

Great expectations:

Arab youth's sustainability priorities



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About the report

Great expectations: Arab youth's sustainability priorities is an Economist Impact report that has been supported by the Arab Youth Center. In this report, Economist Impact first explores the climate-related issues Arab youth are most concerned about and the state of climate anxiety among young people in the region. The report further explores the views of Arab youth on where they believe the burden of responsibility for tackling climate change lies and the actions individuals, governments and businesses can take to mitigate the effects of climate change in the Arab world. It focuses on the 22 Arab League member states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.¹ The report uses the terms “MENA” and “Arab world” interchangeably.

The findings are based on a literature review, a survey and a series of three workshops conducted by Economist Impact between September and November 2022. The survey gathered insights from 1,100 Arabs between the ages of 18 and 35 in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The workshops gathered insights from 32 Arab sustainability leaders, young professionals and entrepreneurs between the ages of 18 and 35 from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Tunisia and the UAE.

The report was produced by a team of Economist Impact researchers, writers, editors and graphic designers, including:

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Foreword by the Arab Youth Center

Youth are increasingly involved in the climate change discussion as we begin to understand the intricate intersectional impact and nature of the challenge. Young people are critical players in tackling climate change, not only due to the grim future they will inherit, but also because, historically, they have been the core drivers of real change, offering legitimate and innovative solutions. Hence, we must see youth as not only pivotal stakeholders, but also as core partners on the road to a sustainable future—their future.

The Arab Youth Center (AYC) was established to empower the next generation of Arab leaders capable of building a better future and to address the needs of Arab youth. It implements purposeful initiatives across diverse sectors and collects valuable data on young Arabs to help decision-makers shape policies that enable their progress. One of the AYC's biggest initiatives leading climate action in the region is the Arab Youth Council for Climate Change (AYCCC), which aims to make a qualitative leap in the interaction of Arab youth with environmental issues, support youth climate action, and engage young Arabs in developing innovative and sustainable solutions.

The AYC has supported this Economist Impact report to give Arab youth a seat at the table and to ensure that their voices are clear and present in regional and global climate conversations.



Introduction

THE ARAB WORLD IS FEELING THE HEAT

We are “on a highway to climate hell with our foot on the accelerator,” warned UN secretary-general António Guterres at the opening of COP27 (the United Nations Climate Change Conference of Parties) in Egypt in November 2022.² Countries around the world are struggling to contain rising temperatures to below 2°C compared with pre-industrial levels, and those in the Arab world are no exception. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is warming twice as fast as the rest of the world and is set to experience a temperature rise of 4°C by 2050 – double the projected global increase of 2°C.^{3,4} Such temperatures would exceed the threshold for human adaptability.⁵

Indeed, the Arab world is already experiencing some of the most severe effects of climate change.⁶ The MENA region is the hottest and driest in the world and faces particular challenges in changing rainfall patterns and the loss of arable land.⁷ GDP in the region is expected to shrink by 6–14% by 2050 as a result of climate-related water scarcity, which means forgoing potential growth and compounding existing social and political fragility.⁸ In addition, the region is the second-worst performer in Economist Impact’s 2022 Global Food Security Index – outperforming only Sub-Saharan Africa – contributing to regional malnutrition and hunger, especially among the most vulnerable.^{9,10}



ARAB YOUTH ARE CALLING FOR FASTER AND TOUGHER CLIMATE ACTION

Despite widespread recognition of the devastating effects of climate change and the size and urgency of the challenge ahead, the Arab world's carbon emissions continue to increase.⁴¹ The MENA is the only region in the world that is not reducing its greenhouse gas emissions relative to its income growth.⁴² As a result, the current climate change outlook in the region is bleak.

Young Arabs (defined as those under 35 years of age) are demanding climate action to protect their futures. They are joining young people around the world in mobilising to raise climate awareness and fight for climate change mitigation and justice.⁴³ Within this context, Economist Impact set out to conduct research on Arab youth's sustainability priorities. Drawing insights from a survey of 1,100 Arabs aged 18 to 35 and a series of three workshops with young Arab sustainability leaders, young professionals and entrepreneurs, this Economist Impact study showcases the increasingly unified voices of Arab youth on climate change. It highlights the importance of climate change as a generational issue and explores how climate-related challenges are affecting young people's mental health. It discusses the views of Arab youth on the stakeholders that should be primarily responsible for turning the tide towards a sustainable future and the steps they need to take to get there.

As the eyes of the world will remain on the MENA region in the lead-up to COP28 in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the region has an opportunity to present a distinct perspective on the global transition to sustainability and emerge as a leader in the battle against climate change. Governments and businesses in the region must begin to listen to the views of Arab youth – the leaders of tomorrow – to a greater extent in order to do so.

Key findings

The acute cost-of-living crisis remains at the forefront of Arab youth's concerns. The Economist Intelligence Unit estimates that inflation in the MENA region hit 19.6% in 2022, compared with 9.8% globally. It is unsurprising then that almost half (44%) of young Arabs Economist Impact surveyed cite inflation as the most pressing issue facing their generation. Young Arab sustainability leaders Economist Impact spoke to claim that such economic instability can make it harder for the population to think about longer-term issues such as climate change.

But young people in the Arab world are also particularly concerned about environmental issues. Two-fifths (40%) of survey respondents consider environmental degradation, resource depletion and climate change to be the most pressing issue facing their generation, surpassing political and social issues. Among the wide range of environmental issues, they are most concerned about the prevalence and impact of air pollution, water scarcity, global warming, ocean pollution and food insecurity.

Climate-related threats and a lack of action to tackle them are causing eco-anxiety among Arab youth. Our survey finds that nearly three-quarters (70%) of Arab youth have felt anxious about the future of the environment and the impact of climate change over the past six months. Of these respondents, 41% have felt very anxious. For participants in the workshops, this stems primarily from a sense of inability to influence the course of action and inadequate climate initiatives by governments and businesses. Women experience the greatest impacts of climate change¹⁴ and are particularly affected by climate anxiety as a result: 34% of women have felt very anxious compared with just 26% of men. The mental health impacts of climate change can have profound economic and social implications, including losses to productivity, rising unemployment and increased government spending on health and social care.^{15,16}



Young Arabs, particularly women, are leading more sustainable lifestyles as a way to scale up their efforts to tackle climate change. They recognise the value of individual-level action and are keen to drive positive change. Almost all (98%) survey respondents report that they have made environmentally conscious lifestyle choices over the past year, including reducing food waste, limiting water and energy use, and recycling household waste. Women are particularly proactive: a higher share of women have adopted the 11 most popular individual-level actions than men. Two-fifths (39%) of women have started to recycle household waste and limit the consumption of single-use plastics, compared with less than a third of men (29% and 28%, respectively).

Arab youth want to influence climate policy but lack avenues to do so. Young Arabs, especially women, are hopeful about the role they can play in tackling the climate crisis: more than eight in ten (84%) women and three in four (76%) men believe that they can influence their country's climate change policy. However, they lack opportunities to share their views: less than two-thirds (57%) of respondents feel that their governments listen to the concerns of young people in relation to climate change. As the government and business leaders of tomorrow, young people deserve to be heard and their views accounted for.

Arab youth value government climate action but believe that their governments need to do more. One in three respondents feels that governments should be the stakeholders primarily responsible for tackling climate change, and nearly three-quarters (74%) think that combating climate change should be their country's top priority rather than the continued pursuit of economic growth. But just three in five (58%) respondents believe that their government's actions are effective in addressing climate change. Young Arab sustainability leaders we spoke to are increasingly calling for their governments to translate their bold pledges into action and stick to their commitments.

Corporate climate action and accountability is a crucial piece of the net-zero puzzle. Over one fifth (22%) of Arab youth surveyed believe that companies should be the stakeholders primarily responsible for tackling climate change. To help meet net-zero targets, Arab youth believe businesses should focus on improving waste management, eliminating the use of pollutants and using more sustainable materials.

The remainder of this report explores the survey and workshop findings, shining a light on young Arabs' priorities for tackling climate change. It pinpoints their climate-related concerns and explores the actions they believe individuals, governments and businesses should take to fulfil our climate goals. It aims to help stakeholders across the Arab world understand how to appropriately step up their climate response.

Chapter 1

Climate concerns



The environment pertains to all aspects of human life, and human life comes first, even before the economy and politics.

Siham Lakrikh, co-professor at Cadi Ayyad University, Morocco

CLIMATE CHANGE IS A BURNING ISSUE

Climate change stands out as an especially strong concern for Arab youth, surpassing social and political issues. “The environment pertains to all aspects of human life, and human life comes first, even before the economy and politics,” says Siham Lakrikh, co-professor at Cadi Ayyad University in Morocco. Two-fifths (40%) of the young Arabs we surveyed – 44% of North Africa-based respondents¹⁷ and 38% of Middle East-based respondents¹⁸ – consider environmental degradation, resource depletion and climate change to be the most pressing issue facing their generation. Across the Arab world, only the current and acute cost-of-living crisis is deemed to be more pressing, cited by 44% of young people.

ARAB YOUTH ARE EXPERIENCING CONCERNING LEVELS OF ECO-ANXIETY

The effects of climate change extend beyond the environment. Climate change-related threats and a lack of action to tackle them pose a risk to young people’s mental health and psychological well-being.¹⁹ Individuals who are most severely affected by the physical effects of climate change are at higher risk of developing

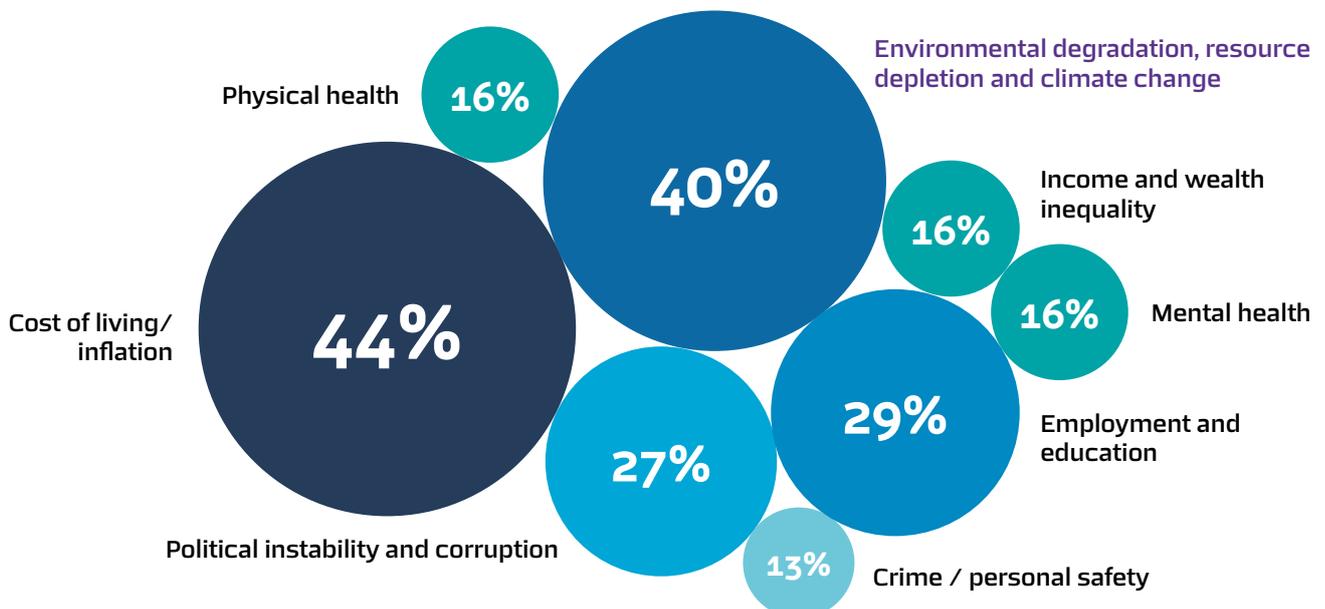
mental health consequences.²⁰ For the sustainability leaders we spoke to, the prevalence of climate anxiety is primarily tied to a feeling of a lack of control over the course of climate action and an inadequate response by governments to combat climate change. “My anxiety does not stem from climate threats per se. It originates from Arab countries not taking seriously the issue of climate change,” says Jordan-based Abdallah Alshamali, program manager in the Regional Climate and Energy Project MENA team at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

A report by the See Change Institute finds that climate-related distress is most salient among younger individuals.²¹ According to our survey, almost three-quarters (70%) of Arab youth have felt anxious about the future of the environment and the impact of climate change over the past six months. Of these respondents, 41% have felt very anxious – making up almost a third (29%) of all young Arabs we surveyed.

Those who consider climate change to be the main challenge facing their generation are particularly affected: 37% feel very anxious. In line with this, Arab youth in North Africa are more eco-anxious than those in the Middle East: two in five respondents in North Africa are very anxious versus one in five (23%) in the Middle East.

FIGURE 1: CLIMATE ON MY MIND

What are the most pressing issues for your generation right now? (% of respondents)



Source: Economist Impact survey

The prevalence of eco-anxiety is also positively correlated with educational attainment. Over three in four (84%) young Arabs who hold a postgraduate degree and over two-thirds (73%) of those who hold an undergraduate degree report feeling anxious about the future of the environment, compared with just over half (55%) of those without a degree.

Overall, as the Arab world is among the regions most impacted by climate change,²² Arab youth are particularly susceptible to developing climate anxiety. Without urgent action, the mental health impact of climate change on Arab youth will continue to worsen.

CLIMATE-RELATED CONCERNS ARE WIDESPREAD AND FAR-RANGING

Young people in the Arab world are concerned about a range of environmental issues. Our survey found that Arab youth are primarily concerned with the prevalence and impact of air pollution, food insecurity, global warming and climate change, water and ocean pollution, and water scarcity (all cited by 79% of respondents).

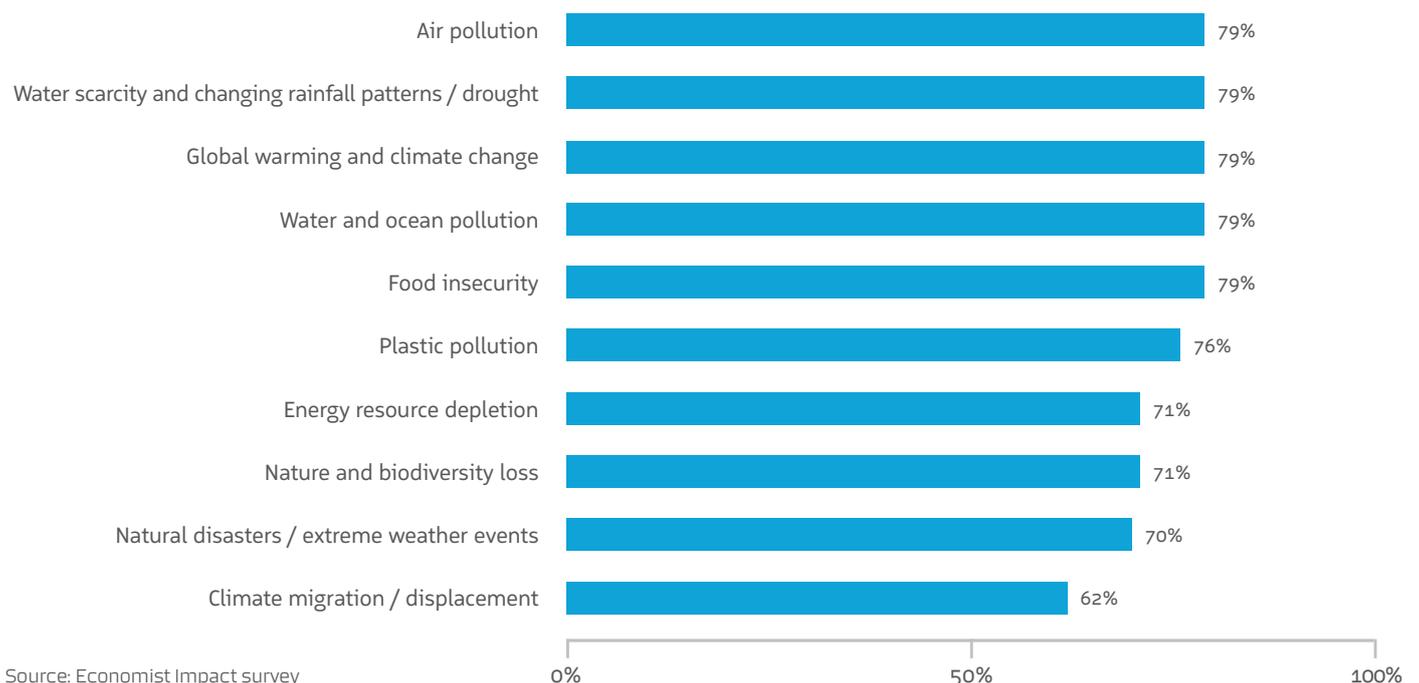
These concerns are rooted in evidence. For instance, according to Economist Impact research, levels of water stress in Jordan are expected to increase at an average annual rate of 1–1.5% until 2100, which will expose 90% of low-income households to critical water vulnerability.²³ In addition, the MENA region is the second-worst performer in Economist Impact’s 2022 Global Food Security Index, outperforming only Sub-Saharan Africa. It is also home to some of the lowest-scoring countries in the Index, including Syria and Yemen.²⁴

Recognising the impacts of these issues, COP27 featured a Women and Water Day and a focus on supply-side solutions to food insecurity.²⁵ However, we are not acting fast enough.

While addressing environmental issues is a top priority for young Arabs, the MENA region has the lowest level of youth civic engagement globally.²⁶ This is beginning to change in relation to the climate. Young Arabs are mobilising to raise climate change awareness and spur climate action. Making up two-thirds of the region’s population,²⁷ they are organising themselves into strong advocacy groups and demanding inclusion in high-level discussions on climate change.^{28,29} They want to protect their futures.

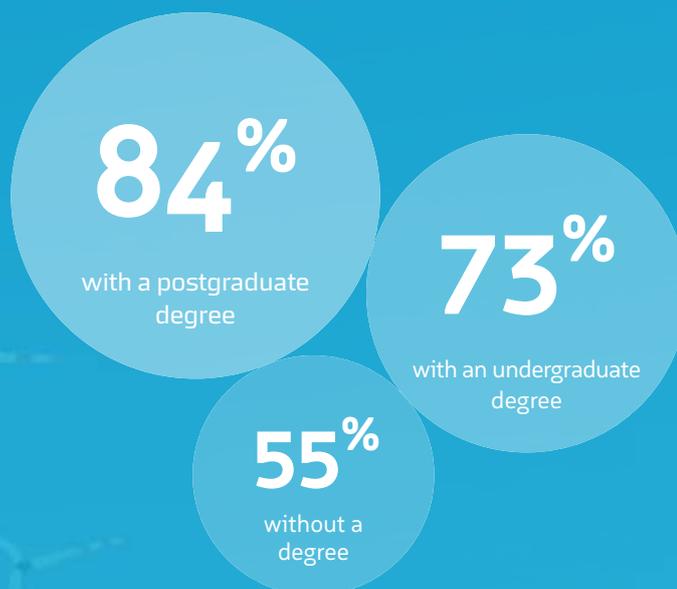
FIGURE 2: ENVIRONMENT IN DISTRESS

How concerned are you about the prevalence and impact of the following environmental issues? (% of respondents)





YOUNG ARABS THAT HAVE FELT ANXIOUS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE ENVIRONMENT



Chapter 2

Burden of responsibility

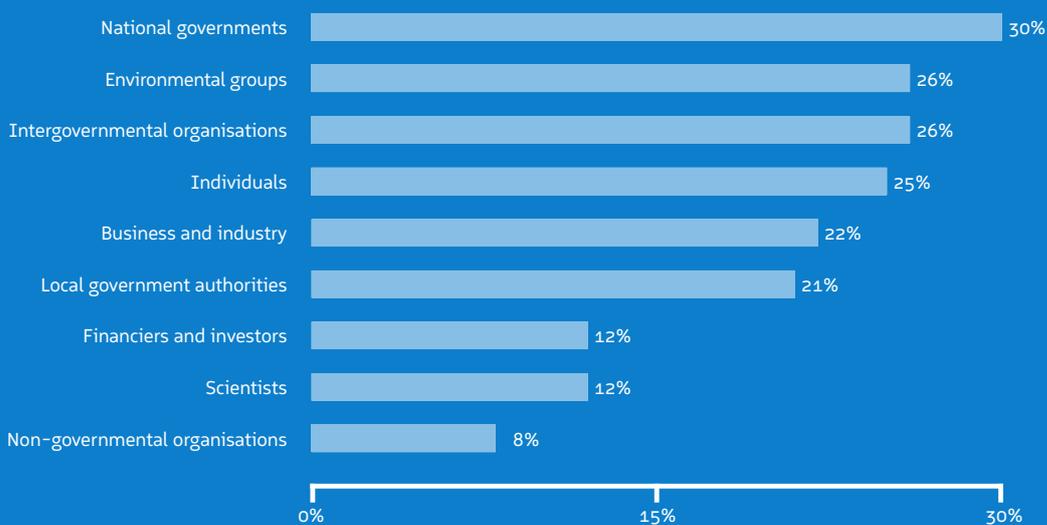
MITIGATING CLIMATE CHANGE REQUIRES A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

Arab youth are highly engaged in driving sustainable change. They are keen to adapt their lifestyles to combat the effects of climate change. But they also recognise the value of collaboration: they hold governments and businesses responsible for complementing their individual efforts.

What, then, do young Arabs see as the way forward in tackling climate change?

FIGURE 3: BEARING THE BRUNT

Which stakeholders should be primarily responsible for environmental protection and tackling climate change? (% of respondents)



Source: Economist Impact survey

2.1 Taking the lead: individual action



ARAB YOUTH ARE TAKING STEPS TO LEAD MORE SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLES

Tackling climate change forms a part of the everyday life of young Arabs. Our survey finds that a quarter of respondents consider individuals, like themselves, to be the stakeholders primarily responsible for mitigating the effects of climate change. Arab youth are also keen to instigate the positive change they want to see to protect the environment. Shaima AlQassab, research engineer at the Siemens Energy Innovation Centre in Abu Dhabi, says, “even if an individual action, such as re-using a plastic bag or bottle, has a 0.001 chance of solving part of the climate crisis, I will do it.”

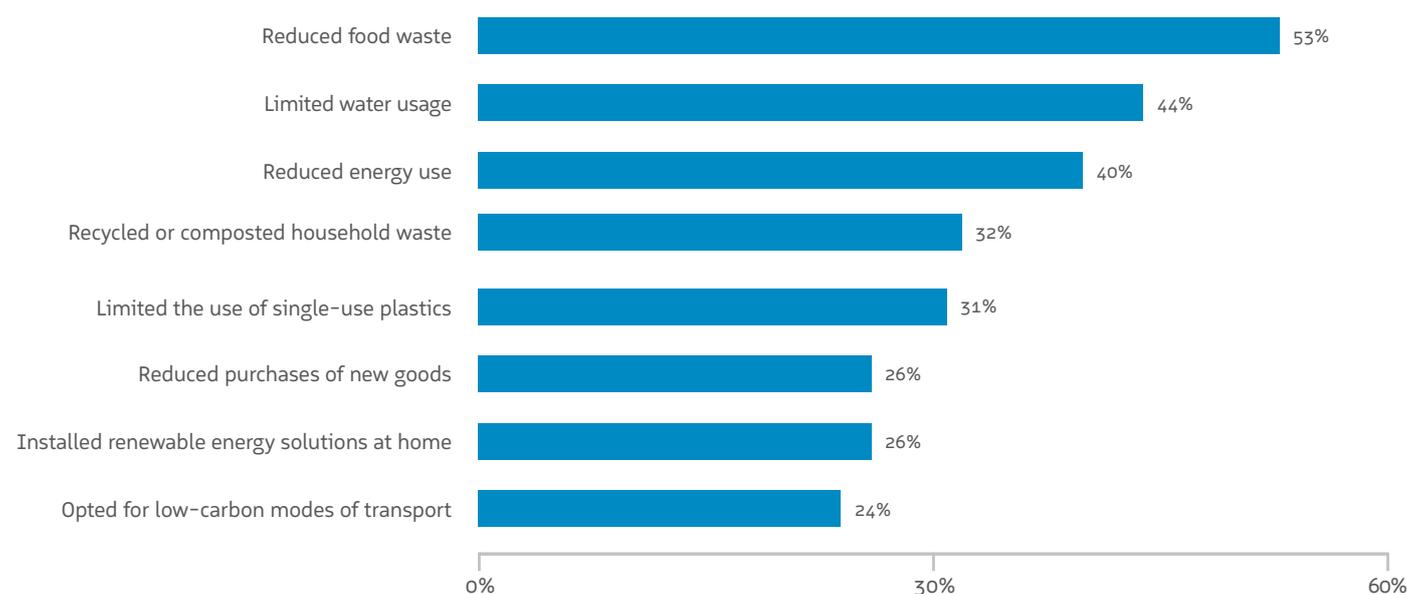
Almost all (98%) young Arabs surveyed are taking steps to lead a more sustainable lifestyle. Over half (53%) have reduced their food waste, while more than two-fifths have limited their water (44%) and energy (40%) use.

Even if an individual action, such as re-using a plastic bag or bottle, has a 0.001 chance of solving part of the climate crisis, I will do it.

Shaima AlQassab, research engineer at the Siemens Energy Innovation Centre in Abu Dhabi

FIGURE 4: TAKING MATTERS INTO THEIR OWN HANDS

Which actions have you taken to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle in the past 12 months? (% of respondents)



Source: Economist Impact survey

CLIMATE ANXIETY AND CLIMATE ACTION: A GENDER GAP

Women experience the greatest impacts of climate change. Four in five climate migrants globally are women.³⁰ In the Arab world, as key providers of food and household water, women are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate-related natural disasters such as flooding and drought, which limit access to key reserves and make their journeys to find resources longer and more dangerous.³¹ In rural areas, women are pushed to cultivate less-fertile lands, diminishing their incomes from selling produce and limiting their ability to provide food for their families.³²

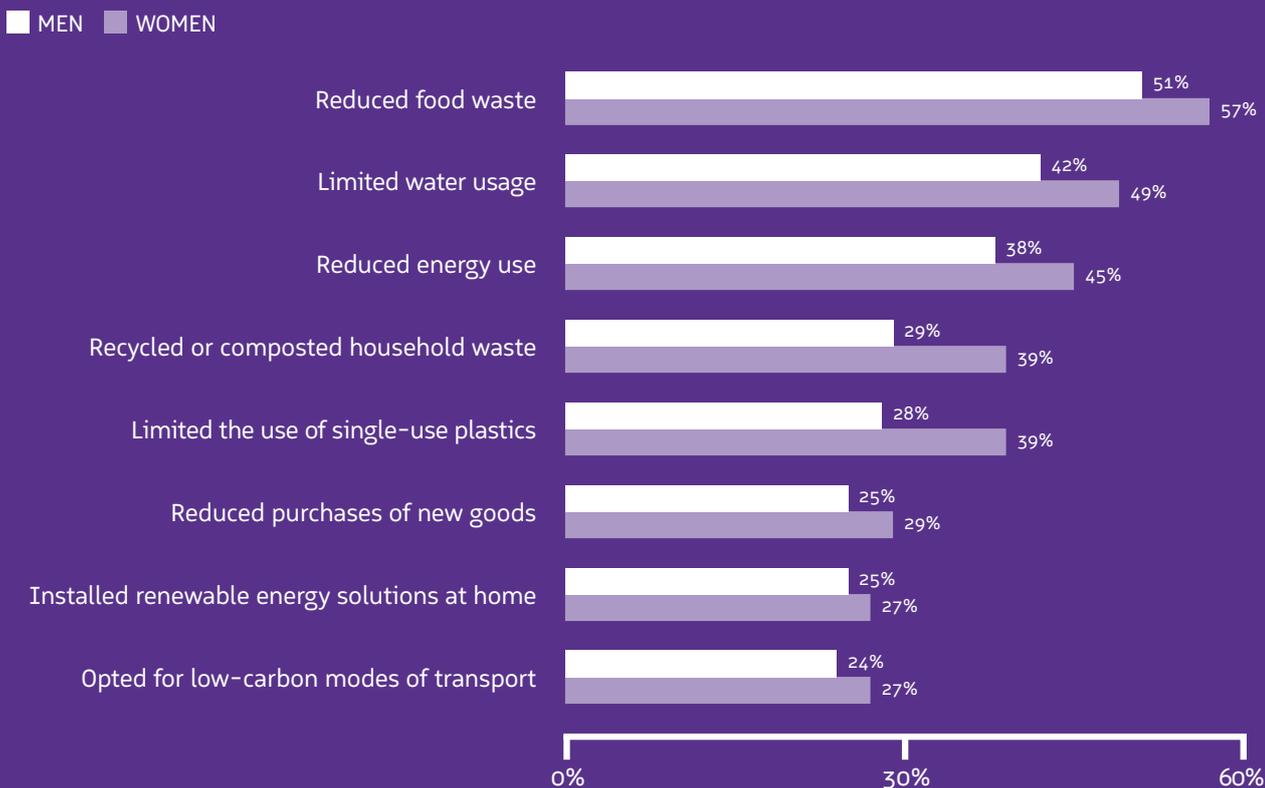
It is no surprise then that young Arab women are more concerned about climate change than young men. Our survey finds that 52% of women are very concerned

about water scarcity compared with 45% of men, and that 42% of women are very concerned about plastic pollution compared with just 35% of men. It is equally unsurprising that women carry a heavier mental health burden than young men when it comes to climate change: 34% of women have felt very anxious about the future of the environment and climate change over the past six months, compared with just 26% of men.

One positive finding is that young Arab women act on their concerns. They are particularly proactive in changing their own habits and routines to lead more sustainable lifestyles: a higher share of women than men have adopted the 11 most popular individual-level actions. Two-fifths of women (39%) have started to recycle household waste and limit the consumption of single-use plastics, for instance, compared with under a third of men (29% and 28%, respectively).

FIGURE 5: WOMEN PAVING THE WAY

Which actions have you taken to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle in the past 12 months? (% of respondents)



Source: Economist Impact survey

INDIVIDUAL ACTION HOLDS POLICYMAKERS TO ACCOUNT AND RAISES AWARENESS

The benefits of individual actions extend beyond the reduction in emissions from the lifestyle changes themselves. Action by individuals is essential to create public momentum, hold policymakers to account and raise awareness of the scale of the climate crisis. As the demand for sustainable change and products grows, governments and businesses will have to respond accordingly. Neeshad Shafi, a youth climate activist from Qatar, emphasises the importance of civil society in making governments and corporate stakeholders accountable, as well as the importance of individual communities and their potential to develop creative solutions to climate change.³³ Young Arabs now hope that their conviction is matched by governments and corporations.

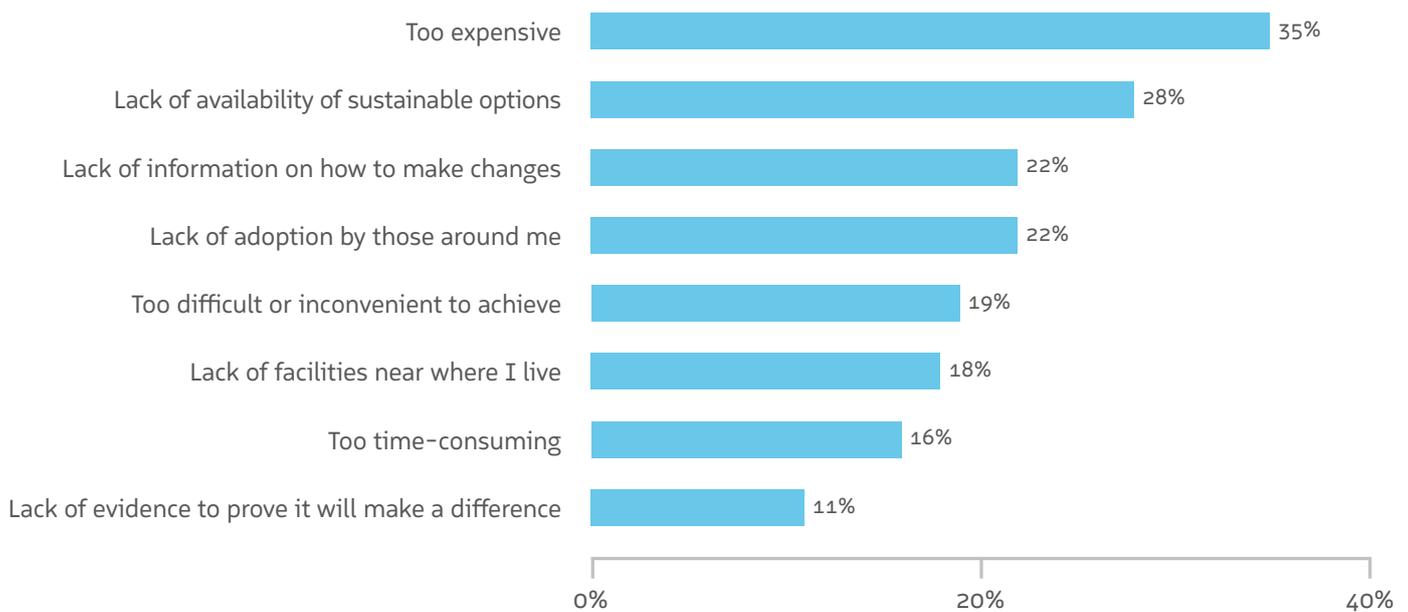
BARRIERS TO INDIVIDUAL ACTION REMAIN AND MUST BE OVERCOME

Across the board, however, young Arabs face barriers to individual action. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given rising prices of goods – the Economist Intelligence Unit estimates that inflation in the MENA region hit 19.6% in 2022 – our survey finds that the primary barrier pertains to the increased cost involved in switching to more sustainable alternatives (a factor cited by 35% of respondents). Younger individuals, who are likely to have lower incomes, are particularly impacted by cost: two-fifths (41%) of respondents aged 18–23 selected “too expensive” as the main barrier, compared with a third of those aged 24 and above.

Other substantial hurdles include a lack of availability of sustainable options (28%) and lack of information on how to make changes (22%). Interestingly, our survey results

FIGURE 6: CONSTRAINING FACTORS

What are the barriers preventing you from adopting a more sustainable lifestyle? (% of respondents)



Source: Economist Impact survey

suggest that there is a multiplier effect to individual-level climate action. Almost a quarter (22%) of respondents cited “lack of adoption by people around them” as a barrier, which indicates that young Arabs are influenced by the actions of those around them. Policymakers and climate activists need to focus on community climate awareness to encourage collective action.

While one individual’s action alone will do little to achieve net zero, thousands of small changes can have a significant impact. Governments and businesses need to focus on overcoming these barriers in order to encourage “people who do not have the self-motivation to change” to lead more sustainable lifestyles, according to Maissam El Kouche, member of the Global Council on SDG13 on climate action.

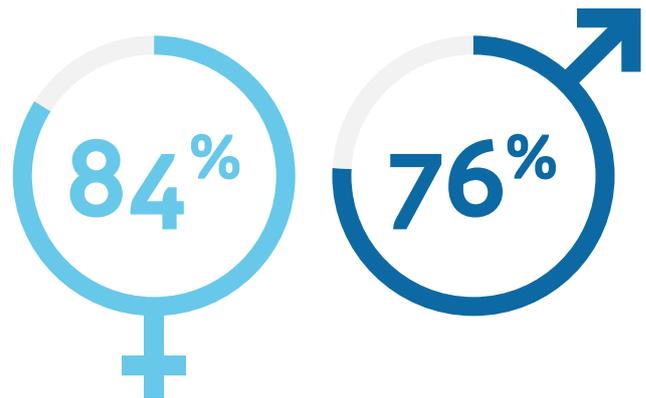
ARAB YOUTH ALSO HAVE A DESIRE TO INFLUENCE GOVERNMENTAL CLIMATE POLICY

In addition to engaging in individual-level action, Arab youth want to share their views and increase collaboration with their governments on climate policy. “To tackle climate change, we need to focus not only on multi-disciplinary collaboration amongst stakeholders but also on multi-generational collaboration,” says Rewa Assi, programme coordinator of the Water Innovation Lab Lebanon at Waterlution Canada.

Our survey finds that the large majority of Arab youth (78%) – more than eight in ten (84%) women and three in four (76%) men – believe that they can influence climate change policy in their countries. This rises to

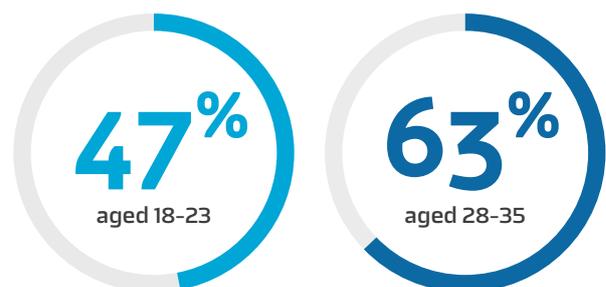
84% for individuals who believe that climate change is the most pressing issue of their generation. However, Arab youth often lack the tools to engage with their governments: less than two-thirds (57%) of respondents feel that their governments listen to the concerns of young people in relation to climate change. Younger individuals are particularly dissatisfied: only 47% of those aged 18–23 believe that their governments listen to them, compared with 63% of those aged 28–35.

As key levers of change, Arab governments ought to prioritise youth engagement and reflect their views in climate-related decision-making.



84% OF YOUNG ARAB WOMEN AND 76% OF YOUNG ARAB MEN BELIEVE THAT THEY CAN INFLUENCE THEIR COUNTRY’S CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY

YOUNG ARABS THAT BELIEVE THAT THEIR GOVERNMENTS LISTEN TO THE CONCERNS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN RELATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE





To tackle climate change, we need to focus not only on multi-disciplinary collaboration amongst stakeholders but also on multi-generational collaboration.

Rewa Assi, programme coordinator of the Water Innovation Lab Lebanon at Waterlution Canada

2.2 Governments need to step up

CLIMATE CHANGE IS INEXTRICABLY LINKED TO THE ECONOMY AND POLITICS

The effects of a changing climate inherently affect countries' economies. As such, climate change cannot be divorced from hopes for economic development, growth and political stability. "The economy, the environment and politics are all so intertwined," says Ms Assi. "As temperatures rise in the Arab world, there is a growing need for investment in sustainable water management, which will in turn affect the overall direction of the agricultural sector, and, in turn, shift the economic cycle of the country," she explains.

Arab governments therefore have an interest in taking action and heeding the climate-related demands of young people in the region. The transition to net zero will require substantial initial investments but will yield positive financial returns in the medium-to-long term and, crucially, safeguard the future of the environment by mitigating physical climate risks.³⁴ Yet, there remains a lack of government support and funding for environmental projects in the Arab world, according to Siham Lakrikh of Cadi Ayyad University in Morocco.

GOVERNMENTS HAVE A CRITICAL ROLE TO PLAY

We need substantial changes from the top down to turn the tide on the climate crisis. Arab youth value the role of governments in tackling climate change: one in three (30%) believes that governments should be the stakeholders primarily responsible for doing so. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of young Arabs also believe that combating climate change should be the top priority in their country over the continued pursuit of economic

growth. This rises to 84% for respondents who are very anxious about the future of the environment. Young people's concern for the environment remains at the fore, even as youth unemployment sits at 26% across the MENA region.³⁵ In this context, how do young Arabs view the efforts of their governments to tackle climate change?

GOVERNMENTS NEED TO TRANSLATE WORDS INTO ACTION BY IMPLEMENTING PLEDGES AND STICKING TO COMMITMENTS

Responsibility for tackling climate change is one thing; willingness to do so comprehensively is another. While Arab youth perceive environmental protection to be primarily the responsibility of governments, not all believe that governments are delivering on their targets. Just over half of survey respondents feel that their national and local governments' actions are effective in addressing climate change (58% and 61%, respectively).

Levels of dissatisfaction are higher in North Africa than the Middle East: our survey finds that almost a third (32%) of North-Africa-based respondents consider their national governments' actions to be ineffective, compared with just 13% of those in the Middle East. Young Arabs we spoke to believe that their governments tend to attend climate-related conferences and endorse climate agreements but take little action. "It is purely a formal presence where everything is just ink on paper," says Khouloud Hamrouni, co-founder of Soli&Green, a non-governmental organisation in Tunisia.

Bold pledges should not be the measure of success. There is a growing call from Arab youth for governments to turn words into action.

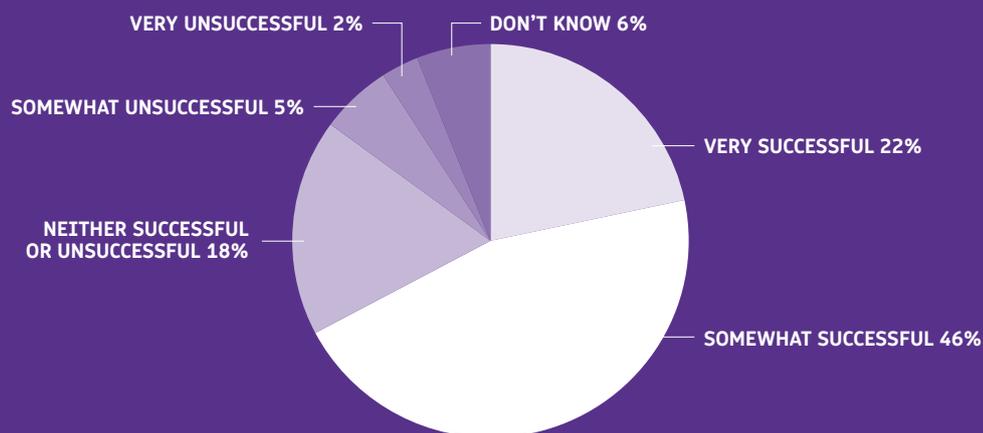
THE VALUE OF CROSS-COUNTRY COLLABORATION

International summits on global climate action have great potential. Arab youth highly value international co-operation on climate change. Over a quarter (26%) of those surveyed consider intergovernmental organisations like the UN to be the primary stakeholders responsible for environmental protection.

Multilateral events, such as the COP conventions, are designed to alarm and urge governments to act. Our survey finds that over two-thirds (68%) consider the COP conventions to be either somewhat or very successful in catalysing positive change in relation to climate action. However, there is scope for improvement, with less than a quarter (22%) of respondents believing that they are very successful.

FIGURE 7: FAR FROM A COP-OUT?

How successful are the COP conventions in catalysing positive change in relation to climate action? (% of respondents)



Source: Economist Impact survey



Governments in the MENA region need to focus more on implementing treaties on climate change, such as the Paris Agreement, rather than delivering nice-sounding speeches.

Ahmed Owda, youth reviewer of Nationally Determined Contributions at the United Nations Population Fund

In order to boost the success of such collaboration, words need to be translated into action by implementing pledges and following through on commitments. According to Ahmed Owda, an Egypt-based youth reviewer of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) at the United Nations Population Fund, “governments in the Arab world need to focus more on implementing treaties on climate change, such as the Paris Agreement, rather than delivering nice-sounding speeches.”

There is also a need for further youth engagement in such global events. “We can only solve today’s climate-related challenges through innovative solutions and innovation requires a modern perspective. Youth hold a modern system-thinking approach and will add a fresh start to the solutions that we want for the future,” says Rewa Assi of the Water Innovation Lab Lebanon at Waterlution Canada.

Indeed, progress is being made. A “Youth and Future Generations Day” has been held at every COP since 2015 to “highlight the power and participation of youth”.³⁶ For the first time ever, COP27 in Egypt featured a Children and Youth Pavilion for youth to hold discussions on climate change, and an official Youth Envoy responsible for promoting the inclusion of young voices in the climate discussion.^{37,38}

World and business leaders must ensure that their actions are not a box-ticking, “youth-washing” exercise to maintain a positive public image. They must take young people’s voices into account.



We can only solve today’s climate-related challenges through innovative solutions and innovation requires a modern perspective. Youth hold a modern system-thinking approach and will add a fresh start to the solutions that we want for the future.

Rewa Assi, programme coordinator of the Water Innovation Lab Lebanon at Waterlution Canada

THERE IS ROOM FOR FURTHER POLICY INTERVENTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Young people across the Arab world have ideas for government climate action. Our survey finds that Arab youth believe that governments should focus on subsidising renewable energy sources to support the shift away from fossil fuel dependency (cited by 34% of respondents); improving waste management to increase the region’s low recycling rates (31%);³⁹ and conserving the natural environment (27%).

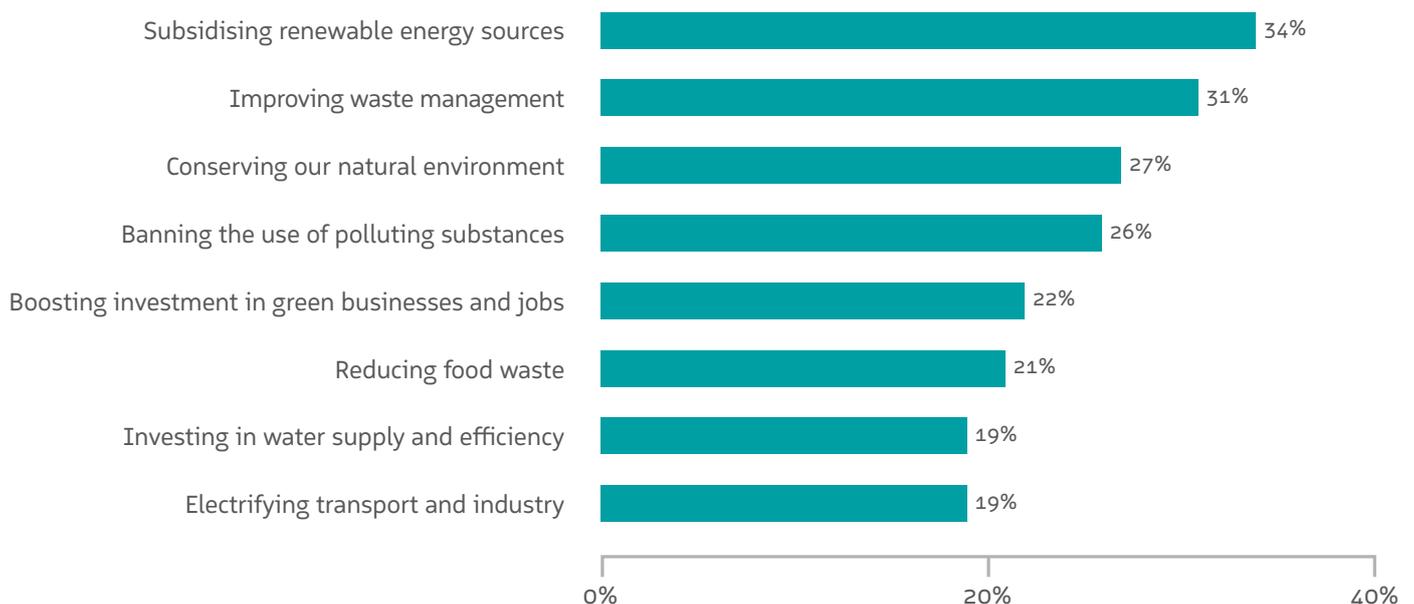
The young Arabs we spoke to also expressed the need for governments to offer increased support and funding to green businesses and incorporate teaching on climate change into education curriculums. Ms Lakrikh, of Cadi Ayyad University in Morocco, for example, calls for improved support for sustainability start-ups. “There is a shortage of awareness-raising, funding and support for small establishments that work in the environmental domain,” she says.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) underscores the importance of educating individuals on the climate crisis to equip them with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes needed to address the issue.⁴⁰ Our survey results also highlight this; there is a positive correlation between concern for the environment and educational attainment. Almost half (45%) of young Arabs holding an undergraduate degree deemed environmental degradation and climate change to be the most pressing issue facing their generation, compared with fewer than one in three (30%) of those without a university degree.

Hatim Aznague, a Morocco-based climate advocate, expresses frustration at the low level of knowledge transfer between the government and the public. “We still have a problem incorporating the environment and climate change into education establishments and curriculums,” he says. Education International’s 2022 Climate Change Education Ambition Report Card finds that climate change education ambition in the Arab world is poor. The NDCs of only three countries – Jordan, Qatar and Tunisia – refer to climate change education.⁴¹

FIGURE 8: TURNING GREENER

What should be the top climate action priorities for governments over the next five years? (% of respondents)



Source: Economist Impact survey

2.3 A call for corporate action

CORPORATE CLIMATE ACTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY IS A CRUCIAL PIECE OF THE NET-ZERO PUZZLE

As major economic players, businesses in the Arab world have a vital role to play in helping to tackle the climate crisis. Our survey finds that almost a quarter (22%) of young people in the Arab world believe that businesses should be the primary stakeholders for tackling climate change. There is a clear business case for climate action: both the causes and effects of climate change can threaten a company's bottom line.

Countries in the region have set ambitious climate targets. The UAE and Oman aim to be net zero by 2050, while Saudi Arabia and Bahrain hope to follow suit by 2060.⁴² Egypt has set a target for renewable energy to form 42% of the electricity mix by 2035.⁴³ To meet these goals, they need action by the private sector.

COMPANIES ARE TAKING POSITIVE STEPS TOWARDS DECARBONISATION BUT MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE

Companies are starting to take action: over 8,300 businesses globally are now signatories to the UN Race to Zero campaign, which seeks to rally support for a "healthy, resilient, zero carbon recovery".⁴⁴ This represents a 60% increase since the COP26 summit in Glasgow, Scotland, in 2021.⁴⁵ Some of the Arab world's largest companies are leading the way. Majid al Futtaim, the major shopping mall, retail and leisure developer across the Middle East, Africa and Asia, has adopted a 2040 Net Positive sustainability strategy and is phasing out the use of single-use plastics by 2025, for example.^{46,47}

However, more action is needed. In 2022, the Arab world took centre stage in the international climate arena. The spotlight on the region from hosting COP27 in Egypt and COP28 in the UAE heightens expectations of the region's businesses. According to our survey, Arab youth believe that companies should focus on reducing waste and improving waste management (38%), eliminating pollutants in their industry (32%),



Governments should introduce policies to help businesses become more sustainable.

Shaima AlQassab, research engineer at the Siemens Energy Innovation Centre in Abu Dhabi

using more sustainable products and materials (30%), developing new climate-friendly products and services (28%), and subsidising the price of environmentally sustainable products (25%).

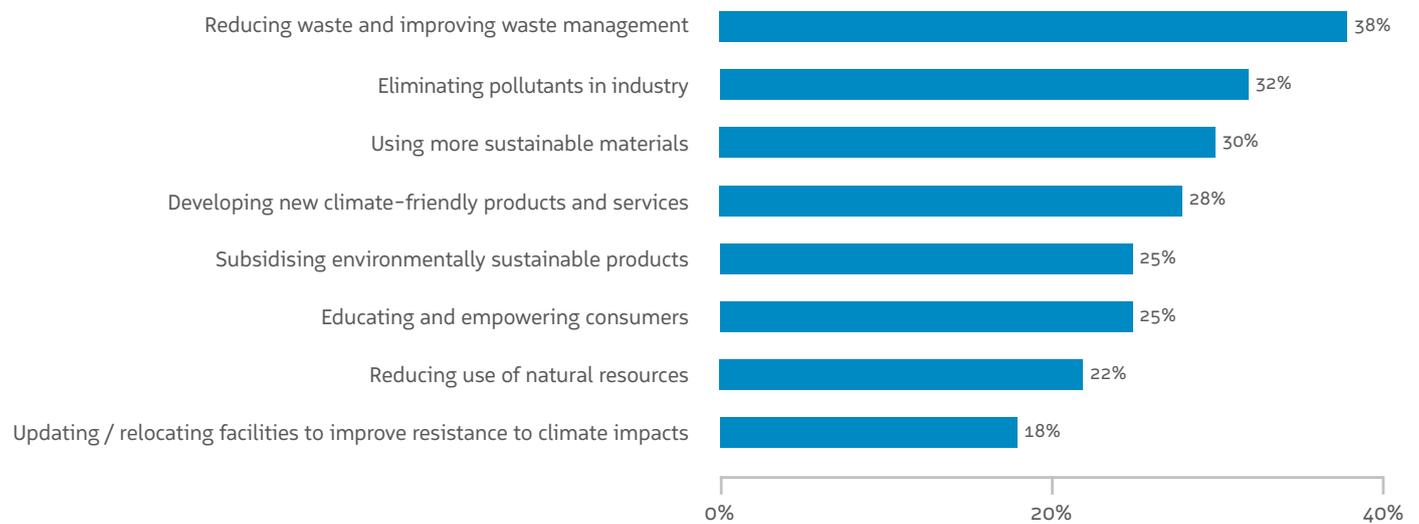
But how can we hold businesses to account and ensure that their efforts are more than corporate greenwashing?

GOVERNMENTS AND BUSINESSES NEED TO WORK HAND IN HAND

For businesses to truly deliver on their climate goals, they must work together with policymakers. One way to tackle the Arab world's "green" infrastructure gap and aid the transition to net zero is through climate-friendly public-private partnerships (PPPs). According to Hossam Araby, government relations specialist at Influence Communications in Egypt, "governments in the region need to facilitate (climate-friendly) infrastructure at a much faster pace." To do so, public sector infrastructure projects will require private sector finance, innovation and expertise.⁴⁸ Saudi Arabia has been implementing PPPs as part of its drive to decrease its dependence on oil. A prime example is the development of the Dumat Al-Jandal wind farm, which is set to become the largest wind farm in the region, generating electricity for 70,000 households every year.⁴⁹

FIGURE 9: SEIZING THE MOMENT

What should be the top climate action priorities for companies over the next five years? (% of respondents)



Source: Economist Impact survey

Governments also have a key role to play through incentives and regulation. “Governments should introduce policies to help businesses become more sustainable,” says Shaima AlQassab, research engineer at the Siemens Energy Innovation Centre in Abu Dhabi. “If a company is not incentivised to lower carbon emissions – a move that has cost implications – why would they do it?” she asks. The MENA region is increasingly adopting climate-friendly policies as a result. In its effort to find innovative and sustainable solutions to water stress, Morocco continues to fund and subsidise green projects such as the Dar Si Hmad Project – the world’s largest fog harvesting system that provides sustainable potable water to rural villages across the country.⁵⁰

Arab youth also advocate for the implementation of laws and regulations that “have teeth” to discourage rule-breaking. Research by PwC, a management consultancy, finds that private sector companies in

the MENA region are in search of increased guidance and more specific regulation from governments to underpin their environment, social and governance (ESG) efforts.⁵¹ In addition, Arab youth are calling for proportional regulation to disincentivise companies from committing unlawful acts that are detrimental to the environment. “It is important that any fines and penalties introduced are directly proportional to the company’s financial performance,” says Faisal Al Abdulmuhsen, climate change and sustainability consultant at EY in Kuwait.

To meet their NDCs, countries in the Arab world need the private sector’s support. Companies in the region trail the rest of the world in corporate ambition relating to national sustainability efforts.⁵² As the eyes of the world focus on the MENA region, the pressure is on for private sector stakeholders to step up.

Conclusion

Young Arabs deem environmental degradation to be one of the most pressing issues of their generation and they feel anxious about the future of the environment. But they are highly engaged in climate action and motivated to make a difference. The large majority (68%) of young people surveyed are optimistic that efforts to protect the environment and mitigate climate change will be successful. “We have the power and passion to drive positive change and create a more sustainable future for all,” says Hatim Aznague, a Morocco-based climate advocate. However, there is a long road ahead.

Climate change can be addressed, but it will require a holistic and collaborative approach between individuals, governments and businesses. Governments and businesses ought to prioritise youth engagement in climate-related decision-making and ensure youth representation on the world stage. Young people want to be pivotal in the fight against climate change. It is time for leaders to remove the barriers that currently limit youth engagement. “The future is for the youth of today,” claims Rewa Assi of the Water Innovation Lab Lebanon at Waterlution Canada. “Arab youth should not only be seen as change-makers of today, but also as part of the action-creators of today to be the change-makers of tomorrow,” she adds.

In the run-up to COP28 in the UAE, the Arab world has an opportunity to emerge as a leader in the fight against climate change. In doing so, governments and businesses need to listen to young voices.





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Endnotes

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