Large youth population plus high unemployment - challenges facing ENP-South countries

Youth statistics - North Africa and Eastern Mediterranean

The countries of the ENP-South region are generally more 'youthful' than their counterparts in the European Union; in a majority of the ENP-South countries about one half of the population was under the age of 25 in 2011 compared to a little over one quarter (27.8 %) in the EU-28. Young people aged between 15 and 24 (the period that covers the transition from dependent childhood to independent adulthood) accounted for about one in every five persons in many of the ENP-South countries compared with about one in every eight in the European Union in 2011.

Main statistical findings

The Arab Spring movements at the end of 2010 highlighted wide dissatisfaction, including issues of limited employment perspectives for educated but disaffected young persons and unequal opportunities. Youth unemployment in many ENP-South countries is high; in 2011 it ranged between 30 % and 40 % in Egypt, Palestine and Tunisia.
Much larger youth populations in ENP-South than in the EU

There is no commonly agreed definition of ‘youth’, as there are differences in the length of compulsory education, legal voting age, etc. The analysis in this publication focuses on the population aged between 15 and 24.

In most countries of the ENP-South region, about one in every five persons (20 %) was aged between 15 and 24 in 2011 (see Table 1). Only in Israel was the proportion lower (15.4 %), although here too it was much higher than the equivalent youth population of the European Union (11.9 %).

A further 30 - 40 % of the populations of many ENP-South countries were under the age of 15, at least double the share (15.7 %) in the European Union in 2011, suggesting that the relative size of the youth populations of the two regions will continue to be different for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, the share of the youth population in both ENP-South countries and the EU fell in the period between 2001 and 2011 (see Figure 1).
Figure 1: Population by age class 15-24 (% of the total population) - Source: for the EU-28, Eurostat (demopjan); for the MED countries, Eurostat (medps112)

High young age dependency ratio in ENP-South countries

Age-related dependency ratios are a means of measuring the age structure of a population. They relate the number of individuals that are likely to be “dependent” on the support of others for their daily living – young persons and the elderly – to the number of those individuals who are capable of providing such support.

There are stark differences in the age-dependency ratios between the ENP-South countries and the EU, which have significant social policy implications. In the ENP-South countries, the young age dependency ratio (the population aged under 15 compared with the population aged 15 to 64) ranged from 34.1 % in Tunisia (2010) to 73.4 % in Palestine (2011), a much higher rate than that for the EU (23.4 % in 2011). Expressed in another way, the young age dependency ratio for Palestine in 2011 shows that for every 1 000 people of working age (15-64) there were 734 children under the age of 15. This suggests that issues of education, youth employment and the transition from school to work are of particular importance to the social policies of ENP-South countries.

In contrast, the EU is faced with challenges that come from a high old-age dependency ratio (26.3 % in 2011 and according to UN population projections estimated to rise to 50.4 % in 2050). Issues of healthcare, retirement ages and pensions for an ageing population are some of the key policy areas in the EU. By way of comparison, the old-age dependency ratios of ENP-South countries were typically between 5 % and 10 % in 2011, with the rates in Lebanon and Israel (16.0 %) being a little higher. Still, according to the UN’s World Population prospects¹, the old-age dependency ratios of all ENP-South countries are also expected to rise sharply through to 2050.

Table 2: Age related dependency ratios (%) - Source: for the EU-28, Eurostat (demopjanind); for the MED countries, Eurostat, (medps112); for Algeria (2011), partner country website.

The total dependency ratio reflects the pressure on the productive population to provide for children (those under the age of 15) and the elderly (those over 65). The total dependency ratio of Algeria, Lebanon (2009) and Morocco was similar to that of the EU (49.7 %) in 2011, but was much higher in Israel (61.2 %) and Palestine (78.7 %).

Youth unemployment persistently high in Tunisia and Palestine

Youth unemployment remains an acute challenge in the ENP-South countries. In recent times, the youth unemployment rate has often been double that of total unemployment (see Figure 2). Among the countries for which data are available, the youth unemployment rates for 2011 were particularly high in Tunisia (42.3%), Palestine (35.7%) and Egypt (29.7%).

Figure 2: Unemployment rate for the 15-24 age group and of the total population, 2011 (%) - Source: Eurostat (medps421)

The high rates in some of the ENP-South countries for 2011 were comparable to those in Spain (46.4%), Greece (44.4%) and Croatia (36.1%), where youth unemployment has risen sharply since the start of the global economic crisis; in 2008, the youth unemployment rate in the EU was 15.8% (the total unemployment rate being 7.1%), but it had risen to 21.5% in 2011 (the total rate being 9.7%).
Youth unemployment in Palestine and Tunisia remained consistently high in the period between 2001 and 2011. In both Tunisia and Egypt, there were sharp increases in youth unemployment in 2011, likely linked to social and political instability.

Nevertheless, in a couple of the ENP-South countries there appeared to be a strong downward trend in youth unemployment. In particular, there were strong declines in Algeria (in the period between 2003 and 2010). The reasons for this decline appear to be a combination of youth unemployment reduction programmes, efforts to facilitate entrepreneurship with easier access to credit and the rapid demographic transition of the country, the latter driven by a fertility decline that may be explained by rising ages at marriage.

Against the backdrop of the changes in youth unemployment rates shown in Figure 3, there were a number of contrasting differences between the rates for young women and young men. In both Algeria and Egypt, the unemployment rates for young women were much higher than those for young men and that gap widened in the decade from 2001 to 2011. In the case of Algeria, although the overall youth unemployment rate declined, the gap between the rates for young women and young men in Algeria grew from 11 percentage points in 2001 to 19 percentage points in 2010. In Egypt, the widening of the gap was even more acute, increasing from 25 percentage points to 31 percentage points between 2001 and 2011 (see Figure 4); some commentators (such as the United Nations Population Fund) pointing to the shrinking role of the public sector in Egypt as a traditional employer of women.

Figure 3: Total youth unemployment rate (%) - Source: Eurostat (medps421)

The unemployment rate gender gap also reversed and widened in Tunisia and Palestine during the same reference period. In the case of Tunisia, the unemployment rate for young women was 7 percentage points lower than that for young men in 2001, but by 2011, it had risen to around 5 percentage points higher. This change was even more pronounced in Palestine, where the unemployment rate for young women was 5 percentage points less than that for young men in 2001 but was 21 percentage points higher in 2011 at 54%.

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Only in the cases of Morocco and Israel did unemployment rates for young women remain quite similar to those of young men.

The net economic activity rate of the population aged 15-24 is the share of the total population engaged in the labour force (including those that are registered as unemployed). Hence, it does not take into account those still in education (or doing compulsory military service). A low net economic activity rate in this age group points to relatively higher proportions of young people remaining in education.

In Morocco, where youth unemployment was relatively low and stable compared with most other ENP-South countries, there was a downward trend in the net economic activity rate (from 42% in 2001 to 35% in 2011), suggesting that higher proportions of young adults were staying in education (through to upper secondary and tertiary education).
A number of ENP-South countries face a lack of qualified jobs and the highest unemployment rates are often found among the most-educated⁴. Therefore, young people might be put off from higher education due to meagre employment perspectives for the highly qualified. This scenario may help to explain the upward trends in the net economic activity rates of Palestine and Egypt during the period between 2001 and 2011.

With the notable exception of Israel, the net economic activity rates of young women in the other ENP-South countries were much lower than for young men (see Figure 6). The difference between the genders was about 24 percentage points in Lebanon (2009), a little over 32 percentage points in Algeria (2010), Egypt and Palestine, and closer to 36 percentage points in Morocco in 2011. These differences may partially be explained by women’s “empowerment deficit”⁵, denoting an insufficient participation in economic and political life, and a lack of access to knowledge and education. The situation in Palestine may be considered as a particular one: the gender difference in educational attainment does not explain the high gap, but rather a situation characterised by instability, mobility restrictions, unemployment and poverty. Marriage at a relatively young age (see below) may be part of the coping and defence mechanisms to deal with those realities⁶.

Figure 6: Net economic activity rate by gender 2011, people aged 15-24 (%) - Source: Eurostat (medps412)

Educational attainment: considerable differences between countries, less between genders

There were considerable differences in the educational attainment levels of young people aged 20-24 between the four ENP-South countries for which data are available (see Figure 7). At the higher end, about nine in every ten young men and women in Israel had attained an upper-secondary education (ISCED 3) in 2011. In Egypt too, a clear majority (about 70%) of young adults had attained an upper secondary education. In contrast though, only about one third of young adults in Morocco and one fifth of young adults in Palestine had attained an upper secondary education by 2011.


In more detail, the upper secondary education attainment level of young women in Israel was higher than young men in both 2001 and 2011, both rates increasing during the reference period. In Egypt, the gap between the attainment rates of young men and women closed as the attainment rate for young women increased between 2003 and 2011 while that for young men declined slightly. In Morocco, the attainment rates for young men and women rose relatively sharply from a low level between 2001 and 2011 although the gap between young men and women remained. In Palestine, the attainment rate for young men was notably higher in 2011 than 2001 (although at a low level) and was also higher than the rate for young women in 2011, a turnaround from 2001 when the rate for young women was higher than that of young men.

Average age of first marriage for women now close to EU countries, except Palestine

Today, young people in the ENP-South countries face challenges that did not exist a generation ago. High rates of unemployment and underemployment among young people, along with the high costs of marriage and housing explain why the average age at first marriage has increased in many of the ENP-South countries since the 1970s/1980s.

In most ENP-South countries for which data are available, the average age of first marriage for women (for the latest reference year available) ranged from 24 in Egypt (2011) to 29 in Algeria (2008). Only Palestine reported an early average marriage age, at 21. This may be influenced by poor labour market perspectives and other social and economic reasons.

These figures are now broadly comparable with those of the EU countries, where the average age ranges between 26 (Romania, Poland) and 33 (Sweden). In most EU countries it is around 30. In all EU countries the average age has increased between 2001 and 2011, and most notably in the Czech Republic, Hungary (by between 3 and 4 years, to reach an average age of 28.1 and 28.7, respectively) and Slovakia (by 5 years, to reach 29.3).


See also: Marriage Patterns in Palestine – MENA working papers series– Population Reference Bureau (http://www.prb.org/pdf08/MENAWorkingPaper2.pdf)
Table 3: Average age of women at first marriage (%) - Source: Eurostat (medps12)

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(3) Algeria, 2008; Lebanon, 2009; Morocco, 2010.

Data sources and availability

The data for the ENP are supplied by and under the responsibility of the national statistical authorities (NSIs) of each of the countries or territories on a voluntary basis. Data from other sources are very limited and clearly identified. The data for Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine territory, Syria and Tunisia are collected by Eurostat directly from the relevant NSIs. The statistics that are included in this article are freely available on-line and form part of the Pocketbook on Euro-Mediterranean statistics - 2013 edition.

Context

This article presents selected statistics and analyses on the situation of young adults under the age of 25 for nine Mediterranean countries covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP-South countries). It provides an overview of demographic trends, the labour market situation and education in Algeria (DZ), Egypt (EG), Israel (IL), Jordan (JO), Lebanon (LB), Morocco (MA), Palestine (PS), Syria (SY) and Tunisia (TN). The Arab Spring movements at the end of 2010 highlighted wide dissatisfaction, including issues of limited employment perspectives for educated but disaffected young persons and unequal opportunities. The policy context of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is explained in International statistical cooperation.

Further Eurostat information

Database
- Southern European Neighbourhood Policy Country (ENP-South) (med)

Dedicated section
- European Neighbourhood Policy countries (ENP)
Methodology / Metadata

- Southern European Neighbourhood Policy countries (ENP-South) (ESMS metadata file — medesms)

Notes

This article is available on Statistics Explained at http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Youth_statistics_-_North_Africa_and_Eastern_Mediterranean

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