A. Nehme, Urban Deprivation Index: The Methodology and Results of Field Survey in Tripoli, Lebanon, p.92.

These preliminary results point to the importance of developing indices that can measure poverty and deprivation at the city (and urban district) level, to

implement poverty development strategies so as to meet the new global and urban agendas.

The Way Forward

Given that this pilot study and UDI were completed before the adoption of 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda, further developing such indices – specifically adaptable for use by local authorities responsible for urban planning and management – can significantly contribute to localizing the implementation of many SDGs, and of targets addressing health, education, gender equality, employment, water and sanitation, energy, transport and inequality.

However, the development of such indices must also be integrated into global strategies to assist

national and local governments in monitoring and implementing urban-related SDG targets. The individual indicators of such urban poverty or deprivation indices must therefore also be relevant to the proposed SDG indicator framework being developed by various United Nations organizations.

For example, the United Nations proposed indicator to measure the implementation of target 11.1 is the proportion of the “urban population living in slums, informal settlements or inadequate housing”¹¹ The proposed



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Proposed elements for defining adequate housing

Legal security of tenure: Regardless of the type of tenure, all persons should possess a degree of security of tenure, which guarantees legal protection against forced eviction, harassment and other threats.

Affordability: Personal or household financial costs associated with housing should not threaten or compromise the attainment and satisfaction of other basic needs (for example, food, education, access to health care).

Habitability: Adequate housing should provide for elements such as adequate space, protection from cold, damp, heat, rain, wind or other threats to health, structural hazards, and disease vectors.

Availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure: Housing is not adequate if its occupants do not have safe drinking water, adequate sanitation, energy for cooking, heating and lighting, sanitation and washing facilities, means of food storage, refuse disposal, etc.

Accessibility: Housing is not adequate if the specific needs of disadvantaged and marginalized groups are not taken into account (such as the poor, people facing discrimination; persons with disabilities, victims of natural disasters).

Location: Adequate housing must allow access to employment options, health-care services, schools, child-care centres and other social facilities and should not be built on polluted sites nor in immediate proximity to pollution sources.

Cultural adequacy: Adequate housing should respect and take into account the expression of cultural identity and ways of life.

Source: UN-Habitat, UNDP, UNEP, UN-Women, UNISDR, WHO and UNESCO, SDG Goal 11 Monitoring Framework, 2016.

United Nations monitoring framework for SDG 11 includes not only indicators on slums and informal settlements monitored during the 15 years of MDG implementation, but also a new component covering different dimensions of adequate housing. The latter increases the universality of the overall indicator by addressing relevant conditions in both developing and developed countries. This would also be relevant to monitoring urban poverty in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

According to the proposed United Nations framework, slum households are defined as those that “lack one or more of the following: durable housing, sufficient living space, easy access to safe water, access to adequate sanitation and security of tenure”.¹² Since this definition may be less relevant for many developed (and GCC) countries, the new adequate housing component makes the proposed indicator more relevant to

all Arab countries. This component relies on a rights-based definition that includes elements of security of tenure, affordability, habitability, availability of services, accessibility, and cultural adequacy (see box).

Although the proposed United Nations framework recommends that only one of these elements is selected – owing to potential unavailability of accurate and internationally comparable data – several of these elements could be built into a revised urban poverty index for Arab cities and towns, similar to the pilot UDI. Ultimately, the critical issue is to formulate an urban poverty index based on the most relevant indicators for the Arab region, which addresses specific conditions present in different countries but that, at the same time, can also be integrated into or be useful for monitoring the implementation of the urban poverty-related SDGs and the New Urban Agenda.

Endnotes

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