

Discussant's Comments on

World Bank MENA Economic Update – Report Launch
**Overconfident: How Economic and Health Fault Lines Left
the Middle East and North Africa Ill-Prepared to Face
COVID**

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This presentation is based on the personal views of the presenter and does not necessarily represent the views of Cairo University nor J-PAL MENA.

Summary

- A tenuous and uneven economic recovery is evident across MENA countries in 2021 in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Long-term socio-economic trends (economic, demographic, and epidemiological) over the past decade left MENA with over-burdened public health systems.
- MENA health systems have been ill-prepared to adequately absorb the Covid-19-pandemic shock despite optimistic views of health authorities of preparedness of their respective health systems.
- Weak data transparency and data systems has significantly contributed to the overconfident yet ill-prepared situation of the health system.

Salient Points...My Thoughts...

- A tenuous and uneven economic recovery due to:
 - Impact of public health surveillance
 - Impact of rising commodity pricesOther factors may be as significant:
 - Pre-pandemic economic conditions (other than market orientation); Egypt?
 - Debt stabilization
 - Unemployment levels
 - Truncated economic transitions have serious implications for economic growth:
 - A need to transition to market economies is emphasized.
 - Lack of accumulation of knowledge; short, interrupted reform episodes led to interrupted growth and human development episodes, especially in middle-income MENA.
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- Structural transformation in the broader sense is indispensable.

Salient Points...My Thoughts...

- “Fiscal myopia” left MENA ill-prepared for pandemic, hurting recovery
 - Governments usually find it more convenient to focus on spending that generate short-term effects rather than long-term social gains.
 - Public employment is high, public spending on health is low (at a time when overall public spending is growing!), but the relation between them is ambiguous.
- MENA’s truncated economic transitions have been accompanied by truncated demographic and epidemiological transitions – super useful to see the big picture!

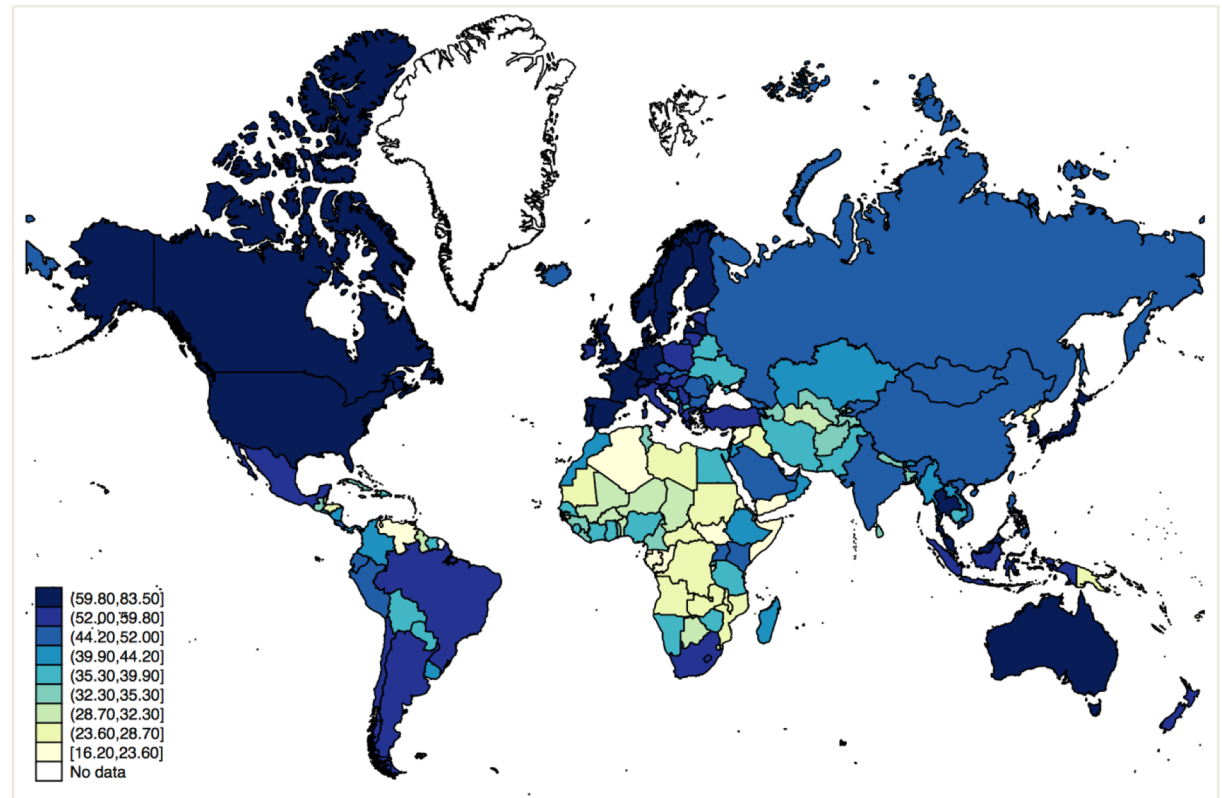
Salient Points...My Thoughts...

- Overconfident MENA: public health system preparedness versus self-assessments – Intriguing!
 - High awareness of low public health spending
 - Low familiarity with public health emergencies (set aside MERS)
- Health systems governance has a way to go!
 - Governance failures, including lack of transparency and accountability, are of paramount importance.
 - Other failures, such as low trust in public health authorities, have significant impact on the ability to induce behavior change during public health emergencies (See literature on risk communication and trust).

Salient Points...My Thoughts...

- MENA is the second least prepared region, with an average score of 36.
- The stronger the preparedness of healthcare systems, the weaker the negative impact of public health emergencies.

Global Health Security (GHS) index, 2019



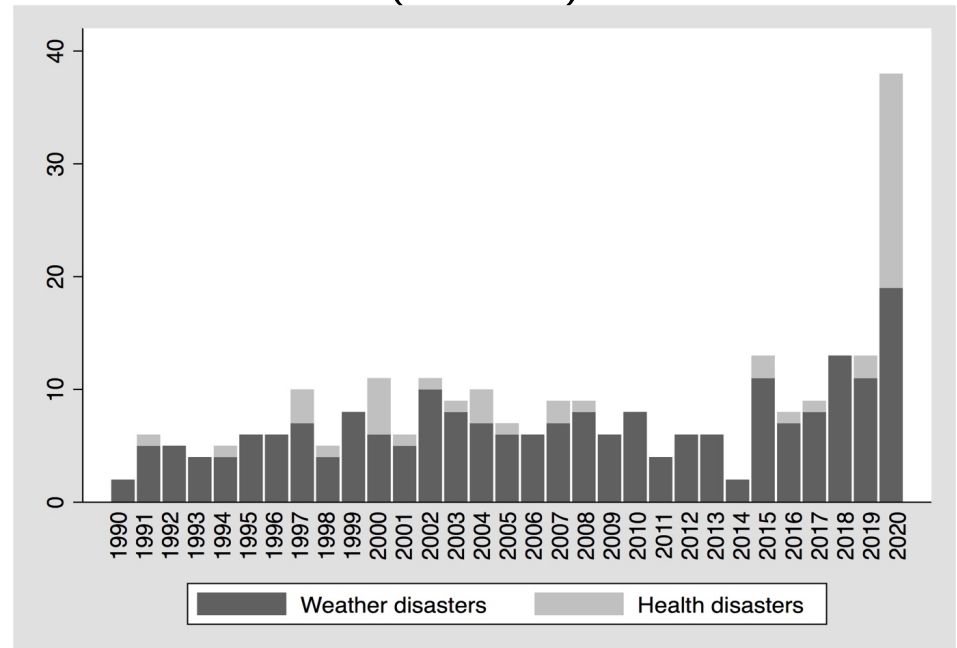
Salient Points...My Thoughts...

- Although public health emergency management (surveillance, response, preparedness, risk communication, etc.) plays a significant role in controlling disaster effects, other factors can have greater impact:
 - Health emergency finance
 - Universal health coverage (UHC)
 - Education
 - Gender equality
 - Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) coverage
- This brings us to the notion of “preparedness” in its broader sense:
 - Creating UHC systems is a priority investment during Covid-19 and beyond.
 - Improving female education helps make people resilient to shocks and better cope with stresses these shocks bring.
 - Preventing breakdowns in infrastructure and specifically failures of basic hygiene, sanitation and/or running water systems, leave populations less susceptible to elevated health risks from disease outbreaks.

The Big Picture

- Natural disasters dominate the top five long-term global risks of the World Economic Forum 2020 for the first time.
- Health (and weather disasters) evolved over time, globally and in MENA, denoting an upward trend since 2016.
- Preparedness, be it economic preparedness, health system preparedness, etc. is not a luxury in the face of rising natural disasters.
- The question is: How can the MENA region be well prepared? BIG data is one key issue.
- Collaborative action is needed.

Occurrence of weather and health disasters in MENA (1990-2020)



Prospects for Future Investigation

- Can adopting a smart approach to community healthcare behavior change be a game-changer in low- and middle-income MENA?
- How to expedite MENA adoption of digital health technologies, in general, to increase flexibility in delivering health service access and quality?
- What are the best approaches to strengthen the governance component of public health system management?
- What can explain the incomplete epidemiological transition – still high burden of communicable diseases?
- How to incentivize broad but intentional data collection, and the transparent dissemination of those data, to improve the feedback-response mechanisms needed to respond to public health emergencies?

Thank you.