

“Financial Inclusiveness Report”, report prepared for UN ESCWA, Jan 2026

“Financial Inclusiveness Report”, prepared with contributions from Nasser Saidi & Aathira Prasad, is available on UN ESCWA (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia)’s [website](#).

The Financial Inclusiveness Index 2025 provides an integrated, data-driven assessment of financial inclusion across 139 countries by measuring three linked pillars: access, usage and barriers, through both traditional and digital channels. Built on transparent selection and treatment rules, the Financial Inclusiveness Index enables consistent cross-country benchmarking and highlights where financial ecosystems are succeeding in expanding infrastructure but failing to translate this into meaningful participation.

Within the Arab region, progress in access and digital infrastructure is increasingly visible, while usage continues to lag. This is the case even in high-income countries, suggesting that constraints are related to adoption incentives, literacy, trust and regulatory/cybersecurity readiness. Comparison with 2023 shows infrastructure gains alongside a deterioration in ease of access, and a rise in traditional barriers driven by growing distrust in some contexts. The report translates these findings into actionable priorities, emphasizing payment digitization, simplified onboarding, targeted capability-building, and enabling frameworks for financial technology and mobile money to accelerate inclusive and resilient financial participation.

A central finding for this report is the underperformance of

the Arab region in financial inclusion. Average account ownership is about 49 per cent, far below the global average of 79 per cent. The gender gap is among the widest in the world, at around 15 percentage points for account ownership and similarly large across several usage indicators. Despite high mobile phone penetration, adoption of digital payments and mobile money remains limited. The most frequently cited obstacle by unbanked adults is “insufficient funds” (71.9 per cent), alongside high costs, documentation requirements, limited trust and uneven digital readiness. While barriers declined in many regions between 2023 and 2025, the Arab region saw a moderate increase.

Within the Arab region, the analysis in this report focuses on 16 ESCWA member States, ranging from high-income Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) economies to conflict-affected middle-income countries, but no low-income economies. GCC countries perform strongly, with Bahrain leading the Arab region and ranking 31st globally, followed by the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. Middle-income countries show gradual progress but remain constrained by cost and capability gaps, while conflict-affected countries face systemic obstacles across all pillars.