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Middle East Youth Outlook

**Empowering youth for
sustainable development:**
A call to action for
governments



Introduction

The Middle East is experiencing a rapid transformation, driven by a growing youth population eager to embrace change and innovation. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), where the majority of our regional youth survey respondents reside, over 50% of the local youth population is under the age of 25, indicating their immense potential to contribute and advance global and national ambitions for sustainable development.¹ Their unique perspectives, challenges, and aspirations are essential for shaping the policies and initiatives that will define sustainable development in the Middle East.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations member states, provides a roadmap for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. It underlines that the future of humanity and our planet lies in the hands of today's younger generation who will pass the torch to future generations.²

Since 2015, there has been a significant awakening to the importance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Twenty targets across six SDGs are strongly focused on the youth: Zero Hunger, Quality Education, Gender Equality, Decent Work and Economic Growth, Reduced Inequalities, and Climate Action.³

This demonstrates that young people are deeply embedded within the fabric of the SDGs and their knowledge, unique perspectives and engagement are essential if sustainable development is to be realised globally and in the Middle East.

The **Middle East findings of the Global Youth Outlook 2024** amplify the voices of approximately 810 children and young adults between the ages of 10 to 30 from eight countries in the region. Unique in its approach, it brings forth the insights and voices of a demographic often overlooked. Also, by comparing the Middle East findings with the global report, which captures the views of over 2000 youth across 43 countries, we are able to understand regional perspectives better and look at ways to engage this demographic as architects and co-creators of a fairer, more sustainable tomorrow. Now is the time to capitalise on this optimism and act decisively. By engaging the youth and harnessing their insights and creativity, we can build a sustainable future. This report is a crucial step in that direction.





Key takeaways

The following takeaways from our survey highlight the unique perspectives and priorities of Middle Eastern youth, showcasing their commitment to shaping a better future. From embracing the SDGs through education and awareness initiatives to placing strong faith in government-driven change and prioritising health, education, water, and innovation, Middle Eastern youth stand at the forefront of building a sustainable future for their communities and beyond.

01 Middle East youth embrace the SDGs, driven by education and awareness initiatives.

02 A strong faith in governments as key drivers of positive change, diverging from global perceptions.

03 Priority on health, education, water, and innovation.

04 Narrowing the “action gap”: a Middle East youth advantage.

Middle East youth embrace the SDGs, driven by education and awareness initiatives.

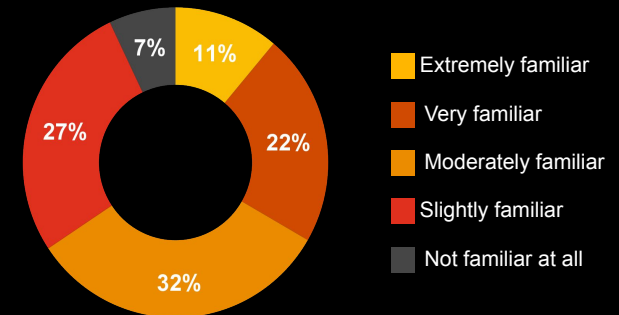
The survey indicates significant awareness of the SDGs among Middle Eastern youth, with a slightly higher familiarity among males than females. Notably, almost 34% of regional respondents were extremely and very familiar with the SDGs, compared to 23% globally, highlighting a critical step towards active engagement in sustainable development initiatives.

This high level of familiarity among Middle Eastern youth regarding the SDGs can be attributed to the increasing emphasis on education and awareness programmes in the region. For example, the UAE Youth Advisory Council on SDGs,⁴ established under the UAE National Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, serves as a bilateral channel between youth and policymakers. It addresses the concerns and challenges of the UAE youth, explores their opportunities and outlines the future outlook of the SDGs in the country.

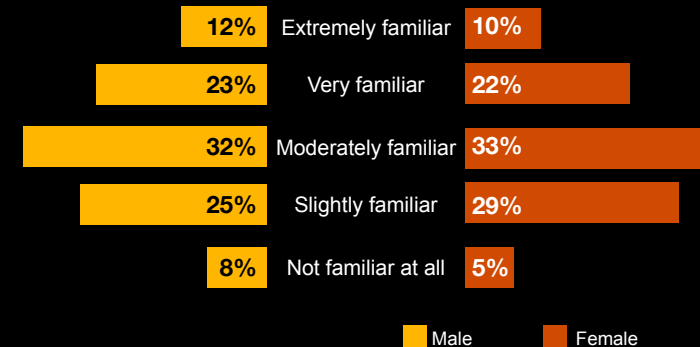
In Saudi Arabia, SDGs are integral to Vision 2030 goals. Organisations such as the Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Foundation (MiSK) also support youth through a wide ranging set of initiatives across a wide range of sectors, including but not limited to education, innovation, arts and culture and creative digital media, aligning with both Vision 2030 and the SDGs.⁵

How familiar are you with the sustainable development goals?

Total



Gender



Do you believe that enough is being done by the following groups to help our planet and people?

Government



Community



Business



Academia



Individuals



IO/NGO



■ Yes ■ Maybe ■ No

Regional youth place strong faith in governments as key drivers of positive change, diverging from global perceptions

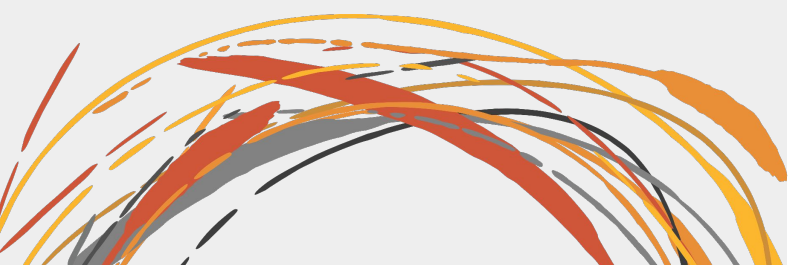
Our Middle East survey findings reveal a stark contrast in perceptions of who drives positive change, with 65% of respondents indicating that governments were the primary drivers for change. This contrasts sharply with global findings, where only 38% see governments doing enough for people and planet and communities and NGOs are seen as the top drivers of action and impact.

The divergence in perceptions between the global and Middle East findings reflect the region's political and social landscape, where governments have historically played a pivotal role in economic development and social reform, thereby fostering a strong sense of trust among citizens. With ambitious national agendas in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar driving transformative change in almost all aspects of life, with a particular focus on citizen wellbeing, economic diversification and sustainable development, the results indicate a high level of awareness of the impact of these changes on the ground.

In contrast, in the region, only 45% of youth believe that non government and international organisations are driving change in the area of people and planet, indicating that there is greater opportunity for such entities to raise awareness and engage youth in meaningful actions that addresses the region's most critical challenges.

Global goals, local focus: Middle Eastern youth prioritise health, education, water and innovation

Similar to their global counterparts, Middle Eastern youth prioritise Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6), Quality Education (SDG 4), and Good Health and Wellbeing (SDG 3), but place a higher emphasis on Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (SDG 9), and Peace and Justice (SDG 16) compared to the global average. The prioritisation of SDGs 6, 4, 3, 9 and 16 by Middle Eastern youth highlights their focus on fundamental needs, while underscoring the importance of peace at a time of geopolitical unrest and the need for industrialisation and innovation to drive economic growth in a region that is fast transforming. Our survey data also indicates that Climate Action (SDG 13) and Gender Equality (SDG 5) ranked lower at the 12th and 14th positions respectively, compared to 9th and 12th positions globally.



Middle East Priorities		Global Priorities
Clean Water & Sanitation	=	Clean Water & Sanitation
Quality Education	=	Quality Education
Good Health & Wellbeing	=	Good Health & Wellbeing
Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions	+1	Zero Hunger
Zero Hunger	-1	Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions
No Poverty	=	No Poverty
Affordable & Clean Energy	=	Affordable & Clean Energy
Decent Work & Economic Growth	=	Decent Work & Economic Growth
Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure	+6	Climate Action
Responsible Consumption & Production	=	Responsible Consumption & Production
Sustainable Cities & Communities	+2	Reduced Inequalities
Climate Action	-3	Gender Equality
Reduced Inequalities	-2	Sustainable Cities & Communities
Gender Equality	-2	Life on Land
Partnerships for the Goals	+1	Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure
Life on Land	-2	Partnerships for the Goals
Life Below Water	=	Life Below Water

01

Clean Water & Sanitation (SDG 6):

The Middle East & North Africa region is one of the most water scarce regions in the world, with 83% of its population exposed to extremely high levels of water stress. Within this grouping, the Middle East is home to the world's top 5 water stressed countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman and Qatar). Projections indicate that heightened demand and limited water supply will increase population exposure to extremely high levels of water stress to reach 100% by 2050, rendering every country in the region "extremely water stressed."⁶ To address this critical issue, regional governments have implemented desalination projects, technological innovations, and water management policies. Countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the largest producer of desalinated water, is harnessing renewable energy to power its desalination plants, exemplified by the \$130 million Al Khafji facility, which will be the largest in the world,⁷ while UAE is expanding solar-powered desalination plants and testing innovative technologies like using algae to absorb salt from water and Jordan has prioritised wastewater recycling projects.

02

Quality Education (SDG 4):

Both global and Middle Eastern youth prioritise "Quality Education" due to its critical role in shaping their futures. In the context of the Middle East, where youth unemployment rates are among the highest globally, the significance of education cannot be overstated. As education is a key factor in breaking cycles of poverty, fostering innovation, and enabling social inclusion, it holds significant bearing in the Middle East & North Africa (MENA),⁸ where governments are building innovative, future-focused education systems focused on developing life skills and digital acumen from an early stage and creating a cadre of national professionals who are equipped to drive and impact national plans and ambitions.



03

Good Health & Wellbeing (SDG 3):

Both global and Middle Eastern youth have prioritised “Good Health and Wellbeing”, reflecting a high level of awareness of global and regional health challenges and issues. Worldwide, around 1.8 billion youth aged between 10 to 24 face health disparities.⁹ In the GCC, non-communicable disease accounts for 69-83% of all deaths, with one of the highest rates of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases in the world.¹⁰ Additionally, with nearly 39% of Middle Eastern youth living in areas of prolonged conflict, health challenges related to malnutrition, mental health stress and others are on the rise.¹¹

The economic burden of diseases in the GCC region is estimated to exceed US\$50 billion, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE contributing the most at US\$24.5 billion and US\$11 billion, respectively. Despite significant increases in healthcare expenditure over the years to enhance the well-being of citizens, the burden of diseases leads to a productivity loss of nearly US\$18 billion annually.¹² Empowering youth to address these urgent health challenges, by sharing information, raising awareness and engaging them on key initiatives is key to a healthier, more resilient future.



04

Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (SDG 9):

In contrast to the results of the global survey, "Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure" ranked significantly higher in the Middle East, with a notable difference of 6 places. This strong emphasis on SDG 9 reflects the region's strategic focus on economic diversification and technological advancement. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are investing heavily in infrastructure to transition from oil-dependent economies to knowledge-based economies.

According to the Global Innovation Index (GII) 2023, issued by the UN's World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), the UAE has maintained its position as the most innovative Arab country, followed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Over the coming years, as development trajectories accelerate in these countries and across the region, governments will prioritise strategies and policies that enhance innovation outcomes, optimising returns on innovation investments.¹³

05

Other prioritisation differences

In the Middle East, the unique regional context has shaped specific priorities for the youth. In a region facing geopolitical conflicts, the relatively lower prioritisation of Climate Action could be due to the perceived lesser immediate impact of climate change on the lives of youth or a lack of awareness about environmental issues amidst the more concerning humanitarian crises unfolding in the region. Additionally, the lower priority on gender equality reflects cultural and societal norms that have influenced youth perceptions.



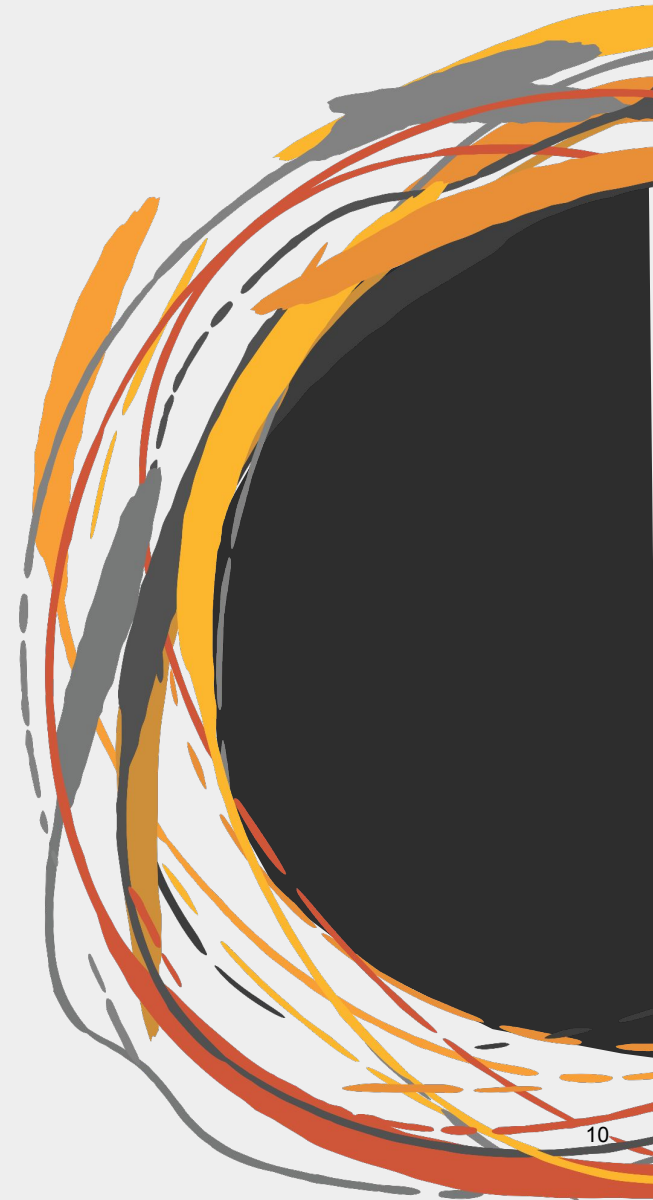
A narrow action gap:

Middle Eastern youth lead in SDG engagement

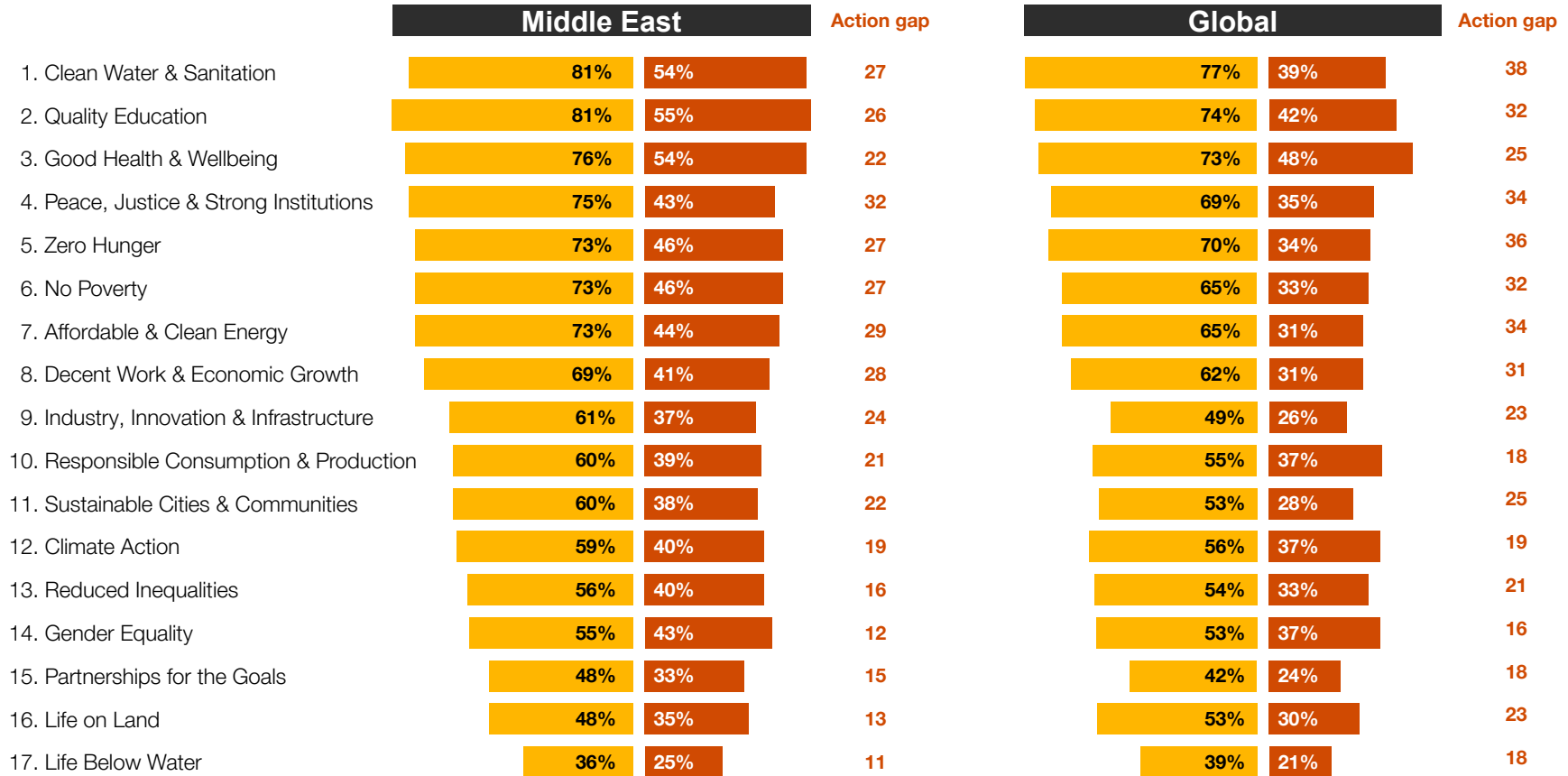
When compared to the results from the global survey, what we have termed “the action gap” - the difference between the importance youth respondents placed on the SDG and their actual engagement - is narrower in the Middle East, compared to global. This indicates that Middle Eastern youth are more actively engaged than their global counterparts in initiatives related to the SDGs that they consider important.

The figures reveal that while Middle Eastern youth place higher importance on certain SDGs, their engagement levels also surpass those of their global peers, highlighting a more proactive approach to sustainable development in the region and a strong commitment among Middle Eastern youth to translate their awareness into tangible actions.

This can at least partly be explained by some of the youth empowerment programmes and initiatives across the region. For example, Egypt runs a “Be an Ambassador” programme that engages youth around the SDGs and encourages them to promote their adoption.¹⁴ Similarly, the Arab Youth Center, based in the UAE, provides platforms for youth to participate in development projects and policy-making processes, thereby fostering a culture of active engagement.¹⁵ Also, programmes such as the UAE Water Aid initiative and Saudi Arabia's efforts to improve water management and sanitation infrastructure are examples of how targeted efforts can galvanise youth participation. This trend indicates a promising direction where youth are not only aware but also actively contributing to sustainable development goals.



The “action gap”: the difference between the importance youth respondents placed on the SDG and their actual engagement



■ Very important
 ■ I am already taking action to support this goal
 xx Action gap

Key recommendations

Key economies in the Middle East have witnessed significant advances in human development and innovation, but progress remains uneven across the region, with many young people lacking access to education, jobs, water, sanitation, and good health. As critical thinkers and change-makers, the youth of the Middle East can make a difference in the region, as envisioned by the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. For governments and policymakers, herein lies a significant opportunity to integrate youth into sustainable activities and increase awareness around the SDGs.

We propose:

01

Building confidence through collaboration:

Governments can create more platforms for meaningful youth engagement and support youth-led initiatives. These platforms must specifically include girls and members of vulnerable populations as key stakeholders in SDG implementation, fostering capacity development and building confidence and knowledge.

02

Boosting youth engagement in climate action:

Regional leaders can continue to facilitate continuous education and awareness programmes about the SDGs, particularly targeting Climate Action. By engaging youth in climate action, as demonstrated during COP28 in the UAE, they can encourage capacity-building opportunities and fund youth innovations in this field.

03

Creating local health ambassadors:

Governments can offer their support for youth-led projects in Clean Water and Sanitation and Good Health. By involving youth in the health sector, leaders can build capacity for effective, equitable care and emergency health response in areas lacking primary healthcare. Youth can also contribute to mental health support, lifesaving testing, scientific research, and technology development.

04

Engaging youth for food security:

Given the national agendas of regional governments to strengthen food security in the region, there is a significant opportunity to engage youth in agriculture and rural development, helping to eradicate hunger and build food security in the region. Their engagement can be part of the region's strategy for self-sufficiency, and will be vital for the sustainability of food systems, simultaneously addressing unemployment, poverty, and migration.

It is time to harness the potential of the Middle Eastern youth to drive sustainable development and ensure a more prosperous and equitable future for the region.



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