

ENABLING SUCCESS

SUPPORTING YOUTH IN MENA
IN THEIR TRANSITION FROM
LEARNING TO DECENT WORK



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MAY 2023

This report is an initiative of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Regional Office for the Arab States and the UNICEF Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa, in collaboration with the European Training Foundation (ETF). It has been developed as an analytical contribution to the 2022 Regional High-Level Meeting on 'Young People's learning, skills and transition to decent work' (Amman, 23-24 May 2022). The analytical work and the drafting of the final report have been conducted by Legacy Social Development Advisory.

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Foreword

Transitioning from adolescence to adulthood is often challenging for young people worldwide. However, in addition to the inevitable uncertainties and questioning, these are also times of skills-building, exploration and intellectual, professional and physical growth. The systems in place to support children and youth during these times have the potential to help them flourish or create additional bottlenecks and barriers.

More than 250 million children and youth aged 0–to–24 years live in MENA countries, comprising around 47 percent of the total population. The rapidly growing population of children, adolescents and youth in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region opens numerous opportunities as well as myriad challenges that the region struggles to navigate. Harnessing these opportunities for the MENA societies would mean achieving higher economic growth rates, greater equity and well-being, and better social indicators.

Despite widespread awareness of youth employment challenges in the region among governments, other labour market actors (employers and workers) and academia, MENA's youth unemployment rate has long been the highest in the world. In 2019, just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 29.7 per cent of young people aged 15–24 were neither employed, in school or receiving training. For young women that figure rises to a very worrying 42.4 per cent. The latest data show that young people are still three times more likely than older workforce cohorts to be unemployed. Various factors contribute to this situation, among which a key obstacle is the limited effectiveness of existing education and training systems to equip adolescents and young people with the skills needed to secure their future as adults. This report represents an urgent call for investment in modernizing education and training systems and developing and implementing job-creation strategies targeting youth.

The report is a result of collaboration between the ILO and UNICEF, with expertise contribution from the European Training Foundation, and the technical work conducted by Legacy Social Development, as part of a joint effort to seek young people's voices and inputs, along with other stakeholders' suggestions, to find ways to address the bottlenecks hindering young people's transition to the labour market.

Due to their shared concern about the long-term implications of widespread youth unemployment, the ILO and UNICEF joined forces to produce this report to inform engagement with policy makers on the issue of young people's precarious transition to the labour market and their search for decent jobs.

The report provides an original literature review on youth transitions from education and learning to labour market and active life, identifies bottlenecks in policy and programmatic responses, highlights successful practices and provides policy recommendations.

The study was originally commissioned to generate evidence and recommendations for presentation at the MENA Regional High-Level Meeting on Young People's Learning, Skilling and Transition to Decent Work held in Amman on 23–24 May 2022, convened by ILO, UNICEF, UNDP and UNFPA under the umbrella of the UN Arab States Issue-Based Coalition on Adolescents and Young People.

The meeting brought together over 300 participants from 18 countries, including government ministers and delegations, the private sector, civil society and young people. Participants discussed best practices and made national voluntary commitments regarding policies, institutions and the adoption of practices to enable effective transitions from learning to work in response to rapid technological advances and changing labour market demand.

The recommendations offered here demonstrate immense potential for guiding implementation of the commitments made by participating delegations to accelerate young people's transition to decent jobs. The study also serves to set a baseline for measuring the progress and results that are expected to result from continuing efforts in this critical area for adolescents and young people across the Middle East and North Africa.

We hope you enjoy reading the study and look forward to advancing this agenda with you.

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION
Ruba Jaradat

Assistant Director General and
Regional Director for Arab States

UNICEF
Adele Khodr

Regional Director for the Middle
East and North Africa

EUROPEAN TRAINING FOUNDATION
Xavier Matheu De Cortada

Director a.i.

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This report has been developed as an analytical contribution to the 2022 Regional High-Level Meeting on ‘Young People’s learning, skills and transition to decent work’ (Amman, 23-24 May 2022), and, more generally as an evidence contribution to advocacy and policy making in the areas relating to transitioning of MENA’s young generations from education to the workplace and to an active life.

The analytical work was conducted, and the report was prepared by Legacy Social Development Advisory. The research team was led by Nader Kabbani and Nejla Ben Mimoune and included Abedah Diab, Najwa Al Jamali, and Shaza Afifi.

The project was guided and supervised by Kishore Kumar Singh (ILO Arab States), Leonardo Menchini and Marleen Renders (UNICEF MENARO), and Donatella Di Vozzo, Sabina Nari, and Manuela Prina (ETF). The report benefited from valuable comments

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young people throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region continue to struggle with the difficult, and often delayed, transition “from learning to earning”, let alone finding decent work. Young people must navigate a myriad of bottlenecks and obstacles in their efforts to secure meaningful employment with decent wages, working conditions, and clear pathways for career advancement. Over the past three decades, governments across the region have introduced a range of policies and programmes aimed at addressing youth transitions to employment. However, most of these efforts have been limited in scope and, in the aggregate, have not had much success in moving the needle on core development outcomes.

YOUNG PEOPLE IN MENA FACE A PRECARIOUS TRANSITION FROM LEARNING TO EARNING

- Unemployment rates among MENA youth (ages 15–24 years) have been the highest in the world for over three decades, reaching 28 per cent in 2020, compared to the global average of 15 per cent. Despite differences in economic conditions across the range of MENA countries, almost all youth unemployment rates are higher than the global average, including young nationals in the Gulf. The only exception is Qatar, which is able to provide public-sector jobs to anyone who wants one.
- Many young people, especially young women, opt out of the labour market altogether. Less than 6 per cent of young women in MENA are employed, by far the lowest share in the world. Yet, the rate of enrolment in education or training is 50 per cent – higher than the global average and on par with young men. The fact that women’s educational attainment has not translated into improved labour market outcomes is affected by the region’s conservative social norms and a widespread emphasis on traditional gender roles.
- For marginalized groups, transition to work is even more difficult. Young people in countries of conflict have limited access to education, and decent work opportunities are few. Refugees are particularly susceptible to difficult work conditions and vulnerable to exploitation. Young people in rural areas have access to schools, but the quality of their education is lower than in urban areas. They also have fewer economic opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated a number of these inequalities, with marginalized communities unable to engage in remote learning.

YOUNG PEOPLE IN MENA ARE CONFRONTED WITH DEFICITS IN OPPORTUNITY, SKILLS, AND AGENCY

- Overregulation has limited the ability of the private sector to grow and create decent jobs. More than 75 per cent of young workers in the region work informally in low-wage jobs with limited benefits, job security, or opportunities for career advancement. Increasingly, young people are turning to self-employment in the so-called “gig economy”. While offering greater flexibility, gig jobs lack steady pay, social protection, or organized collective bargaining.
- Students across the region are leaving school with credentials, but without the knowledge and skills they need to succeed, such as creative thinking, problem-solving and leadership skills. In a digitalized world, these skills are increasingly in demand. Especially worrisome is the poor quality of technical and vocational education and training (TVET). TVET institutions tend to use outdated equipment, curricula and pedagogy, and are often unresponsive to labour market needs.
- Faced with limited opportunities, many young people develop a mindset of dependency, and look to the State to provide solutions. There is little room for the kind of social or political participation that would allow them to contribute to solutions. Young people who create their own opportunities, say, through entrepreneurship, confront a difficult start-up ecosystem. As a result, many young people end up migrating, even though this may not be their preferred course of action.

EDUCATIONAL REFORM EFFORTS NEED TO GO FURTHER

- Despite progress in school enrolment, learning outcomes remain weak. MENA governments have focused on updating school curricula. Several have undertaken more fundamental reforms, such as improving teacher quality and training, integrating digital platforms, and reducing reliance on national exams. Countries undertaking reforms have seen some improvements in student achievement. However, results have been limited or temporary, suggesting that such reforms do not go deep enough. Few have attempted to increase autonomy within schools or teach critical thinking and independent enquiry within the classroom.
- TVET systems in the region suffer from a lack of resources, outdated equipment, curricula that do not reflect market needs, a lack of well-trained instructors, limited hands-on experience, and social stigma. MENA governments have responded by developing stronger ties with the private sector through dual systems and sectoral skills councils, which inform governments on the skills needs of the market. These efforts should be expanded in scope and scale. An important aspect of TVET reform remains to raise it from its second-class status. This can be done through better funding and developing national qualification frameworks (NQFs) to enable students to move between education tracks more easily.
- Lifelong learning has become increasingly important at a time when skill requirements are constantly changing. Young people must become lifelong learners, while employers must support employees to develop new skills and provide opportunities for career advancement. There are few options for young people and adults to access lifelong learning or second-chance training programmes in the region. Current education and training systems are poorly equipped to generate lifelong learning options. Nonetheless, some recent progress has been made with national frameworks. However, project implementation under these frameworks is generally poor.

JOB CREATION MUST BE A PRIORITY

- Governments across the region have attempted to stimulate private-sector growth and job creation. They have promoted investment-friendly macro-economic conditions, worked to improve the business environment, streamlined regulations, and expanded access to credit. However, their efforts to promote free and fair competition – critical elements for firm growth – have been only partially successful. MENA governments must continue to create and expand spaces that do not give preference to insiders, such as free trade and special economic zones, export-oriented industries, and emerging sectors that rely on innovation and technology.

- Governments have encouraged youth entrepreneurship as a way to help young people create economic opportunities for themselves and for others. They have expanded the provision of entrepreneurship education, awareness-raising, enterprise support, and access to finance. They have also supported business incubators, skills development programmes, mentoring, and more. Despite these efforts, young people still find it difficult to start and grow a business. One constraint is the widespread lack of access to finance. Another is that programmes that support entrepreneurship generally only benefit privileged youth and are difficult for others to access.

- The issue of mobility within work and career advancement has not received much attention. In MENA, a young person's first job is typically informal, with low pay, limited benefits and a lack of job security. As such, both policymakers and young people tend to fixate on the conditions of the job rather than prospects for job mobility and career advancement. This is concerning because, in terms of their life course, it is better in the long run to begin a career in a low-paying job or apprenticeship that provides valuable experience, skills development and rapid career advancement than a higher-paying job that provides few such opportunities.

SUPPORT FOR TRANSITIONING YOUTH IS KEY

- There is a lack of career guidance and limited information available to support employment decisions. Young people know little about the types of careers that might suit them and what jobs might be available when they leave school, and little about entry-level positions and wages. They also lack “employment skills” such as how to write a résumé or prepare for an interview. MENA governments should improve and expand career guidance programmes and make up-to-date information about current and future job prospects available to young people. Special attention should be given to making career services accessible to all.

- Young people have few opportunities to gain work experience before their first real job. Very few take up an internship or apprenticeship, and volunteering and social work are not common. There is also a stigma surrounding unpaid work. Young women face an added hurdle, as social norms dictate that they work in formal settings. However, opportunities in the formal sector are limited. In response, private universities have begun introducing compulsory internships into their curricula. Youth-oriented organizations should tackle this situation through programmes that legitimize internships and work experience, providing youth with a “shield” against social stigma.

- Some governments have turned to direct financial support for unemployed youth, including wage subsidies, unemployment benefits and subsidized training. Such programmes have not been found, in general, to be very effective. The employment impact of wage subsidies tends to decay quickly. Paid training and cash assistance decrease the urgency to find a job. However, there are examples of successful subsidized internship programmes administered through the employer. A better alternative is to subsidize services that young people need to access employment opportunities, such as financial support for transportation and day care.

THE WAY FORWARD – A NEW CALL TO ACTION

- Despite decades of interventions, MENA countries have not been successful at overcoming the barriers and bottlenecks hindering young people as they attempt to transition from education to decent work. Youth unemployment remains persistently high across the region and labour force participation remains low, especially among young women. Education and skills gaps remain; in some countries they have worsened. With few exceptions, private-sector reforms have not led to an enabling environment for businesses to grow, thrive and create enough decent jobs.

- One issue is a fragmented policy environment and lack of coordination among key actors. To address this, countries have introduced ministries of youth to help coordinate youth policy. However, they often they lack sufficient capacity and must rely on front-line ministries to deliver the proposed programmes, services and reforms. Another issue is insufficient governance with respect to the administration of policies and programmes, including a lack of institutional capacity to implement ambitious strategies and limited feedback mechanisms – vital for course correction.

- Time is of the essence. Several global drivers of change are underway and will affect economic, social and environmental outcomes across the region and the world. These include climate change, demographic shifts, urbanization, technological change and a transition to renewable energy. Each driver of change on their own represents an opportunity to develop better options for young people. Together, they provide a strong incentive for countries to adapt and invest in reskilling their workforce, creating the potential for rapid development and growth.



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Policy recommendations

GETTING THE BASICS RIGHT – LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS MUST BE STRUCTURAL

1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education reforms should increase teacher training and autonomy, create environments that can accommodate differential approaches to learning, and create space for students to develop critical thinking and enquiry. Systems must become better able to adapt to changing conditions.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TVET must improve links to the labour market, engage the private sector in skills identification and delivery, and increase workplace learning. Governments should reduce the social stigma surrounding TVET by building pathways to general education tracks that are supported by NQFs.
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governments must enable the private sector to grow and create jobs. Reforms should promote export-oriented free zones and innovation-driven growth sectors that can become globally competitive and create jobs. They should also increase support for youth entrepreneurship.
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people need jobs that enable mobility and career advancement. Reforms should expand initiatives that support internships, apprenticeships and on-the-job training. Governments should incentivize firms to develop employee skills and create pathways for advancement.
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policymakers, youth, and businesses need better information to make decisions. Governments should enhance their labour market information systems. They should expand career guidance services to help youth identify the kinds of careers in demand that align with their aptitudes and preferences.

IMPROVING IMPLEMENTATION OF YOUTH-ORIENTED ORGANIZATIONS

1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governments must increase coordination among public agencies serving youth. They need to update national youth policies and ensure that priorities are harmonized within national budgets. These strategies should be linked to implementation plans and coordination mechanisms.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizations serving youth must improve their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) efforts. Policies and initiatives need credible information on performance that can help identify gaps in delivery, support course-correction decisions and identify programmes that fail to deliver meaningful results.
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governments must improve the implementation capacities of their agencies. This should include increased autonomy, with space for innovation and learning from mistakes. Youth organizations must become learning organizations and hubs for policy innovation.
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governments and youth organizations must involve young people in finding solutions to the issues that affect them and contribute positively to developing their communication. Young people should be involved in decision-making and policy development.

IDENTIFY, DESIGN AND SCALE UP PROMISING INTERVENTIONS**1**

- Governments should develop more human-centred and targeted services that support young people's transition, with input from stakeholders and beneficiaries. These include providing employability training, career guidance, job placement, subsidies for transportation and day care.

2

- Governments and youth organizations should expand business and entrepreneurship training in schools and ensure adequate access to finance, business development services and mentorship support for young entrepreneurs, especially young women.

3

- Governments must prioritize lifelong learning. Change is coming more quickly than formal education systems can respond. Young people need to develop skills that will allow them to become better lifelong learners with the ability to access resources that support continuous education.

4

- Governments and the international community must expand educational opportunities for refugee children and youth. They must also work to create more opportunities for refugees to work in host communities or migrate to other countries where such opportunities exist.

INTRODUCTION



For decades, young people throughout the MENA region have struggled to find decent work after completing their education. While young people across the world must navigate the often-challenging transition to stable and productive employment, the barriers and uncertainties faced by MENA youth are particularly long and difficult, especially for those from the most vulnerable groups in society. Young people must navigate a myriad of bottlenecks and obstacles as they strive to secure meaningful employment with decent wages and working conditions, and carve out clear pathways for career advancement.

In MENA the search for decent work can take years for young job-seekers. Along the way, many discover that the knowledge and skills they acquired at school are not sufficient. They discover that the kinds of public-sector jobs that their parents had access to are no longer available and that the work opportunities and wages on offer do not align with their expectations or aspirations. They find little in the way of accessible, useful labour market information to guide their career choice and job search. They find themselves confronted by fast-changing markets, driven by rapid technological progress, but lack the

lifelong learning skills to maintain the relevance of their knowledge and skills. Many eventually accept, and get stuck in, precarious jobs that do not offer the pay or opportunities for advancement they need to start a family. Others, especially young women, opt out of the labour market altogether. The result is lost effort, wasted potential, increased vulnerability, and high levels of frustration. In some countries, this frustration has spilled over into social unrest.

Many young people attempt to escape this reality by migrating in search of better opportunities, often risking their lives in the process. In 2021, almost 200,000 migrants and refugees attempted to cross illegally into Europe, mainly from the Arab countries of Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Syria, as well as from Afghanistan.¹ Leaving their families and communities behind, in many cases paying traffickers to get them across, migrating youth often exhaust their savings and risk their lives to face the

MANY YOUNG PEOPLE ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE THIS REALITY BY MIGRATING IN SEARCH OF BETTER OPPORTUNITIES, OFTEN RISKING THEIR LIVES IN THE PROCESS. IN 2021, ALMOST 200,000 MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES ATTEMPTED TO CROSS ILLEGALLY INTO EUROPE, MAINLY FROM THE ARAB COUNTRIES OF ALGERIA, MOROCCO, TUNISIA, AND SYRIA, AS WELL AS FROM AFGHANISTAN.

uncertainties of living illegally in preference to the dearth of hope and opportunity offered by their home countries.

Governments across the region understand the predicament of youth and the difficulties they face in transitioning from learning to earning and finding decent work. Over the past three decades, with technical support from international organizations and financial support from donors, MENA governments have introduced a plethora of policies and programmes aimed at addressing the various aspects of youth transition, such as skills development, career guidance and entrepreneurship support. However, at the aggregate level, these efforts have not proved successful in moving the needle on core development outcomes. Overall skill levels remain low and misaligned with the needs of the labour market, unemployment rates remain high (the highest in the world), young women continue to opt out of the labour market and most jobs continue to be informal and precarious.

There are several reasons for the lack of progress in improving overall labour market outcomes for youth. First, over the past three decades, the MENA region has experienced a large demographic youth bulge that placed substantial pressure on education sys-

tems and labour markets. Such demographic waves can contribute to greater economic growth and prosperity, so long that the economies experiencing them can create enough decent jobs to absorb incoming cohorts. Unfortunately, most countries of the region were not able to do so. Second, most of the policies and programmes designed to support youth have been limited in scope. Instead of taking a holistic approach, programmes tended to narrowly address specific aspects of the transition. Focusing on one aspect of the challenge at a time is not enough.

This report aims to summarize the existing evidence on young people entering the labour market, identify gaps and bottlenecks in policy and programmatic responses and highlight successful practices and includes a set of recommendations for policy discussion and national and regional advocacy.

The report is divided into three parts. Part 1 sets the context. It provides an overview of the issue of transition from learning to earning and finding decent work. It identifies underlying deficits in skills, opportunity and agency. It then highlights the experiences

of a range of young people in different contexts. Part 2 then focuses on deficits in learning, weaknesses in earning, and gaps in support during the transition. It discusses barriers and bottlenecks and past public responses. Part 3 articulates a call to action and draws attention to the kinds of pending global challenges that make the issue of youth transition to employment more urgent than ever. The report ends with an outline of policy recommendations.

OVERALL SKILL LEVELS REMAIN LOW AND MISALIGNED WITH THE NEEDS OF THE LABOUR MARKET, UNEMPLOYMENT RATES REMAIN HIGH (THE HIGHEST IN THE WORLD), YOUNG WOMEN CONTINUE TO OPT OUT OF THE LABOUR MARKET AND MOST JOBS CONTINUE TO BE INFORMAL AND PRECARIOUS.

PART 1. YOUNG PEOPLE'S PRECARIOUS TRANSITION FROM LEARNING TO EARNING



1.1. MENA and young people's transition into work

Young people across MENA face difficult and delayed transitions from education to employment. The search for decent work often lasts years, giving rise to persistently high rates of joblessness and unemployment. Unemployment rates among young people (15–24 years old)ⁱ in the regionⁱⁱ have been highest in the world at least since 1990 (FIGURE 1).² Between 1991 and 2019, they hovered between 22 and 28 per cent, compared with a global average of between 9 and 14 per cent. In 2020, unemployment was pushed higher by the COVID-19 pandemic, with youth unemployment in MENA reaching 28 per cent, compared with 15 per cent globally.

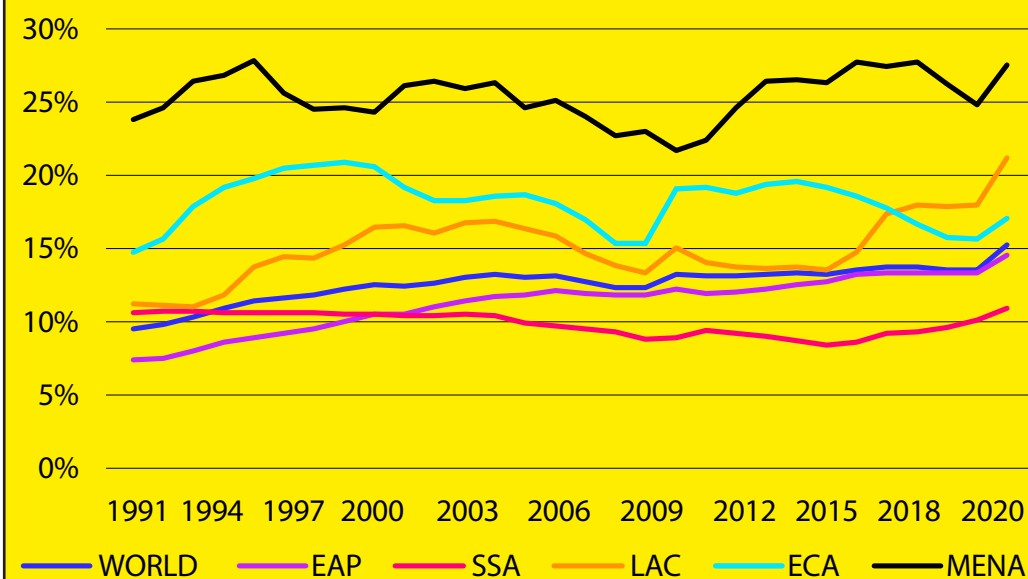
It is interesting to note that, despite stark differences in economic conditions between countries, young people across the region face similar difficulties in transitioning from learning to earning. Youth unemployment rates are higher than the global average across all income categories, even in the high-income countries of the Gulf. Since 2017, the highest youth unemployment rates in non-conflict countries have been in Algeria (39 per cent), Jordan (37 per cent), Tunisia (35 per cent), Saudi Arabia (32 per cent among nationals), Kuwait (27 per cent

among nationals), and Morocco (25 per cent).³ In Palestine, youth unemployment rates stand at around 40 per cent. In open conflict countries, they are even higher. The only exception is Qatar, which has a small enough national population that it can provide public-sector jobs to all young nationals who want one. MENA countries of all income levels also have low rates

of female labour force participation and similar deficits in opportunities, skills, and agency, thus impeding a smooth and successful transition from education to decent work. Throughout this report, we present both a regional perspective on the issue, as well as delve into country-specific contexts and examples.

- i. In most UN data and reports, youth are defined as aged between 15 and 24 years. However, studies of youth transitioning to work typically cover ages 15–29 years to capture those completing university. In this report, we try to extend the data, whenever possible, to include young people aged 15–29 years.
- ii. The countries covered in this report include Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, UAE and Yemen. Unless otherwise stated, in this report aggregate data for the MENA region covers these countries. The term 'Palestine' in this report is used in reference to what is alternatively referred to by different entities as the State of Palestine and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. For ease of narrative, this report uses the simple conventional names of countries and territories rather than full official ones. The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this report do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the authors, ILO, UNICEF or ETF concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

FIGURE 1. UNEMPLOYMENT RATES (AGES 15–24) BY REGION AND YEAR, 1991–2020



SOURCE: ILOSTAT EXPLORER (2022)

NOTE: EAP = EAST ASIA AND PACIFIC; SSA = SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA; LAC = LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN; ECA = EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA.

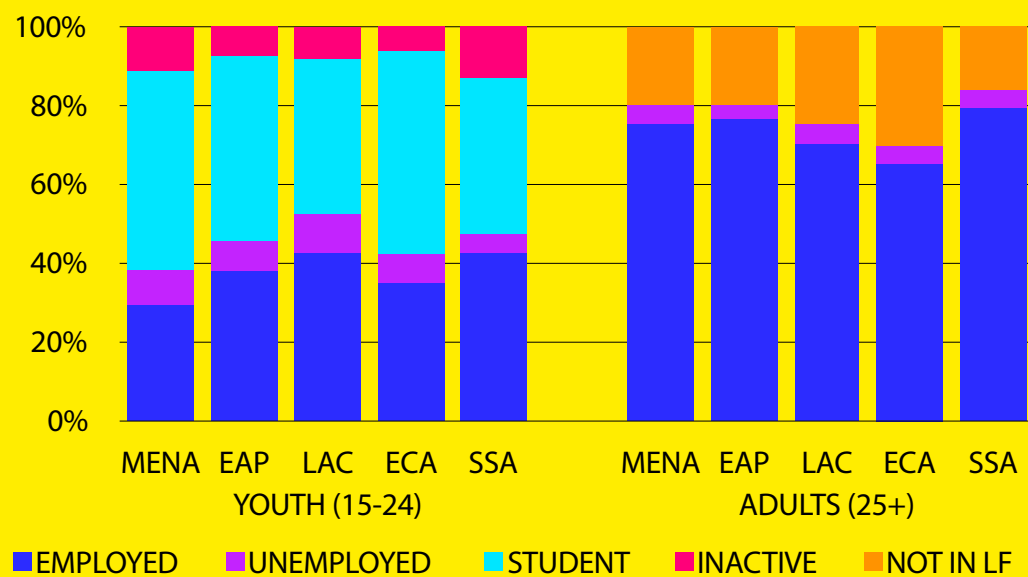
Faced with a dearth of decent employment opportunities, many young people across MENA opt out of the labour market altogether. Among young men, an estimated 11 per cent were neither in education or training nor in the labour force in 2020 (FIGURE 2).⁴ This is one of the highest rates of inactivity for males in the world, and underscores the fact that unemployment among young men (23 per cent of the labour force aged 15–24 or 8.8 per cent

of the total youth population) is the highest in the world. However, in line with their social role as breadwinners, young men eventually come to accept whatever job they can find, or migrate. Thus, only 20 per cent of adult men (aged 25 and over) are out of the labour force, a proportion on par with, or even less than, other developing regions. In figures 2 and 3, students and inactive populations are, by definition, counted as being not in the labour force.

For young women the story is dramatically different. Young women have very low rates of labour force participation (FIGURE 3), estimated at only 10 per cent in 2020, compared with the global average of 31 per cent and 26 per cent in EAP, the next closest region. Furthermore, the unemployment rate among young women reached 45 per cent of the female labour force in 2020, substantially higher than the global average of 15 per cent and nearly twice

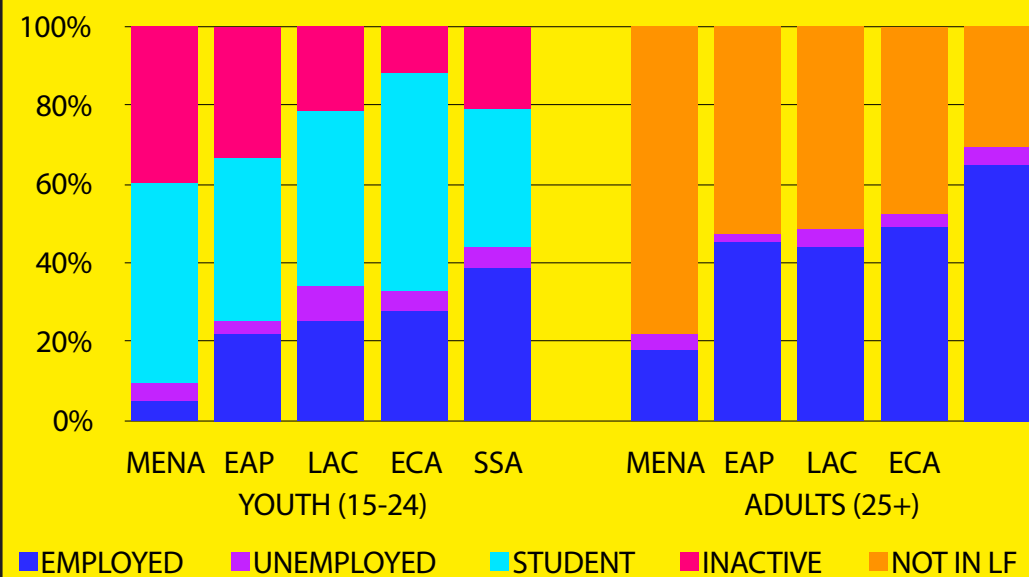
as high as their male counterparts. This means that among the very small share of young women participating in the labour market, a large proportion are unable to find acceptable employment.

FIGURE 2. MALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION STATUS BY AGE AND REGION, 2020



SOURCE: ILOSTAT EXPLORER (2022)

FIGURE 3. FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION STATUS BY AGE AND REGION, 2020



SOURCE: ILOSTAT EXPLORER (2022)

On the other hand, more than 50 per cent of young women in MENA are enrolled in education or training. This is on par with their male counterparts and higher than the world average of 42 per cent. Indeed, women across the region have made remarkable progress in terms of educational attainment over the past decades, closing the gender gap in terms of years of education.⁵ They have especially excelled in higher education. Across the region, the proportion of women enrolled in tertiary institutions grew, on average, from 10 per cent in 1990 to 43 per cent in 2020,⁶ surpassing their male counterparts whose enrolment stood at 40 per cent in 2020.⁷

Yet, remarkably, such progress has not translated into improved labour market outcomes. Young women struggle to find acceptable employment; most eventually give up and drop out of the labour market altogether. This represents a major underutilization of human capital. As women have become increasingly well-educated, female labour force participation rates have actually declined in some countries, notably Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Yemen.⁸ Researchers have dubbed this phenomenon the “MENA paradox”.⁹ After leaving school, the majority of women choose not to work. In 2020 labour force participation rates among adult wom-

en (aged 25+) stood at only 23 per cent, substantially below the global average of 50 per cent, as well as the closest comparative region, EAP (47 per cent).

Many factors lie behind women’s inability or unwillingness to enter the labour market. They may choose or feel pressured to focus on family care and raising children, especially given the lack of policies that facilitate work–life balance, such as flexible working hours and affordable childcare. For instance, young Qatari women enrolled in university say that their top priority once married is caring for their family, irrespective of their education and career goals.¹⁰ Social norms also restrict women’s labour force participation. In patriarchal societies, men may consider women’s employment threatening to their status as household heads. They may also be concerned about women interacting with unknown men.¹¹ Other contributing factors include unequal legal protection and lack of financial inclusion. In 2018, for example, 73 per cent of adult Egyptian women either did not have a bank account or had limited access to financial services, a 12 per cent gap compared with Egyptian men.¹² In addition, women from peripheral and rural areas may face a lack of adequate transport options.

Despite the low level of labour force participation, when they seek work, young women of the region struggle to find acceptable employment opportunities. They (and their families) prefer jobs in the public or formal private sector, which offer a more professional work environment. However, opportunities in the formal sector are few and far between and discrimination also plays a role. Employers are reluctant to employ women, who are perceived

as more likely to be absent from work or quit their jobs to tend to family care responsibilities. Women also face limited mobility and are reluctant to work in locations away from home that limit their ability to respond to family needs. Collectively, these factors substantially prolong the search for employment for young women and push many to leave the labour market and join the discouraged working-age population.

MANY FACTORS LIE BEHIND WOMEN’S INABILITY OR UNWILLINGNESS TO ENTER THE LABOUR MARKET. THEY MAY CHOOSE OR FEEL PRESSURED TO FOCUS ON FAMILY CARE AND RAISING CHILDREN, ESPECIALLY GIVEN THE LACK OF POLICIES THAT FACILITATE WORK–LIFE BALANCE, SUCH AS FLEXIBLE WORKING HOURS AND AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE.

1.2. Deficits in opportunity, skills, and agency

There are a number of key factors behind the high rates of youth unemployment and joblessness in the MENA region. First and foremost is the inability of the region's economies to create enough decent jobs. Second, weaknesses in the education system mean that young people graduate without the knowledge and skills required by employers. Third, institutions reduce young peoples' agency rather than empower them to succeed and contribute to their country's development. In the end, after months or years looking for decent, meaningful work, most unemployed youth settle for low-paying informal jobs that offer little in the way of security and benefits, or opportunities for advancement.

Limited economic opportunities

The deficit in decent jobs in the formal sector can be traced back to the public-sector development model pursued by most countries of the region since the 1960s.¹³ By the 1990s, public-sector employment in MENA had become the highest in the developing world.¹⁴ Public-sector wages were also 30 per cent higher than those in the private sector, a situation not observed in other developing regions.¹⁵ However, many of these government jobs were not linked to productive output, thus representing a financial drag on the region's economies. The large public-sector wages bill eventually became financially unsustainable, and governments were generally forced to limit recruitment, greatly affecting the employment prospects of young labour market entrants.

To mitigate the decline in the public sector's ability to create jobs, starting in the 1980s, MENA countries introduced economic reforms to increase the role of the private sector. However, because of the social structures of political economies of the region, these reforms often ended up mainly benefiting well-connected firms. The result was that the formal private sector became dominated by large low-productivity, but connected firms that were unable to create enough decent jobs.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the private sector more broadly remained highly regulated, ensuring that unconnected firms could not compete on a level playing field, thereby stifling their ability to grow, formalize and create decent jobs.¹⁷

Overregulation and rent-seeking behaviour allowed connected firms to survive even when they were not very competitive, allowing them to undervalue and under-invest in workers' skills. As a result, MENA firms are not well connected to global value chains. Indeed, together with sub-Saharan Africa, it is the least connected region in the world.¹⁸ The economic structures of most countries of the region are based on the model of an unproductive consumer market, with a labour market producing primary and intermediate goods and unsophisti-

cated services. Such a model adds little value and tends to employ workers with low-medium skill levels. In Tunisia, for example, agri-food and the car part industry often employ overqualified youth who cannot find other jobs that match their skill levels.

Today, employment opportunities in the public sector continue to be limited and MENA governments continue to overregulate the private sector. As a result, economies are unable to create enough decent jobs for the emerging cohorts of young people. The situation is exacerbated further by labour laws that benefit existing workers at the expense of new entrants.^{19,20} Importantly, firms are reluctant to hire untested young people, whom they cannot easily let go if their skill set is not a good match. As a result, young people continue to struggle to find decent, meaningful work in the public and formal private sectors, and youth unemployment rates remain high across the region.

Faced with this shortage of decent employment opportunities, young people often wait for years to find work in either the public or formal private sector. During this time, they might queue for a government job or register with a public employment office, which are available in most MENA countries.

TODAY, EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR CONTINUE TO BE LIMITED AND MENA GOVERNMENTS CONTINUE TO OVERREGULATE THE PRIVATE SECTOR.

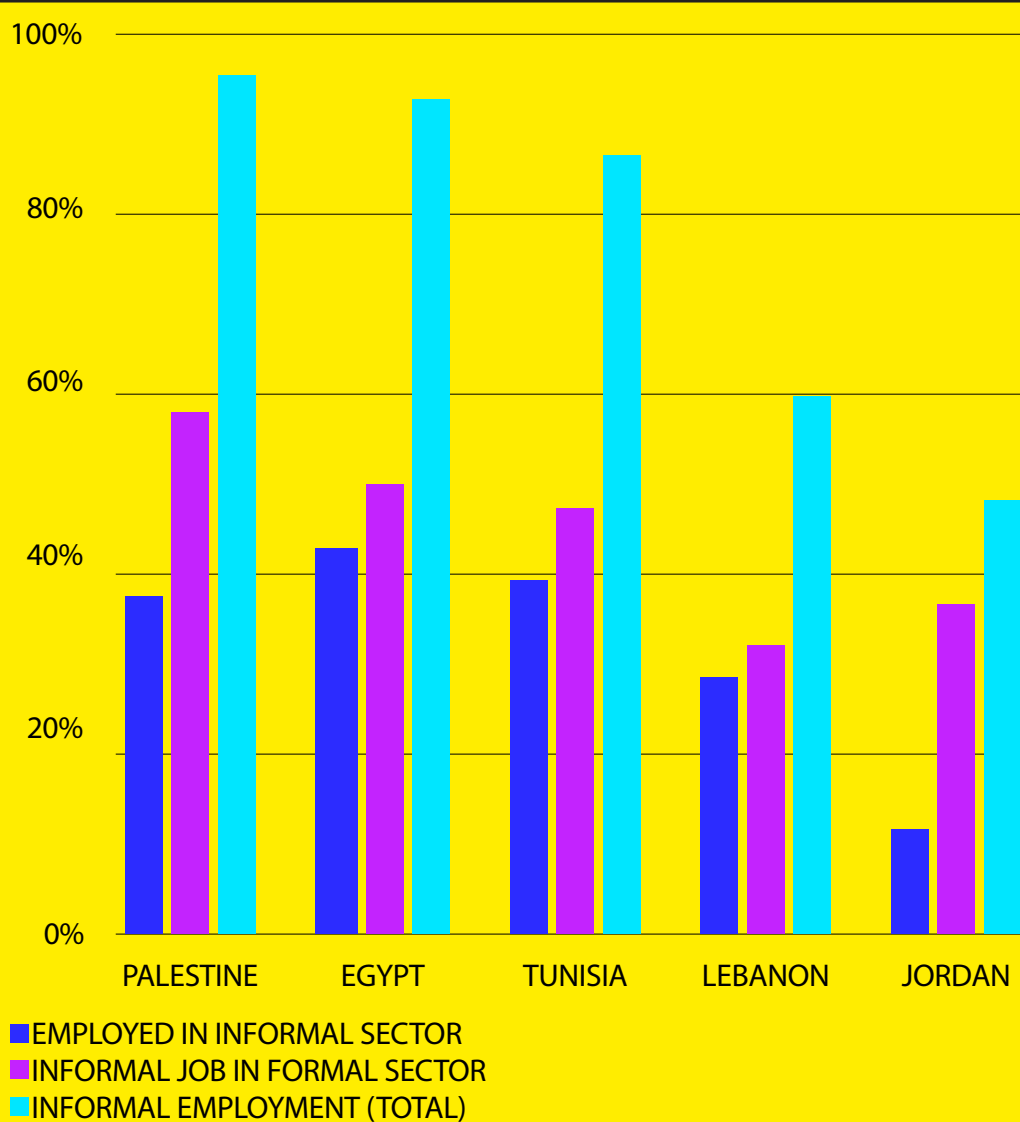
They might sign up with a training provider to acquire additional skills or certifications that could improve their employment prospects. Some may seek experience through internships or on-the-job training, although such opportunities are few. Long spells of unemployment, while waiting for the right economic opportunities, prolong young people's transition to adulthood in other aspects of life, such as marriage and family formation. This situation, coined "waithood", limits the ability of young people to fully experience adult life.²¹ Some families can afford to support their adult children, giving them time to find decent work. While family support can prolong the search for work, it also serves as an important social protection buffer.

In the end, however, there are simply not enough jobs in the formal sector. Thus, most young people are eventually forced to accept a job in the unregulated informal sector. Vulnerable youth without family support are forced to accept the less-desirable jobs. These jobs are characterized by low pay, few benefits, poor working conditions, little job security and few opportunities for career advancement. More than 75 per cent of workers aged 15–29 years old work informally, either in the infor-

mal sector or in an informal job in the formal sector.²² In Tunisia, Egypt and Palestine, the informal sector accounts for around 80 per cent of youth employment (FIGURE 4). Some young people see informal work as a stepping-stone to a better job as part of their transition. However, many find themselves trapped in precarious work conditions with few opportunities for advancement.

And still, despite the size of the informal sector opportunities remain limited. Unregistered firms are reluctant to grow beyond a certain point, even those experiencing sufficient demand for their products or services, in order to avoid drawing the attention of regulators and tax collectors.²³ This constraint on firms stifles economic growth and limits job creation.

FIGURE 4. INFORMAL YOUTH EMPLOYMENT BY SECTOR AND COUNTRY, 2013-2015



SOURCE: RALITZA, ELDER AND STEPHAN (2016)

Many young people are turning to self-employment in the so-called “gig economy” to secure a livelihood. While the gig economy has long existed, it has gained prominence with the rise of digital platforms, such as ride-sharing services (e.g. Uber and Careem), delivery services (e.g. Talabat) and freelance platforms (e.g. Upwork and Mostaq). The gig economy is often touted as a way for people to achieve greater flexibility and freedom. Indeed, young jobseekers often consider this a better option than an unregulated job in the informal sector. Young women might be attracted to the flexible working conditions. However, there are downsides. Securing top ratings and ensuring that platform algorithms direct customers requires quick responses and constant engagement. So, freedom and flexibility are more hypothetical than real. Gig workers also lack steady pay, social protection and mechanisms for resolving disputes with clients or platform operators.²⁴ The nature of digital platforms also makes it difficult to unionize and engage in collective bargaining.

The contraction in public-sector employment across the region, with few good private-sector alternatives, has pushed many women into unemployment or out of the labour market.

Women tend to prefer public-sector jobs, which are more family-friendly with shorter working hours and longer maternity leave policies.²⁵ Just 23 per cent of principal business owners in the region are women, lower than the world average of 34 per cent.²⁶ This is due to gender-specific constraining factors, such as the lack of access to finance, the complexity of business registration, and constraints on women’s freedom of movement.²⁷ For instance, women spend, on average, 10 per cent more time to register a business.²⁸ Whether unemployed or out of the labour force, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimated that such barriers to women’s access to employment cost the MENA region US\$575 billion a year.²⁹

EMPLOYERS THROUGHOUT THE REGION COMPLAIN THEY CANNOT FIND PEOPLE WITH THE RIGHT SKILLS TO FILL KEY VACANCIES, ESPECIALLY FOR OCCUPATIONS REQUIRING TECHNICAL, CREATIVE, PROBLEM-SOLVING OR LEADERSHIP SKILLS.

Inadequate learning and skills

Even as young jobseekers face a lack of decent employment opportunities, most young people are also unprepared for the world of work. Young people in the MENA region leave school with some education credentials, but their education generally fails to provide them with the knowledge and skills demanded by the labour market. Employers throughout the region complain they cannot find people with the right skills to fill key vacancies, especially for occupations requiring technical, creative, problem-solving or leadership skills. Thus, while young people spend months looking for a good job, firms spend months looking for people with the right skills to fill key vacancies. Educational attainment

alone is not enough to secure decent work. While the odds of being employed increase with higher levels of education in some countries (e.g. Egypt and Jordan),³⁰ they decline in others.

During the 1960s and 1970s, MENA governments promoted educational attainment by establishing it as a way to access desirable jobs in the public sector. As a result, the average years of schooling increased faster than in any other region.³¹ To accommodate the surge in student numbers, governments took an assembly-line approach to education. More schools were built and curricula were standardized. Teachers relied on rote memorization and standardized tests to handle the large influx of students and young people were pushed through a one-size-fits-all system without concern as to whether they were learning productive skills, developing soft skills (e.g. critical inquiry), or engaging in learning experiences that suited their unique aptitudes and interests. Thus, while educational attainment increased dramatically, job readiness did not.

Public education systems today continue to teach in a mechanistic fashion. Except for a handful of elite institutions, most private schools follow a similar approach. Facing large,

impersonal, bureaucratized education systems, young people must memorize textbooks and take standardized exams to advance from one education level to the next. There are limited opportunities for classroom discussion, creativity, critical thinking or team projects – the kinds of activities that develop problem-solving skills. When governments started limiting public-sector hires in the 1980s, turning to the private sector to create jobs, education systems continued to produce standardized graduates, rather than adjusting curricula to meet the more dynamic and evolving needs of the private sector.

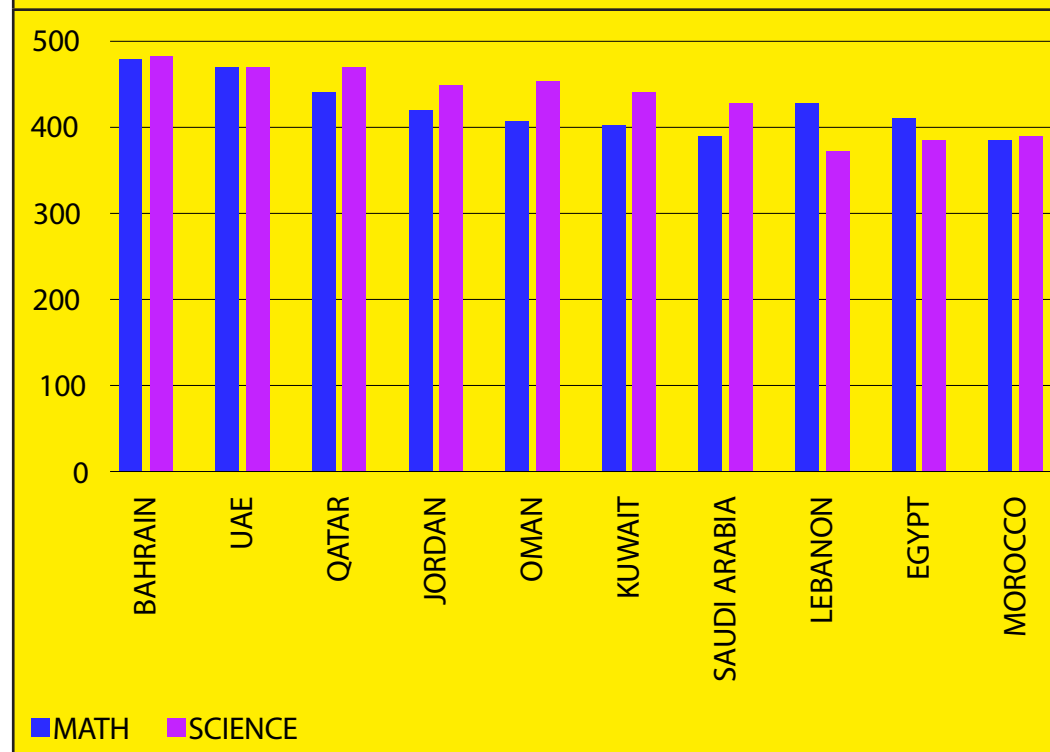
Evidence suggests that students leave school without acquiring the right mix of knowledge and skills for the labour market, indicating that, overall, the quality of education is still inadequate despite decades of investment.³² Some 10 MENA countries participated in the 2019 Trends in International Science and Mathematical Study (TIMSS), but not a single country reached the international benchmark average of 500 in either mathematics or science (FIGURE 5). Indeed, no MENA country has achieved the benchmark score in any test year going as back as far as 1999.ⁱⁱⁱ

iii. While GCC countries tend to perform better on international tests than other MENA countries, it is worth noting that they have large populations of expatriate students who tend to perform relatively well on tests.

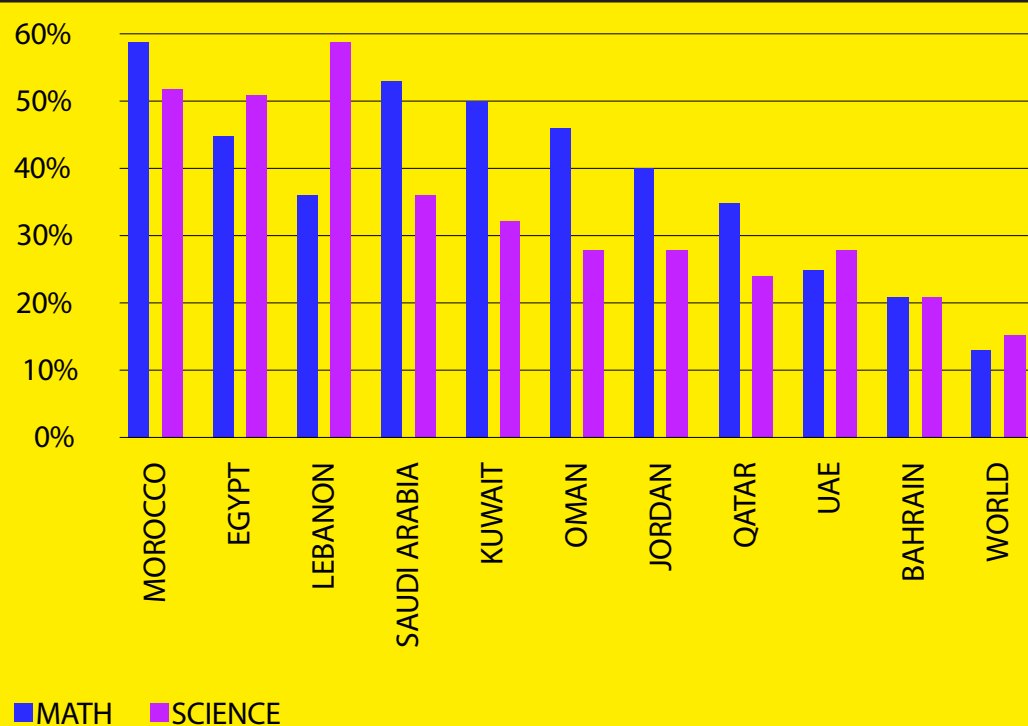
Furthermore, a relatively large proportion of students across the region scored below the “low benchmark” level of 400. In Morocco, 59 per cent of eighth graders scored below 400 on mathematics and 52 per cent scored below 400 on science, compared with 15 and 13 per cent, respectively, of

students globally (FIGURE 6).³³ Indeed, in no MENA country did fewer than 20 per cent of students score below the low threshold on either test.

FIGURE 5. AVERAGE TIMSS SCORE BY COUNTRY AND SUBJECT, EIGHTH GRADE, 2019



SOURCE: TIMSS (2019)

FIGURE 6. SHARE OF STUDENTS SCORING BELOW 400 ON TIMSS BY COUNTRY, 2019

SOURCE: TIMSS (2019)

Deficient pedagogy tends to follow MENA students into university. For example, the law school of Cairo University, one of 12 law schools in Egypt, had around 40,000 students in 2015³⁴ – an incredibly large number given the needs of the country. Large class sizes make interaction between

students and lecturers all but impossible. Teaching staff are understandably overwhelmed by the numbers and try to keep things moving as tightly as possible. A related problem is that there are too few career guidance mechanisms steering young people towards majors that are in demand in the labour market.³⁵

Young people also lack technical and essential life skills, underpinned by a general lack of critical inquiry throughout their schooling, from elementary school all the way through to university. Both technical and essential skills are associated with greater productivity and one way to assess them is by examining the metric of financial return for each additional year of schooling. Studies consistently find that, globally, the MENA region has among the lowest rates of financial return for a given level of education. One recent review of the international literature found that each additional year of education in the MENA region increased wages by 5.7 per cent, compared with the global average of 8.8 per cent (table 1).³⁶ Another study found that rates of return to education in the region are high for primary education, but low for secondary and tertiary education, resulting in low

aggregate rates overall.³⁷ This suggests that the central issue is less one of developing foundational skills in early years, but one of developing technical and essential skills during the formative years.

In addition to the low rates of financial return to education, reflected in low salaries and wages, a number of studies have highlighted the limited economic returns to society relative to education in the MENA region, finding a weak relationship between education and economic growth.³⁸ This further emphasizes that education and skills development do not meet the needs of the labour market. The fact that many students leave school without appropriate knowledge and skills is especially worrisome in a world that is increasingly interconnected by technology. Workplaces are being transformed through digitalization, automation and artificial intelligence. Computers will increasingly replace people in activities that require information retrieval and repetitive tasks. Where humans will excel and complement computers is in areas of creativity, problem-solving and leadership skills, precisely the essential skills that employers say are lacking in young people of the region today.³⁹

TABLE 1. YEARS OF SCHOOLING AND INCREASE IN WAGES FOR EACH ADDITIONAL YEAR OF EDUCATION (%) BY REGION, 2000–2009

REGION	OVERALL RATE OF RETURN	AVERAGE YEARS OF SCHOOLING
LAC	11.0	7.3
SSA	10.5	5.2
EAP	8.7	6.9
SA	8.1	4.9
OECD	8.0	9.5
ECA	7.3	9.1
MENA	5.7	7.5
WORLD	8.8	8.0

SOURCE: PSACHAROPOULOS AND HARRY ANTONY PATRINOS (2018)

NOTE: THE RATE OF RETURN ON EDUCATION CAPTURES THE AVERAGE PERCENTAGE INCREASE IN EARNINGS ASSOCIATED WITH EACH ADDITIONAL YEAR OF EDUCATION.

The issue goes deeper still. Many children entering primary school today will work in occupations that do not yet exist.⁴⁰ In the digital era, advances in technology call for new skills seemingly overnight. It has become more difficult to anticipate which job-specific skills will be required next. This uncertainty places a premium on essential life skills that enable people

to adapt quickly to changing circumstances.⁴¹ An emphasis on lifelong learning, and an ability to unlearn and relearn, will become especially important. This is worrisome in a region where educational institutions focus exclusively on teaching to the curriculum and where students rarely take the initiative to search for knowledge outside the classroom.

Especially worrying is the poor quality and second-tier status of TVET institutions, which tend to use outdated equipment, curricula and pedagogy. They also tend to be dissociated from practical applications and experience. Only a few TVET institutions in a handful of countries coordinate their curricula and training with the private sector through, for example, internships and dual training programmes. Jordan is one such country that has introduced national sector councils and, as a result, has had strong outcomes within its TVET systems.⁴² However, in most MENA countries, TVET students tend to graduate with outdated skills.⁴³ Furthermore, across the region, students and their parents perceive TVET to be a second-tier, dead-end track. It is generally considered a pathway for students who failed to get into university, offering few opportunities for students to re-join regular education tracks.

These realities are reflected in the weak average financial returns to education for TVET graduates. In the case of Egypt, for example, a comparison of returns from vocational secondary schooling and the returns from acquiring skills outside the education system found that vocational schooling offered no additional return.⁴⁴ This is unfor-

tunate as many of the technical skills required to work with computers and robots can be taught in 2-year technical college courses rather than in more expensive and time-consuming universities. However, this would require governments to allocate sufficient resources to TVET institutions. While TVET can be a more cost-effective alternative for preparing young people for the job market, TVET systems across the region are not funded well enough to develop meaningful reforms.⁴⁵ MENA countries need to revamp their TVET systems to make them relevant and cutting-edge. TVET needs to be a choice that students aspire to and work towards, not a place they try to escape from.

MENA youth also lack sufficient knowledge about the labour market because of a lack of labour market information systems, as well as access to career guidance and work experience. As a result, their expectations about job opportunities and building a successful career are skewed. Instead, young people rely on job postings on social network sites and personal connections.⁴⁶ Expectations have a social dimension. A 2014 study on unemployment among tertiary-educated Jordanian youth found that “reservation prestige”, whereby youth decline to interview for,

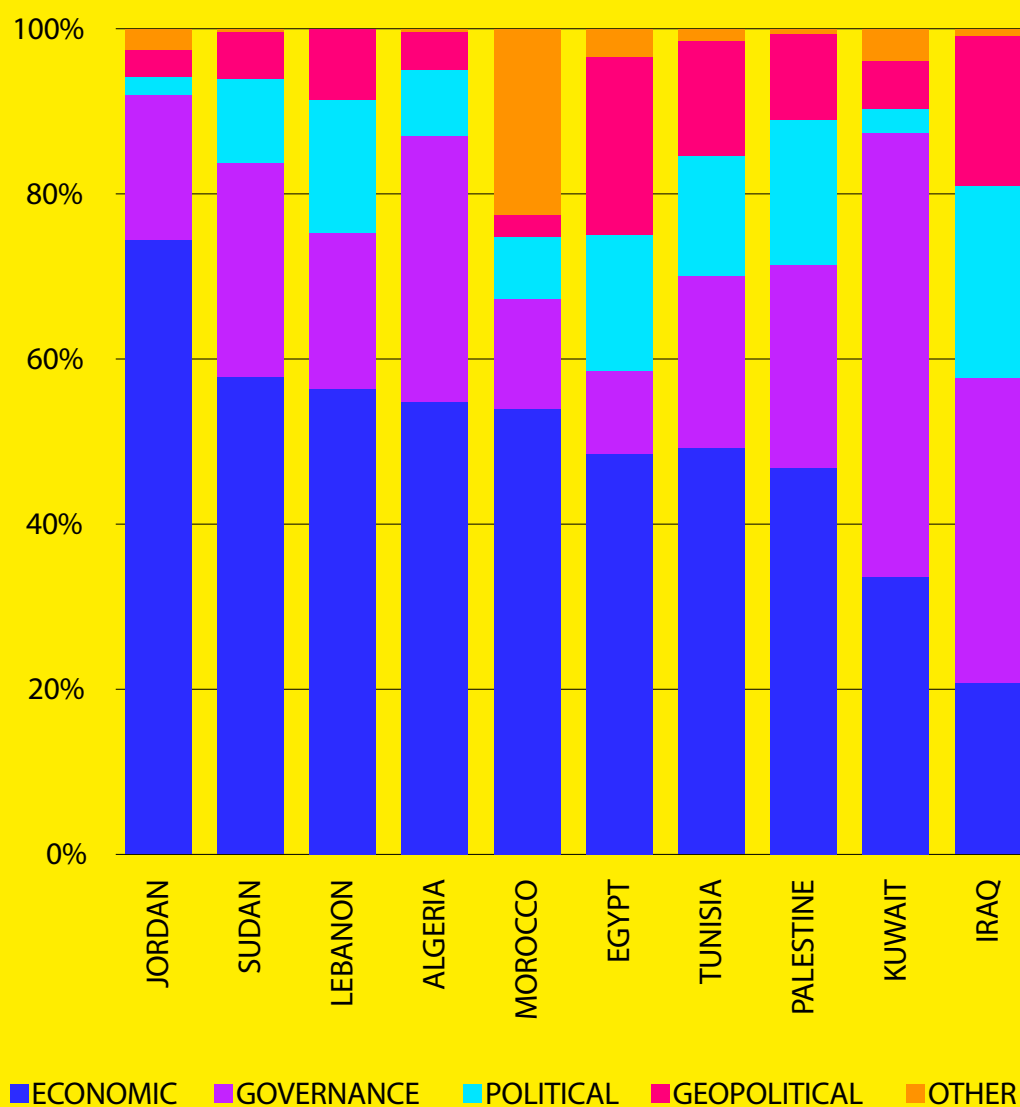
or accept, low-prestige jobs, contributes to unemployment.⁴⁷ This extends even to work experience opportunities, including internships.

Finally, it is important to note that education and training systems in the region are not gender responsive. Part of the persistently high rates of unemployment among young women is due to their preference, or pressure from their families, to pursue fields of study that offer fewer employment opportunities in the labour market, such as languages and arts, together with their lower propensity to enter fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), which enjoy greater demand.⁴⁸ However, male-dominated industries can discriminate against women, perpetuating and reinforcing a cycle of exclusion and self-selection. This is especially the case for TVET, as many women graduating from TVET institutions struggle to get jobs in industries that discriminate against them, and this discourages other women from pursuing these education and career options.

Limited agency and space to create their own opportunities

Delayed and incomplete transitions from learning to earning and finding decent work have resulted in wasted potential, as young people wait, often for years, before they begin to build their lives and contribute to economic development. This postpones other aspects of their transition to adulthood, including marriage and family formation. Delayed transitions have become a source of frustration, contributing to social tensions, which have occasionally spilled over into social unrest and political instability. According to the 2018/2019 Arab Barometer, economic issues, including decent employment and access to quality social services, remain the top concern of young people in most MENA countries, followed by concerns over governance and corruption (FIGURE 7).⁴⁹

FIGURE 7. MOST IMPORTANT CONCERN BY COUNTRY, AGES 18–29 YEARS, 2018–2019



SOURCE: ARAB BAROMETER (2019)

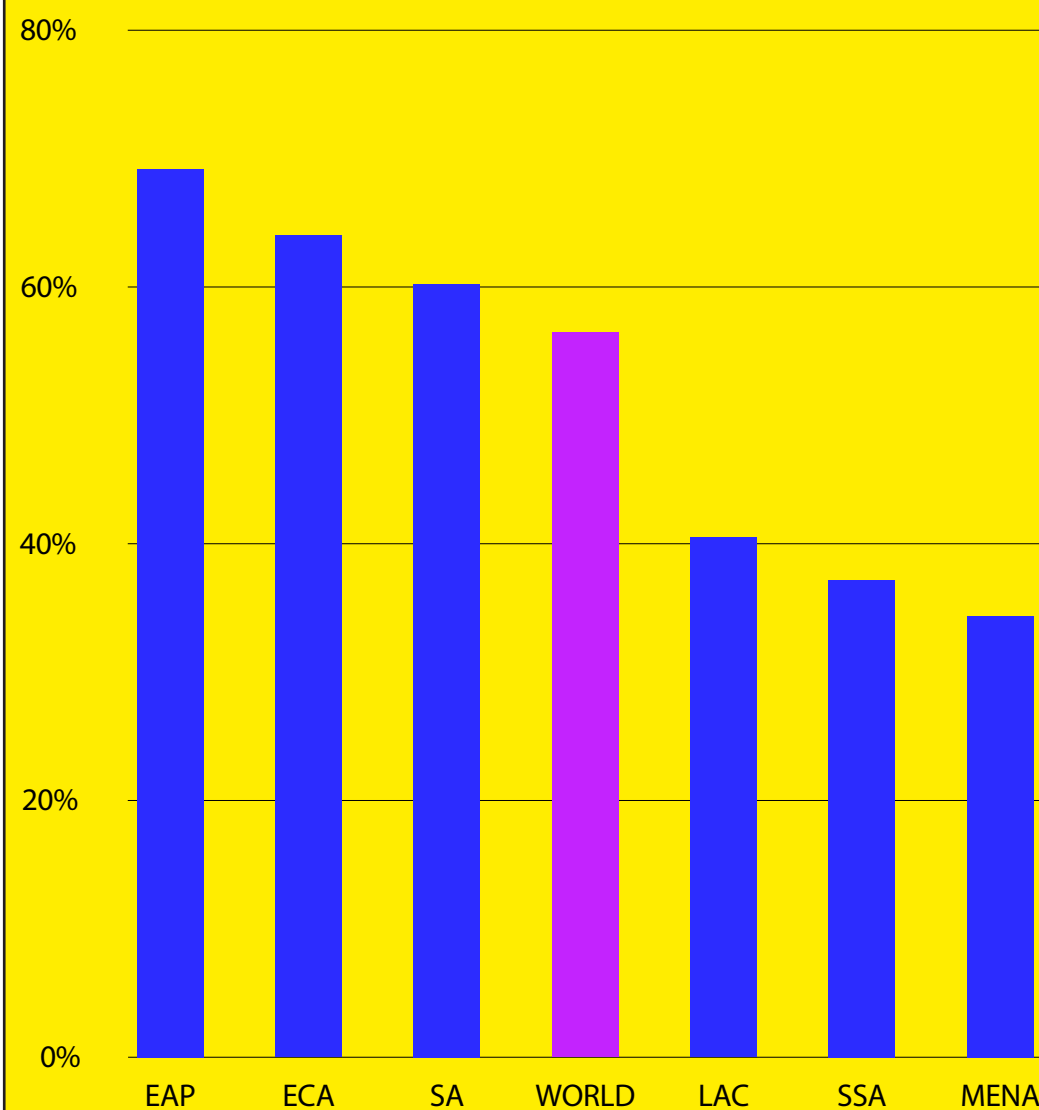
Faced with limited opportunities and perverse incentives, many young people develop a mindset of dependency, looking to the State to provide job opportunities. This attitude has been reinforced by a public-sector led development model and public expectations that the public sector is responsible for creating economic opportunities and jobs. In recent decades, however, faced with growing fiscal constraints, most MENA governments have withdrawn from this commitment. Yet expectations persist. Administrators of youth organizations interviewed for this report bemoaned a culture of dependence among youth that prevents many of them from taking the initiative to develop their own skills and careers.

Young people who do decide to create their own opportunities by becoming entrepreneurs often confront a difficult start-up ecosystem, with limited support. Business regulations are especially difficult for start-ups – hardly surprising given that successful firms might eventually disrupt their industries and challenge the status of connected firms. The share of young people engaged in the early stages of entrepreneurship in the MENA region is small at 9.2 per cent, compared to other regions (e.g. 16 per cent in the

LAC region).⁵⁰ While some countries have made progress in creating hubs and incubators for business development, it is difficult to access most of these resources. Furthermore, access to credit is limited. Only 34 per cent of MENA youth own an account at a financial institution or mobile-money service provider, compared with 56 per cent globally (FIGURE 8).⁵¹ Here too, several countries have created programmes that extend credit to youth-led start-ups. However, the impact of these programmes is unclear.

Faced with a dearth of employment opportunities at home, many young people migrate to either outside the region or within the region – especially the Gulf. Migration is a form of agency; however, it is usually a choice made under considerable strain and may not be a young person's first choice if viable alternatives had been available in their home country. A 2018-2019 survey showed that a majority of young people aged 18–29 had considered emigrating (FIGURE 9). For most, the reason was primarily economic, followed by education (FIGURE 10). While 35 per cent of young people in Lebanon in 2018 had considered emigrating, by the time of the 2020 Arab Youth Survey a financial crisis

FIGURE 8. FINANCIAL ACCOUNT OWNERSHIP BY REGION, YOUTH (AGES 15–24), 2017



SOURCE: WORLD DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS (2022)

had rocked the country and the share of Lebanese youth (ages 18–24) wanting to emigrate had doubled to 77 per cent. Young Lebanese today are seeking any available opportunity abroad, even if it does not match their skills or wage expectations.⁵²

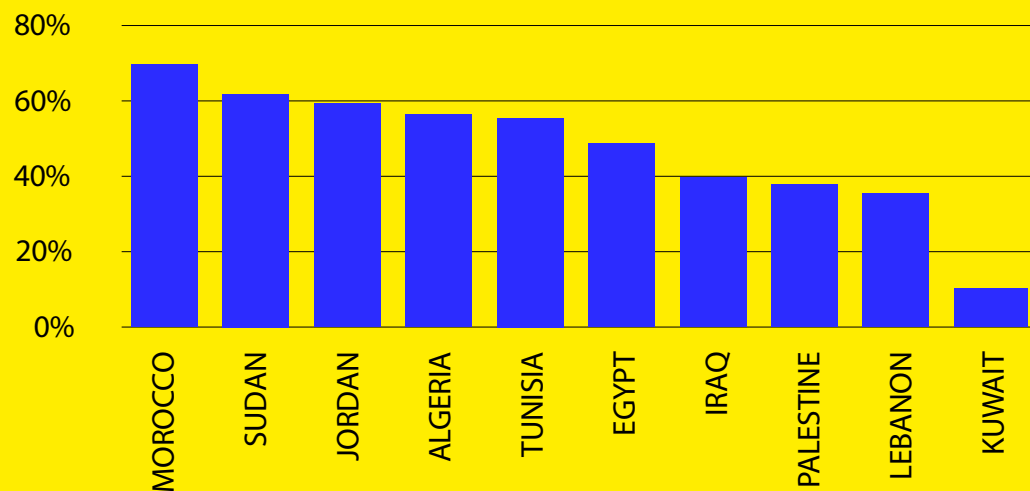
While the Gulf states have served as an important valve, accommodating much of the excess labour in the region, this role is expected to decrease as revenues from oil and natural gas decline. In addition, Gulf countries

also struggle with their own youth employment issues. Faced with high public-sector wage bills, most Gulf countries are no longer able to provide a government job to all young nationals who want one. However, most young nationals lack the skills required by the high-wage technical jobs offered by the private sector, and most are unwilling to accept low-paying unskilled positions. This mismatch of skills and preferences leaves opportunities available for foreign workers from the region and elsewhere.

Finally, a major concern regarding agency is that young people who want to draw attention to their economic marginalization have few avenues for airing grievances. The 2010 Arab unrest was sparked by a young Tunisian street vendor, who resorted to a desperate act of self-immolation after being denied an audience with local authorities to communicate his grievances. There is little room for social or political participation, and no path for young people to contribute to the political process. As a group,

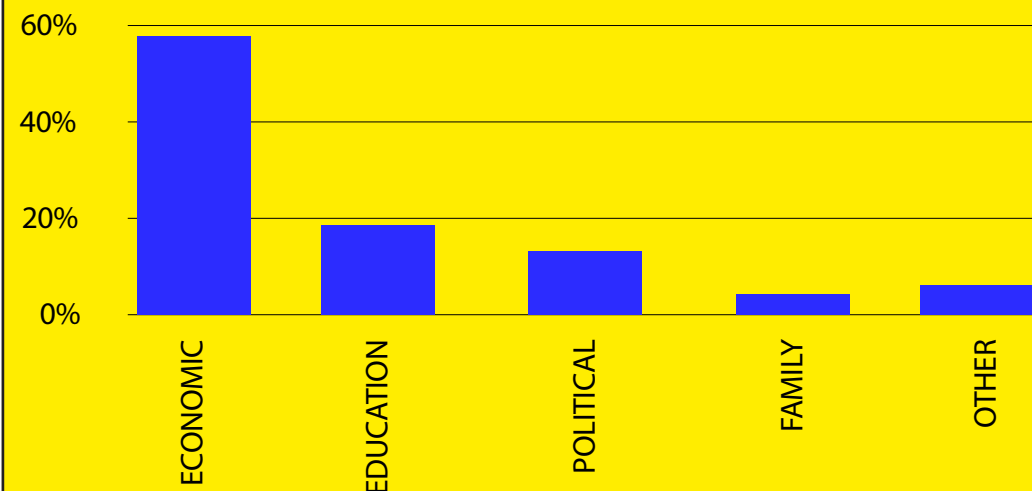
MENA countries have been ranked the least free in terms of political freedoms and civil liberties of any region in the world.⁵³ Additionally, MENA countries rank low on civic space and openness.⁵⁴ This lack of social and political participation deprives young people of contributing towards their community's development or improving their lives and livelihoods. The result is a loss of potential energy as young people lie idle and underutilized, leaving countries and the entire region worse off.

FIGURE 9. EVER THOUGHT ABOUT EMIGRATING BY ORIGIN COUNTRY, YOUTH (AGES 18–29), 2018–2019



SOURCE: ARAB BAROMETER (2019)

FIGURE 10. REASON FOR EMIGRATING, YOUTH (AGES 18–29), 2018–2019



SOURCE: ARAB BAROMETER (2019)

1.3. Different circumstances, unequal outcomes

As young people across MENA struggle to transition successfully from learning to earning and finding decent work, marginalized and vulnerable groups face additional hurdles and difficulties to those discussed above. We have noted how young women face social constraints to finding employment. In addition, marginalized areas are not receiving the investments they need from central governments to grow and thrive. Rural communities face pressures of climate change, while urban areas face population pressures caused by rural–urban migration. There is also a growing disconnect between rich and poor people, reflected in increasing inequality and economic exclusion, that may foreshadow social tensions that lie ahead. Furthermore, the region has experienced serious armed conflicts, which have resulted in large populations of displaced persons and refugees. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated imbalances in learning and skills delivery, and dampened labour demand.

Refugees and youth in conflict countries experience the worst

Young refugees and youth living in conflict-stricken countries face extremely difficult realities in school and in work, let alone the transition between the two. In 2018, an estimated 40 per cent of Syrian adolescents aged 15 to 17 were out of school, increasing the risk of child labour, early marriage and other forms of exploitation.⁵⁵ In war-struck Yemen, more than 2 million school-age children are deprived of education because the government is unable to pay teachers' salaries. In addition, one in five schools in Yemen can no longer be used.⁵⁶ In refugee host countries such as Lebanon, the demand for publicly funded education, driven by the influx of refugees, is straining the public education system.

Transitioning to work in conflict countries is extremely difficult, and few jobs exist. Traditional work opportunities are few and salaries are shockingly low. In Syria, a public-sector employee with a university degree earns around US\$30 a month. This is barely enough to buy bread for a family, let alone pay for rent, clothes, transportation and other necessities.



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Youth unemployment rates are estimated at 75 per cent in Syria, around 70 per cent in Yemen, and 50 per cent in Libya. In post-conflict Iraq, youth unemployment rates are around 26 per cent, but work is precarious.⁵⁷

Refugees living in host communities across the region are also marginalized when it comes to employment. Driven by their dire livelihood conditions, they are among the most vulnerable to exploitation and susceptible to accepting difficult working conditions, such as undocumented

work in the informal sector, child labour, low wages and long working hours. Most often, they are employed in informal seasonal jobs that are unattractive to citizens (e.g. agriculture and construction) and, sometimes, they are legally constrained to work only in these sectors, as is the case of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.⁵⁸ In addition, weak enforcement of labour laws, such as wage protection, means that refugees are often paid below the national minimum, with no health insurance.⁵⁹

ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH LIVING IN RURAL AREAS TYPICALLY FACE MORE DIFFICULT TRANSITIONS THAN THEIR URBAN COUNTERPARTS. THIS IS PRIMARILY DUE TO THE LIMITED RANGE OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES IN THESE AREAS.

Rural communities lag behind

Large disparities between rural and urban areas, in terms of development and welfare, means that rural regions are less developed with lower quality infrastructure and public services, higher poverty levels, and often lower economic productivity.⁶⁰

For children, disparities in access to education between rural and urban areas have narrowed in most countries where they used to be significant, such as Algeria and Egypt, but they have increased in others, like Sudan.⁶¹ Persistent patterns of early school dropout and low school retention at primary and lower secondary levels are reinforced by systematic inequalities. In general, dropouts in the region come from the poorest rural households, with girls from disadvantaged families outnumbering boys.⁶²

Young students from urban areas perform better on standardized tests than those from rural areas. For instance, in Morocco average test scores for fourth and eighth graders on TIMSS are, on average, 8.5 per cent higher for urban students than for rural students.⁶³ Lower scores are presumed to be an indication of lower education quality in these areas, which impacts students' skills development

and, therefore, their future work and life outcomes.

Adolescents and youth living in rural areas typically face more difficult transitions than their urban counterparts. This is primarily due to the limited range of economic opportunities in these areas. Young people in marginalized communities also lack opportunities to develop skills or access finance for their projects and activities. Most migrate to urban centres, seeking higher education and jobs. But often they find themselves in low-paying jobs in the informal sector or suffering long periods of unemployment.⁶⁴ Rural-urban gaps are also observed in other labour market outcomes, such as wage differentials. Area of residence and family background are found to be among the largest predictors of unexplained variance in wage disparities in Egypt and Jordan.⁶⁵

The poor and vulnerable struggle more

Education systems in the region do not offer equal opportunities to all persons.

While all MENA countries provide free public education, access can be an issue for vulnerable communities.⁶⁶ The tendency for education quality to be lower in vulnerable communities creates a disadvantage for adolescents and youth living there in terms of knowledge and skills development. Although public education is formally free, the quality is generally

low, typically requiring supplementation with private tutoring. This places low-income and marginalized groups at a decided disadvantage. These factors accumulate; a young woman from a low-income, displaced family in a peripheral area faces multiple barriers to accessing education, placing her at great risk of under-education and early marriage.

Furthermore, higher levels of education or vocational training require resources not available to everyone equally, such as parental support and private tutoring.⁶⁷ Household wealth is the leading driver of inequality of opportunity in education, followed by the educational level of the household head.⁶⁸ A comparison of education level of the richest urban men to the poorest rural women revealed high disparities in several countries, with large gaps in Yemen and Morocco, followed by Egypt and Iraq.⁶⁹ For children and youth from rural areas, households of the lowest wealth quintiles, and households with less educated parents, the likelihood of them attending a higher education institution lags far behind their counterparts from wealthy urban areas.

Unfortunately, little progress has been made to close these gaps over time. On the contrary, middle-income countries such as Jordan and Egypt have shown

larger disparities over time between the most and least fortunate when it comes to primary and secondary school completion rates.⁷⁰ Inequality of educational opportunity peaks above secondary education.⁷¹ In Egypt, the probabilities of reaching higher education are far from equal; fewer than 9 per cent of young men from the least advantaged households attain higher education compared with 97 per cent for those from the most advantaged households.⁷² Jordanian youth also face unequal opportunities in accessing tertiary education with worsening disparities over time, driven mainly by differences in family wealth.⁷³ Young girls are persistently less likely than boys to ever attend school in most countries, except for Jordan and Tunisia, where the gender gap for school attendance is in favour of girls.⁷⁴

Inequities beyond one's circumstances are often transmitted to the labour market and other life aspects. Labour markets are far from perfect, and individuals are not always rewarded for their abilities, skills, merit or effort. Individual and familial social markers, such as gender, class, parental employment and area of residence affect labour market outcomes and how rewards are allocated, leading to human capital underutilization and loss of untapped potential. In the MENA

HIGHER LEVELS OF EDUCATION OR VOCATIONAL TRAINING REQUIRE RESOURCES NOT AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE EQUALLY, SUCH AS PARENTAL SUPPORT AND PRIVATE TUTORING.

region personal and family connections play a big role in helping young people secure employment. Referred to as *wasta*, such connections are pervasive across all segments of society. The system is reinforced by the oversupply of jobseekers, and grants those with connections access to scarce positions.

Like education systems, labour markets in MENA foster inequality.⁷⁵ Marginalized youth struggle to make their way through unequal educational systems, then struggle to transition into work, and again within work. Stuck in a biased system, they are unable to move up the social ladder. Even after controlling for unequal human capital and experience levels, substantial labour market variations are observed in the region. While some of this variation can be explained by variation in effort, circumstantial disparities based on factors like gender and geography are significant. For instance, circumstantial differences in first-job wages amount to 16 per cent and 12 per cent in Egypt and Jordan, respectively. These factors play an even bigger role over the long term, with circumstances explaining nearly 30 per cent of wage differences in Egypt and 18 per cent in Jordan, 5 years after graduation.⁷⁶

COVID-19 made matters worse

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the MENA region's vulnerabilities and exacerbated its challenges, testing health sector capacities, weakening fragile economies, and revealing institutional deficits. These impacts are likely to be long-lasting and deepen pre-existing challenges with respect to development and governance. Once schools were forced to close, the region's digitalization gap became obvious, as remote-learning mechanisms were lacking in many communities.⁷⁷ While some countries switched to remote learning, others lacked capacity. For example, internet penetration in conflict-stricken countries (i.e. Libya, Sudan, Syria and Yemen) is less than 35 per cent. In 2020, it was estimated that 40 per cent of the region's students across all educational levels did not benefit from any remote learning initiative.⁷⁸

The most vulnerable in society were significantly affected by these shocks. The ranks of the poor swelled by some 14.3 million people to encompass one quarter of the total Arab population. During the second quarter of 2020, the region lost an estimated 17 million full-time jobs, with youth among those first affected. Women were also dispropor-

tionately affected economically by the pandemic. In addition, migrant workers, recipients of humanitarian aid, refugees, and those forcibly displaced also faced higher vulnerabilities.⁷⁹ In Iraq, for instance, the child poverty rate was estimated to have doubled following the pandemic with greater exposure to different kinds of child exploitation.⁸⁰ Meanwhile, a survey examining the impact on Iraqi women revealed that they struggled to access health services, possessed less decision-making power, and assumed more family and care responsibilities, further reducing their participation in the labour market.⁸¹

PART 2. BARRIERS AND BOTTLENECKS FACING YOUNG PEOPLE IN TRANSITION



2.1. Rethinking learning

Part 1 discussed the issues facing young people's schooling in the MENA region. This section examines the underlying factors behind weak education and training systems, and explores why reform efforts have not been successful. It also touches on educational attainment among vulnerable groups, including refugees and adolescents living in marginalized areas. We distinguish between general education, which leads to university, and TVET, and argue strongly for more fluidity and less segmentation between the two tracks. Finally, this section touches on the issue of lifelong learning, a concept not common in the region but one that is expected to gain in importance with increasing digitalization and automation.

Strengthening the relevance and quality of education

Young people transitioning from learning to earning should be able to expect that their education and training prepared them properly for the world of work. However, MENA youth often discover that they lack the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the labour market. Formal education systems generally do not meet global standards and are typically disconnected from the realities of work.⁸² Most systems do not take into consideration the labour market's needs in terms of skills, and lack strategic interconnection and engagement with the private sector to bridge this gap in a way that reflects countries' sustainable development capabilities.⁸³

As noted in Part 1, no MENA country has met the global average on any TIMSS test.⁸⁴ A Brookings report found out that 56 per cent of primary students in participating MENA countries and 48 per cent at the lower secondary level are not even learning foundational skills appropriate for their respective education levels.⁸⁵ COVID-19 school closures aggravated the situation and the share of children suffering from learning poverty (i.e. unable to read and understand a simple text by the age of 10) could increase by 60 to 67 per cent across the region.⁸⁶

According to the 2021 Arab Youth Survey, nearly 90 per cent of respondents had concerns about their countries' educational quality.⁸⁷ MENA youth who pursue higher levels of education frequently face the "dead end of unemployment".⁸⁸ Also, despite higher enrolment rates across the region, school dropout rates at the lower tiers of education remain higher than in other regions of the world and insufficient effort is made to retain students.⁸⁹ Policymakers know that their education systems are producing weak outcomes. Out of 18 MENA countries covered in this report, only three (Iraq, Libya and Sudan) have not participated in at least one international assess-

ACCORDING TO THE 2021 ARAB YOUTH SURVEY, NEARLY 90 PER CENT OF RESPONDENTS HAD CONCERNS ABOUT THEIR COUNTRIES' EDUCATIONAL QUALITY.

ment of learning outcomes ([TABLE 2](#)). Fourteen of the 15 MENA countries that have participated in TIMSS have done so numerous times, and eight have participated in a related assessment, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Nine countries have participated at least once in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) administered by the OECD.

Thus, most MENA governments receive a “report card” at least once every four years to help them assess how well their students compare to students in other countries. MENA policymakers are thus aware that their students are underperforming on international assessments. They are also aware that educational reforms, while possibly contributing to better learning outcomes, have not been able to bridge the gap with the rest of the world.

MENA governments have responded to these issues. Over the past two decades, they have worked with international organizations, private consulting firms, donor countries, and other institutions to identify weaknesses in their respective education systems and to develop policy prescriptions for improving them. In terms of reforms, special

attention has been given to investing in updating school curricula. This makes sense, as outdated curricula have been identified as a key issue in the region and are at least partly responsible for student underachievement on international assessments. However, updating curricula is only one of the necessary steps in improving student learning.



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TABLE 2. PARTICIPATION IN TIMSS, PIRLS, AND PISA ASSESSMENTS BY COUNTRY AND YEAR

	TIMSS							PIRLS				PISA						
	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011	2015	2019	2001	2006	2011	2016	2003	2008	2009	2012	2015	2018	2022
ALGERIA																		
BAHRAIN																		
EGYPT																		
IRAQ																		
JORDAN																		
KUWAIT																		
LEBANON																		
LIBYA																		
MOROCCO																		
OMAN																		
PALESTINE																		
QATAR																		
SAUDI ARABIA																		
SUDAN																		
SYRIA																		
TUNISIA																		
UAE																		
YEMEN																		

SOURCE: [HTTPS://NCES.ED.GOV/TIMSS/PARTICIPATION.ASP](https://nces.ed.gov/timss/participation.asp); [HTTPS://WWW.OECD.ORG/PISA/ABOUTPISA/PISA-PARTICIPANTS.HTM](https://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/pisa-participants.htm).

Education systems of the region also continue to support outdated teaching techniques. Teachers, working in difficult conditions with low salaries and little prospects of career development, rely on the use of rote memorization at the expense of developing the more time-consuming critical thinking, teamwork, and other essential skills.⁹⁰ One key driver behind this phenomenon appears to be that education systems remain stuck in a credentialism trap.⁹¹ The goal for many young people is to obtain a degree or certificate that qualifies them for a job in the public or formal private sector, neither of which is especially responsive to merit-based skills. So, schools, teachers, parents and students are incentivized to focus only on the knowledge required to pass exams. In Tunisia, the education system, with its governance and pedagogical fronts, is designed to help students reach the final secondary level without necessarily retaining much knowledge or developing the kinds of skills that support a STEM orientation.⁹² While the role of the public sector in employment has weakened over time, the focus on credentials, which do not necessarily reflect actual skills, remains strong.⁹³

Indeed, other incentives have developed that serve to reinforce the status

quo. Three particular factors stand out: (1) a large influx of young people over the past two decades following a demographic wave; (2) bureaucratic structures that provide financial incentives to teachers and administrators to maintain the national examination system; and (3) a governance structure that discourages taking the initiative, autonomy and critical inquiry.⁹⁴

First, the past three decades have witnessed large increases in the number of students and expanding class sizes. These were the result of both increasing enrolment rates and a demographic wave between 1980 and 2000. This made individualized teaching difficult and placed financial pressures on school systems. While governments responded by building more schools and hiring more teachers, schools also developed an assembly-line approach to education to accommodate the influx of new students. This approach resulted in uniform knowledge dissemination, reducing the diversity of knowledge and skills of students and ignored the kinds of skills demanded by the labour market. This is often referred to as a “skills mismatch” problem. The assembly-line approach also led to a reduction of teacher training and professional development. Thus,

across the region, teachers lack exposure to learner-centred pedagogies and modern teaching techniques. Instead, they have continued to rely on rote memorization, excessive examinations and, sometimes, corporal punishment. Students, in turn, are expected to follow the teachers and absorb information rather than think for themselves.

Second, as student numbers increased, governments restricted access to post-secondary education options by raising the level of difficulty of national exams. An informal system of private tutoring emerged to help students prepare for national exams and obtain degrees and certificates.⁹⁵

THE PAST THREE DECADES HAVE WITNESSED LARGE INCREASES IN THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS AND EXPANDING CLASS SIZES.

IN GENERAL, MALE FAMILY HEADS WIELD UNQUESTIONABLE AUTHORITY WITHIN THE FAMILY. PRIVATE BUSINESSES TEND BE MICROMANAGED FROM THE VERY TOP. THE MENA REGION IS THE LOWEST RANKED OF ALL THE REGIONS COVERED IN MOST DEMOCRACY INDICES.

Teachers use this system to supplement their salaries, which tend to be fairly low. Understandably, teachers are reluctant to support moves to replace credentialism with a focus on skills development. Private tutoring also contributes to the maintenance of unequal access to higher education as many low-income families cannot afford to pay tutors. Nevertheless, private tutoring is widespread; in Egypt some students devote more time to their tutors than to their schooling. The system has become self-reinforcing and government efforts to ban the practice have so far been unsuccessful.⁹⁶

Third, public school principals have been given little autonomy to modify the system; nor have administrators and teachers. Teachers in MENA countries have considerably less autonomy than those in OECD countries.⁹⁷ This is no surprise; schools reflect the power structures of the societies in which they operate. MENA societies tend to be autocratic in nature. In general, male family heads wield unquestionable authority within the family. Private businesses tend to be micromanaged from the very top. The MENA region is the lowest ranked of all the regions covered in most democracy indices, including

Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index.⁹⁸ While educational institutions could, potentially, take the lead in preparing a new generation of enlightened leaders who can overcome the autocratic social tendencies of the past, they must first actively and deliberately break away from these structures. This will not be easy. It would require government support and the active participation of young people, their families and communities to create a new approach to learning.

The rigidity of public education in MENA is preventing schools from adapting to emerging global challenges. For example, despite the rising demand for green and digital skills, schools and universities are largely failing to adapt, thereby continuing the skills mismatch between young graduates and the needs of potential employers. COVID-19 further exposed weaknesses and exacerbated vulnerabilities. Unable to shift towards alternative modes of teaching online (with accompanying pedagogical shifts), schools in many countries closed for extended periods – more than 30 weeks in Morocco and Tunisia, and nearly 50 weeks in Libya.⁹⁹ Simulation exercises suggest that, unless school systems take urgent action, the

number of children unable to read and understand a simple age-appropriate text could increase by from 60 per cent to close to 70 per cent.¹⁰⁰

Several countries have attempted to go beyond updating curricula, building more schools and improving teacher training by attempting more fundamental reforms to address deeper underlying issues. These include increasing the focus on skills development, integrating digital platforms and reducing the reliance on national exams. Helping students develop the ability to acquire and apply knowledge requires reducing class sizes, improving teacher quality and training, increasing autonomy within schools and classrooms and encouraging an environment of critical thinking and inquiry.

Countries of the Gulf have been at the forefront of these reform efforts, thanks to plentiful financial resources. Over the past 15 years, governments of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) have established national quality assurance agencies, along with teacher training and accreditation initiatives. They have also introduced national standardized tests to monitor student performance.¹⁰¹ Jordan dedicated extra efforts to its K-12 education systems

in the early 2000s, placing it ahead of other Arab countries in terms of educational reforms.¹⁰² More recently, Jordan, Egypt and Tunisia have incorporated learner-centred pedagogy, and Tunisia is introducing comprehensive reforms with a focus on twenty-first century skills and life skills. However, evidence on the impact of these efforts is not yet available.

Some countries are also moving to improve access to digital learning, although this is not a magic bullet. Any existing vulnerabilities in the education system are transposed onto digital education as well. Digitalizing dysfunctional systems simply results in dysfunctional digital systems. Digital platforms need to be accompanied by updated pedagogies, teacher training, adapted learning materials and other fundamental reforms in order to respond to the labour market's ever changing needs.¹⁰³ Egypt's Education 2.0 initiative is trying to address these issues as part of a massive effort to improve skills-based education and digital learning in the country.¹⁰⁴

While few evaluations have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of these educational reforms, some conclusions can be drawn from the available evidence. First, countries undertak-

ing educational reforms have generally seen improvements in student achievement on standardized international tests, notably Bahrain, Egypt, Oman, and Qatar. However, these improvements have not been enough to lift average student test scores above international median benchmarks. Furthermore, while improvements have been witnessed in countries that at one time or another have been at the forefront of educational reform, such as Jordan, Kuwait and Lebanon, these were followed by declines in test scores when reform efforts ebbed. In the case of Jordan and Lebanon, such reversions were no doubt exacerbated by the refugee crisis, which placed pressures on the countries' education systems and contributed to weak performance. However, many educational reforms, while offering temporary improvements, do not address the root causes of the problem. Educational reform needs to be treated as an ongoing process, not a one-off effort.

Moving forward requires a multifaceted, multisystem approach that can move the region out of its low-level equilibrium. A recent World Bank report offers guidance and solutions to unleash the region's education potential. The flagship report suggests adopting a "push, pull, pact" framework.¹⁰⁵

- Pushing for learning emphasizes foundational skills in early childhood, as well as essential skills and lifelong learning in later years, ensuring that teachers and school leaders are qualified, effectively used and incentivized to develop professionally, and developing a modern, learner-centred pedagogy that systematically integrates twenty-first century skills and promotes inquiry, creativity and innovation.

- Pulling for skills requires a calibrated reform effort. Policymakers must ensure that the private sector is allowed to grow and become competitive, and that the civil service does not send contradictory signals on credentials. Employers will then be incentivized to shift from focusing on credentials to demanding skills. Parents and students will then demand skills from their education systems, leading to a virtuous cycle by increasing pressure for further reforms.

- A pact for education involves all members of society, including politicians, business people, community leaders, parents, teachers, administrators, and students. Tensions between divergent stakeholder goals need to be addressed and interests aligned. This requires a unified vision and strong leadership to rally support around common national goals. A new pact requires reconciling investments and resources with priorities.

CASE STUDY 1

In 2002, Qatar launched one of the most ambitious school reforms in the region. It transformed its public schools into independent schools, whereby the government provided the funding but contracted out the operation to autonomous school leaders. This major departure from centralized control aimed to create a more diverse and innovative system, responsive to the needs of students and their families. Qatar also introduced national curricula standards, student assessments, teacher licensing and other changes. Student assessments on international tests improved substantially, especially among nationals. Average scores on eighth grade TIMSS rose from 313 in 2007 to 459 in 2019.¹⁰⁶ However, Qatari parents pushed back against incorporating English-language instruction into the core curricula, and teachers were overwhelmed with the additional teaching and reporting requirements. While some of the reforms remain, Qatar decided to abandon the independent school model and, in 2017, brought all schools back under management of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. A key lesson was that the reforms were hurried and failed to involve key stakeholders, and did not allow for proper capacity-building.¹⁰⁷ The reforms also failed to properly evaluate the 2-year pilot programme before proceeding immediately to full-scale implementation.

Fixing TVET

TVET systems are the backbone of a vibrant economy. Most jobs do not actually require years of university education, but rather strong technical and vocational skills. Such vocations cover occupations as divergent as plumber, mechanic, teller, medical technician, nursing assistant and so on. The coding skills required to design digital applications can be taught in less than a year. More than half of the workforce generally work in jobs that require vocational skills. Vocational careers can provide decent work and paths to advancement. However, TVET systems – not only in the MENA region, but across much of the world – have not lived up to this role.¹⁰⁸ TVET has been relegated to a second-class status, which students and their families try to avoid.

In much of MENA, TVET institutions lack resources – modern equipment, infrastructure, materials and facilities. They also lack well-trained instructors and trainers, as well as quality teacher training. Ideally, TVET curricula should be forward-looking, and anticipate future demand by remaining up-to-date with technological changes. However, TVET graduates often find that their skills are inadequate and that they

need to upskill or reskill to secure a job. Furthermore, opportunities for upskilling and reskilling are lacking. Continuing education and training are neglected and fragmented in most countries. Even where funds might be available through training taxes, the offerings are limited.¹⁰⁹ Upgrading TVET systems will require substantial investments in facilities, technology, curricula and teaching staff. It would be a huge undertaking, but one that could pay off handsomely if done right. Donors have funded upgrades to TVET systems in the region on a temporary or pilot basis, with positive results. However, allocations need to be part of national budgets to make them sustainable.

Further, TVET curricula are typically not developed in consultation with the private sector and do not consider the needs of the market. Successful TVET systems include consultative mechanisms with private industry councils and labour market information systems. They rely on feedback to identify skills gaps and have the flexibility to update topics and material on a continuous basis. Students are provided with practical experience through internships, apprenticeships and dual systems that balance classroom education with on-the-job training. TVET



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systems in most MENA countries, however, have none of these attributes. They use outdated curricula that do not consider the needs of the market, and provide little in the way of hands-on experience. Furthermore, TVET systems are overly centralized in terms of skills planning and budgeting. Centralized decision-making limits local relevance and stifles innovation. It limits the space for TVET centres to engage the

private sector to facilitate work experience and job placement.

One of the main challenges of TVET in the MENA region is the social stigma associated with being a second-class education track. Some countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco, have attempted to propagate positive attitudes towards TVET and campaign to reform its image. However, public perceptions are reinforced by the

low quality of the curricula and outdated equipment.¹¹⁰ Also, TVET students are generally those who fail to receive high enough grades on national exams to enter the general education track. Top TVET students are prevented from re-joining the general education track or enrolling at universities after graduation. This reinforces the notion that TVET is a dead-end second-class education track. Creating more flexibility to move between education pathways is key to removing the social stigma associated with TVET.

As a result of these deficits, TVET institutions suffer from high disengagement and dropout rates. Policymakers have consistently identified TVET as an area of priority. International organizations and donors have offered technical and financial assistance to improve TVET systems throughout the region. Reform efforts have focused on updating the curricula and acquiring more modern equipment. They have also attempted to improve the linkages with market needs by introducing private industry skills councils, which provide guidance and feedback to TVET administrators on labour shortages and the areas where training efforts should be focused. Some countries have also experimented with dual system mod-

els in a handful of institutions. One of the more famous examples was the Mubarak Kohl Initiative – Dual System (MKI-DS) initiative, introduced in Egypt in 1992 and informed by Germany’s well-regarded experience with dual systems and apprenticeship programmes (see case study 2). In 2018–2019 Egypt introduced “applied technology schools”, a new collaboration between the Ministry of Education and Technical Education, the private sector and international accreditation institutes. While this is an important development, it is still a partial achievement; more components will need to be overhauled for it to be effective.

Jordan tried to address the disconnect between its TVET system and the private sector by establishing nine^{iv} sectoral skills councils, tasked with advising TVET providers on the training and skills needs for each occupation.¹¹¹ In Morocco, the Strategy on Vocational Education and Training for 2021 seeks to improve the quality and access to TVET through collaborations and a more coherent approach to stakeholders. The reforms aim to enhance cooperation between TVET institutions and employers to identify the skills required in different parts of the country. Regional commissions will be established

iv. The nine industries and sectors include chemicals and cosmetics, plastic and rubber, logistics, construction, information and communication technology, agriculture, tourism and hospitality, leather and textiles, and water and energy.

MOROCCO HAS MADE SIGNIFICANT STRIDES IN TERMS OF DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR, BUT BOTH THE QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF TRAINING PROGRAMMES NEED TO BE IMPROVED TO CLOSE THE SKILLS GAPS.

as partnership bodies of universities, employers, government institutions and trade unions, and will coordinate TVET activities, foster collaboration, manage regional programmes and evaluate their effectiveness. Morocco has made significant strides in terms of dialogue and cooperation with the private sector, but both the quantity and quality of training programmes need to be improved to close the skills gaps. Demand is estimated to be twice as

high as the number of available TVET places, leading to a selection process that deprives many young people of opportunities, especially girls and rural youth.

TVET systems across MENA have also been criticized for their high degree of fragmentation. Responsibility for delivering programmes is distributed across a range of agencies, ministries and other entities. Definitions of terms and target groups are

inconsistent. What is meant by youth? Who is considered unemployed, underemployed or not in education, employment or training (NEET)? Such inconsistencies can create overlaps in targeting or neglect certain groups.¹¹² What is required is a measure of coordination and quality assurance across entities, rather than more centralization. Even more than general education, TVET systems need to be flexible and responsive to changing market demands. This requires a measure of decentralization and autonomy at the institutional level which, as we have seen, is often lacking in the region.

THE PRIVATE SECTOR PLAYS A ROLE IN BUILDING THE SKILLS OF YOUNG PEOPLE BY MAKING TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE TO STAFF AND SUPPORTING ON-THE-JOB TRAINING.

However, flexibility and autonomy also require a strong monitoring and accountability mechanisms, which are also lacking. Jordan, for example, established a Technical and Vocational Skills Development Commission (TV-SDC) in 2019, in line with its National Strategy for Human Resource Development. The Commission includes the Technical and Vocational Skills Development Council with such members as the Minister of Education, the Minister of Higher Education, the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Labour, the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission for higher education institutions, representatives of the private sector, and representatives of the tourism, industrial, commercial, construction, communications and health sectors.¹¹³

Another important issue is that most education and training systems in the region, and across much of the developing world, are not responsive to the struggles of young women in the labour force. There are many industries where women are underrepresented. Rather than playing a positive role in helping young women overcome barriers to participation, TVET systems often reinforce gender workplace norms by dissuading young women from

joining training programmes, thereby maintaining social barriers to female participation in these sectors. This may also represent good-intentioned, if misplaced, efforts by administrators and trainers to dissuade young women from joining industries they know are discriminatory and from which many young women ultimately drop out. Indeed, young women are generally reluctant to work in firms and industries that have few other women. Regardless of the intention, such gendered segmentation within training contributes to a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion from certain industries, and the labour market more generally. TVET reforms must take these dynamics into account and position the system to serve as a positive force for advancing social inclusion.

Raising the reputation of TVET will require that TVET systems are adequately funded. MENA governments currently tend to assign far more resources to the more prestigious general education track and to universities. Limited financing is the main reason why TVET institutions are unable to employ trained teachers and trainers, or offer the most appropriate equipment with the latest technology. Other areas of reform in TVET financing

includes decentralized skills planning and budgeting, creating production and service centres at TVET institutes, and performance-based budgeting.

While TVET continues to be dominated by public institutions, private vendors and NGOs also play a role. Some, such as Luminus Technical College in Jordan, are highly regarded for providing excellent training and work closely with public and international institutions to support youth. Some NGOs, such as American Near East Refugee Aid in Lebanon, also provide training. Although limited in coverage, these are demand-driven with respect to the business sector's needs for graduates skilled in information technology (IT), business and agribusiness.¹¹⁴ However, most private vendors offer training of dubious quality with limited oversight from public authorities. They tend to focus on skills that can be taught in classrooms, such as accounting, business, languages, and computer coding, while leaving more expensive training that requires heavy equipment or large workspaces to the public sector.

The private sector plays a role in building the skills of young people by making training opportunities available to staff and supporting on-the-job training. Firms benefit from higher lev-

els of productivity brought about by a more capable and motivated workforce. In MENA, the private sector has not, arguably, played as big a role in this regard as it could have. Governments can unlock employer resources for TVET financing through various means, including public-private partnerships (PPPs), apprenticeship programmes, dual training systems, tax credits, incentives and more. However, en-

agement with the private sector also requires governments to substantially improve their M&E capacities to ensure that resources are not misallocated and that firms meet basic workplace health and safety requirements.

An important step in turning TVET into an education pathway of choice among students is ensuring that students can move between education tracks more easily. More focus should

be placed on enhancing the vocational pathway by better integrating TVET in general education, establishing links with higher education, and introducing career counselling for TVET students.¹¹⁵ Why should qualified secondary TVET graduates not be able to study engineering at a public university? Why should a post-secondary TVET graduate not be able to continue to a graduate programme in business administra-



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tion? If there are issues and concerns with the quality of the TVET curricula in preparing students for such transitions, then the solution is to improve the TVET curricula and better prepare students, not prevent students from pursuing viable education tracks outside TVET.

More robust national qualification frameworks would give more weight to competencies and qualifications, instead of relying exclusively on credentials. NQFs allow for a more flexible and efficient education system by weaving together general education, technical and vocational education, and higher education into a harmonized quality-assured system. They define pathways and equivalencies, which provide access to qualifications and assist people to readily move between different education sectors, as well as between these sectors and the labour market. Several countries (Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Morocco, Tunisia and the UAE) have experimented with such systems, offering valuable lessons. Education systems should allow for multiple alternative pathways to learning and ensure that they are certified and linked with the formal education system. This will help develop an inclusive education system that caters for all population groups, including those most vulnerable.

CASE STUDY 2

In 1994, Egypt launched the MKI-DS as part of German technical cooperation to help Egypt improve its secondary technical education system. The aim was to adapt Germany's dual system and apply it to the Egyptian context. Students spent 2 days per week in a secondary technical school, studying theoretical concepts, and 4 days per week in an enterprise, experiencing work and developing practical skills. By 2010, enrolment has exceeded 10,000 students per year with 2,000 companies providing training. By 2020, the programme served around 50,000 students per year, representing 2 per cent of vocational education students in the country. An impact assessment conducted in 2010 found that MKI-DS graduates earned 20–30 per cent more than graduates of traditional technical schools. One tracer study found that 85 per cent of the sample had been offered employment at the time of graduation. Employers were enthusiastic about the programme and its benefits, teachers appreciated the training they received, and schools experienced cost savings, as students only attended 2 days per week. Criticisms included the low rates of female participation, concerns over child labour laws and long working hours, and a weak governmental response to workplace injuries. In fairness, most of these concerns reflected the poor workplace conditions in Egypt and not the programme itself. Nonetheless, there is a need for the Egyptian Government to improve workplace conditions and increase its M&E capacity in order to respond to safety and health abuses when they occur, especially for students involved in internships and dual systems.¹¹⁶

Educational attainment in conflict countries and among the most vulnerable

The MENA region is home to large populations of vulnerable communities that have uncertain and limited access to education. As a share of the population, the region hosts proportionally more refugees and displaced persons than anywhere else in the world. Between 2011 and 2019, armed conflict in Syria, Libya and Yemen cost the lives of 750,000 people and resulted in the outward migration of 6 million people while, internally, 11 million more were displaced.¹¹⁷

Armed conflict has devastated educational infrastructures, greatly affecting educational outcomes. In 2018, an estimated 5.8 million Syrian children (97 per cent of the total) needed educational support, and roughly 40 per cent of school infrastructure was damaged, destroyed, converted to shelters or no longer accessible.¹¹⁸ A 2017 assessment found that 52 per cent of seventh graders and 35 per cent of eighth graders could not read at the equivalent level of second grade, and 63 per cent of seventh graders and 46 per cent of eighth graders could not solve a second-grade math problem.¹¹⁹

In Yemen, 4.1 million children (54 per cent) were in need of educational support, and around 1.9 million children were out of school.¹²⁰ By September 2017, 256 schools had been completely destroyed and another 1,413 were partially damaged because of airstrikes and shelling. In addition, two thirds of teachers had not been paid in over a year, affecting their ability to continue teaching.¹²¹ Pre-conflict Libya was already suffering from weak infrastructure. But by 2016, some 558 schools had been affected by the crisis, of which 30 were destroyed and 51 were being used by displaced persons.¹²² Some 300,000 children were in need of educational support, amounting to 20 per cent of school-age children.¹²³ Humanitarian organizations have resorted to informal schooling to cover gaps.¹²⁴

The direct impacts of conflict on school infrastructure and human capital are compounded by the general lack of basic necessities, including electricity and heating, books and other school supplies, not to mention the physical damage to roads and transportation systems, disruption of family livelihoods and the rise of food insecurity, affecting students' ability to learn and pressuring families to

take their children out of school to work or get married. Indeed, the incidence of early marriage among young women has increased dramatically in conflict countries. In addition, the psychological trauma of war has had a severe impact on the mental health of children and youth, blunting their ability to learn or even imagine how schooling can improve their future lives.

Similarly, children in refugee communities face difficulties accessing education. While the enrolment rate of refugee children in basic education (ages 6–14 years) is around 60 per cent or higher, enrolment rates decrease dramatically at secondary level.¹²⁵ In response, host countries and the international community have made substantial efforts. The No Lost Generation Initiative has brought together humanitarian and development partners from UN agencies, local and international NGOs, donors and host governments to collectively mobilize resources for children and youth affected by war and conflict in Syria and Iraq. Collective efforts have prevented at least 2.5 million Syrian children from being out of school.¹²⁶ In Jordan, e-learning and innovative education initiatives are helping children return

THE DIRECT IMPACTS OF CONFLICT ON SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE AND HUMAN CAPITAL ARE COMPOUNDED BY THE GENERAL LACK OF BASIC NECESSITIES, INCLUDING ELECTRICITY AND HEATING, BOOKS AND OTHER SCHOOL SUPPLIES.

to the classroom through programmes such as the Kolibri platform, which is aligned with the Jordanian curriculum.¹²⁷ Jordan also recognizes prior learning for Syrian refugees.

The lack of secondary and post-secondary education carries over to a lack of vocational training opportunities. Even Jordan, which ensures access to education for Syrian refugees, is reluctant to include vocational training. Ostensibly, host countries claim they are preventing refugees from displacing national workers. However, barriers

to training are often much broader, excluding refugees from vocations for which there is excess demand in the market, such as sectors where nationals do not want to work, or export-oriented digital platforms that are far removed from the local labour market. Overly restrictive policies limit the ability of refugees to earn a living, thereby maintaining their dependence on humanitarian assistance. They also prevent young refugees from developing key work skills for when they eventually relocate back to their home countries.

Supporting lifelong learning

Vocationally relevant lifelong learning is becoming increasingly important in labour markets where skills requirements are constantly changing.

Both employers and jobseekers need to be aware that learning does not stop when students leave school, especially when the formal system does not provide young people with the appropriate skills. Young people need to become lifelong learners, even after they secure a job, while employers need to facilitate opportunities for employees to develop skills and advance in their careers.¹²⁸

Governments must provide training facilities, establish connections with private-sector stakeholders, and ensure that experts develop and update training content and that sufficient training spaces are available. In addition, it is crucial to ensure adequate access to quality lifelong learning TVET programmes, particularly for disadvantaged and marginalized youth, including young women, young migrants and refugees, youth living in rural areas and youth with physical or learning disabilities.

The need for lifelong learning is clear. Individuals at different stages of their careers may require training or re-



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training when they transition between jobs, find themselves in prolonged periods of unemployment, or when forced to migrate. Access to lifelong learning is essential for lifelong development. Lifelong learning is also important in the context of providing people with a second chance at obtaining the kind of education and training they need. Often this means simply acquiring basic literacy and other skills to secure a specific job. The number of adults possessing a low level of literacy is relatively high in the MENA region, representing more than 50 million adults,¹²⁹ and the number seems to be on the rise, mainly in areas of crisis and conflict.

However, there are few options for young people and adults to access lifelong learning and second-chance training programmes in the MENA region. Structural challenges, such as lack of vision, the absence of comprehensive legal and policy frameworks, insufficient financial investment, and poor quality of educators and programmes have meant that, until relatively recently, lifelong learning was not seen as a priority. The operating assumption has been that, after young people leave school, they enter stable and secure employment in the public sector or formal private sector.

Labour regulations make it difficult to fire workers in formal employment and the lack of effective competition makes these jobs relatively secure. However, the reality is that most young people cannot access formal employment and end up changing jobs and careers, sometimes multiple times. Furthermore, rapid advances in technology and digitalization are putting secure jobs at risk – all the more reason for governments to introduce lifelong learning opportunities to help workers keep their skills up-to-date, or reskill in the event of job losses.

Nonetheless, positive developments towards lifelong learning have been witnessed in the region. For example, in 2018 Lebanon adopted a national strategic framework for TVET that allows for lifelong learning. However, the implementation of lifelong projects has been poor.¹³⁰ Since 2011, vocational training centres under the Ministry of Social Affairs have provided only traditional crafts courses. The ministry has a limited budget, and its training programmes have not kept pace with local industry needs because of the high cost of equipment and expertise. Instead, short vocational training courses have been developed in cooperation with NGOs and affiliated social development

centres. These efforts have allowed the ministry to establish a local presence, facilitating local development and lifelong learning projects.¹³¹

In Jordan, although there is no clear national policy for lifelong learning, universities have embraced the concept in their missions and practices. Most Jordanian universities have training centres that offer specialized courses in computing and technology, modern languages, business administration, accounting and finance, educational sciences, graphic design, nursing and more.

Lifelong learning is a complex process. It requires engagement and commitment from learners, employ-

ers, training institutions and other stakeholders. While successful lifelong learning systems increase the employability of participants, it is important to consider business and employer interests.¹³² Furthermore, it is crucial to enhance collaboration between public and private TVET providers in order to optimise outreach and accessibility for lifelong TVET that keeps pace with the requirements of the labour market. MENA countries must upgrade and improve the current TVET structures but do so in a way that ensures that lifelong learning considerations are adequately built in and taken into account.

HOWEVER, THERE ARE FEW OPTIONS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULTS TO ACCESS LIFELONG LEARNING AND SECOND-CHANCE TRAINING PROGRAMMES IN THE MENA REGION.

2.2. Unlocking earnings

Educational reform is only one aspect of helping youth to transition. Even if young people were to emerge from schooling with relevant knowledge and strong technical and life skills, delayed transitions will continue to persist without sufficient decent jobs, resulting in persistently high unemployment rates among educated youth. Tunisia, for example, has high levels of university completion, but in 2017 the unemployment rate among young university graduates was over 60 per cent.¹³³

FORMAL EMPLOYMENT OUTSIDE THE PUBLIC SECTOR IS INCREASINGLY LIMITED BECAUSE OF RESTRICTIVE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENTS ACROSS THE REGION. EXCESSIVE REGULATION PUSHES COSTS ONTO FIRMS, LOWERS PRODUCTIVITY AND HINDERS COMPETITION, ALL OF WHICH LIMIT FIRM GROWTH AND JOB CREATION.

The main factor behind the high rates of unemployment and low rates of labour force participation is the dearth of decent employment opportunities. The public sectors of the region are unable to absorb new labour market entrants, while the private sector is composed of large, politically connected firms often sheltered from competition. Small informal firms are prevented from growing. Institutional and regulatory barriers also prevent young people from starting their own businesses and creating opportunities for themselves and for others. Private-sector growth and job creation have stalled. The prevalence of informal work and lack of labour market dynamism have also limited career advancement and wage progression. To that end, MENA countries must remove obstacles to private-sector development and growth, support youth entrepreneurship, and support young people as they seek to advance their careers and transition within work.

Private-sector development and job creation

Arguably, the most critical element in the decades-long efforts to tackle youth unemployment in the MENA region has been the issue of job creation, particularly in the formal private sector. In part, this is because of declining productivity and the lack of structural reforms. More crucially, the dearth of decent employment opportunities is the single most important factor behind the persistently high rates of youth unemployment and rising levels of informal employment in the region.¹³⁴

Formal employment outside the public sector is increasingly limited because of restrictive business environments across the region. Excessive regulation pushes costs onto firms, lowers productivity and hinders competition, all of which limit firm growth and job creation.¹³⁵ Connected firms rely on lower-level service provision and low-productivity industrial output rather than shift to high-value services and highly productive industries, including those with the potential for job creation and global integration, such as the IT sector, renewable energy, and the green economy. For

MENA GOVERNMENTS HAVE BEEN ABLE TO IMPROVE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENTS BY ENHANCING THE EFFICIENCY OF PUBLIC SERVICES. ONE WAY HAS BEEN TO DIGITALIZE APPLICATIONS, PERMITS AND PAYMENTS.

unconnected firms, administrative burdens, demonstrated by long waiting periods for permits and a high number of approvals required to start and run a business, adversely affect job creation. Additionally, the lack of transparency and consistency of tax authorities slows down firm growth and, subsequently, labour demand.¹³⁶ As a result, most firms end up operating in the informal sector, especially in North Africa where employment rates in the informal sector among youth are as high as 80 per cent in Tunisia and Egypt.¹³⁷

The inability of MENA economies to create enough decent work opportunities in the private sector is a result of the region's unique political economy, whereby the State maintains predominant control over the private sector. In addition to overregulation, MENA governments often reserve economic privileges for business elites with strong ties to the establishment.¹³⁸ For example, in Tunisia, the majority of connected firms operate in industries that enjoy foreign direct investment restrictions.¹³⁹ In Lebanon, large connected firms have been found to be less productive than smaller, unconnected firms.¹⁴⁰ Studies have shown how restricted competition, coupled with significant energy subsidies, constrain job creation by pushing firms to rely on capital and machinery instead of labour.¹⁴¹

In addition to limited job creation, connected firms are less inclined to pursue environmental, social and governance (ESG) objectives than firms that are accountable to public regulators and answerable to private investors.

Finally, despite positive attitudes towards self-employment,¹⁴² the lack of resources available for entrepreneurs prevents many from pursuing

this career path.¹⁴³ In a 2017 survey of entrepreneurs jointly conducted by the World Bank Group and the World Economic Forum, only 65 per cent of survey participants reported that they received mentorship, and less than 40 per cent reported that they underwent entrepreneurship training.¹⁴⁴ Except for a few initiatives in the venture capital space, such as Egypt's Flat6Labs and Sawari Ventures, start-up networks are largely absent in the region.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, according to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, lack of profitability and restricted access to finance are responsible for over 70 per cent of business exits in Morocco and Jordan.¹⁴⁶ Loans to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) account for the smallest share of bank loans in the Middle East, with most going to larger, often politically connected, firms.¹⁴⁷ Data from 2011 show that, in most Middle Eastern countries, only 8 per cent of loans went to SMEs.¹⁴⁸ The effects of business restrictions are more severe in contexts where security and infrastructure deficiencies are widespread, such as the West Bank,¹⁴⁹ or in conflict countries, such as Syria and Yemen. As a result, the region has boasted globally low rates of firm entry – about 1.2 new limited liability

companies per 1,000 working-age population were registered over the 10-year period between 2006 and 2016.¹⁵⁰

Governments and international organizations across the region have recognized the importance of stimulating private-sector development. Its potential for driving job creation and economic growth can be facilitated through, for example, ensuring investment-friendly macroeconomic conditions, improving the business environment, enhancing the efficiency

of public services, streamlining regulations and expanding access to capital and credit.

MENA governments have been able to improve business environments by enhancing the efficiency of public services. One way has been to digitalize applications, permits and payments. For example, in 2019, Bahrain introduced an online platform for obtaining building permits.¹⁵¹ By making processes faster and more transparent, businesses in the region are now

facing fewer obstacles and can divert money and time to more productive uses. To the same effect, governments, including the UAE, have streamlined many procedures, such as business registration.¹⁵²

MENA governments have also moved to make the business environment more financially secure. Increasingly, governments (e.g. Jordan) are revising insolvency laws to allow weak firms to exit the market or restructure their debts and are improving access to credit ratings for banks and other financial institutions.¹⁵³ In 2001, Morocco established the Casablanca Technopark, which provides office space and support to IT-based companies and start-ups, and has inspired the establishment of multiple techno-parks in the country.¹⁵⁴ Notably, GCC countries have made progress in terms of ease of starting a business over the last decade, establishing agencies to support SME development and financing (such as Oman's Riyadh). Free trade and special economic zones have also been established to bypass restrictive regulations (the UAE has 45 such economic zones). GCC countries have also introduced innovation hubs and business incubators, such as Bah-

GOVERNMENTS ACROSS THE WORLD ARE ENCOURAGING ENTREPRENEURSHIP AMONG YOUTH AS A SOLUTION TO TACKLING HIGH RATES OF YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT, ESPECIALLY IN THE MENA REGION. RESEARCH SHOWS THAT THE MAJORITY OF JOBS ARE CREATED BY FIRMS THAT ARE 3 TO 5 YEARS OLD.

rain's International Investment Park and Saudi Arabia's Prince Abdullah Science Park.¹⁵⁵

However, government efforts to promote free and fair competition often fail to materialize during the implementation stage. Much of the private sector remains linked to government through contracts, making private-sector activity not only a function of political connectivity, but also of government rents.¹⁵⁶ This is the case in high-income countries with substantial hydrocarbon rents, as well as middle-income countries that have fewer sources of income, but nonetheless maintain a rentier economy. Even in low-income countries experiencing conflict and underdevelopment, rentier systems persist. This creates market distortions through encouraging myopic decision-making (e.g. hiring or promoting labour based on nepotism as opposed to merit), rent-seeking behaviour and restrictions on firms' ability to grow.

Consider the economies in conflict or financial crisis, as with Yemen and Lebanon. It is unrealistic to expect such governments to promote private-sector growth and job creation. Their focus should be on managing the crisis, resolving it, and

ensuring humanitarian aid flows. At the same time, governments should allow individuals and firms to function with minimal interference and allow them to create jobs and support economic activity. Unfortunately, this is not what happens. The economies of countries in crisis continue to be dominated by insiders. Governments even look to benefit from the flow of international humanitarian assistance.¹⁵⁷

MENA governments should continue to pursue policies that level the business playing field, such as reducing administrative barriers to firm entry and growth.¹⁵⁸ In rentier states where insider access is a reality not easily reversed, governments can create spaces that do not give preference to insiders, and then work to defend and expand them. These spaces include free trade and special economic zones, export-oriented industries that can drive growth and create jobs, and sectors that rely on innovation and technology that require a dynamic investment climate and a meritocratic employment system to thrive.

Encouraging youth entrepreneurship

Governments across the world are encouraging entrepreneurship among youth as a solution to tackling high rates of youth unemployment, especially in the MENA region.¹⁵⁹ Research shows that the majority of jobs are created by firms that are 3 to 5 years old.¹⁶⁰ As MENA economies struggle to create jobs and labour markets fail to absorb the large supply of educated youth, many governments have turned to promoting an enterprise culture among youth. Governments have expanded the provision of entrepreneurship education, enterprise support and access to finance,¹⁶¹ and the majority of these entrepreneurship programmes are aimed at youth.¹⁶² Gulf countries, in particular, have been praised for their efforts, which are reflected in their rankings in ease of doing business.¹⁶³ In general, entrepreneurship has skyrocketed in the region in recent years; there are currently just over 22,000 start-ups in the region today, compared with around 3,000 in 2017.¹⁶⁴

Entrepreneurship education covers business development, market research strategies, business pitching and pricing strategies, along with financial literacy skills. It may also include opportunities

IN RECENT YEARS THE REGION HAS ALSO SEEN A DRAMATIC INCREASE IN ENTERPRISE SUPPORT TAILORED FOR YOUTH AND OFFERED BY GOVERNMENTS OR THE PRIVATE SECTOR. THESE INCLUDE BUSINESS INCUBATORS AND ACCELERATORS, SKILLS TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT, CAREER GUIDANCE, MENTORING, VOLUNTEERING AND INTERNSHIPS, AND NETWORKING, AND SO ON.

for youth to put theory into practice. Concerted efforts by international organizations to introduce and popularize entrepreneurship education in the region date back to 2006 with the ILO's Know About Business (KAB) programme, which contained modules on developing business ideas, entrepreneurship operations, and economic education. KAB was first introduced in Syria through 19 secondary and vocational schools and intermediate institutions.¹⁶⁵ In recent years, there has been a bur-

geoning commitment among both the public and private sectors to advance entrepreneurship education. One of the region's best-known examples of entrepreneurship education is INJAZ Al-Arab. A network of INJAZ chapters across 13 MENA countries provides training and programmes to school-age and older youth on work readiness, financial literacy and entrepreneurship, with participation reaching over 100,000 youth.¹⁶⁶

While Egypt is part of a cadre of MENA countries that exhibit a dearth

of entrepreneurship education, some domestic and international partnerships have offered workshops, such as KAB and a 2-week entrepreneurship education workshop by the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the Ministry of Education for over 100 vocational school teachers in Luxor in 2016.¹⁶⁷ Similarly in Lebanon, the American University of Beirut partnered with the Beirut Digital District, an innovation community hub, to provide engineering students with skills and knowledge to develop businesses.¹⁶⁸

Entrepreneurship education often introduces new pedagogies into classrooms where students have typically experienced only traditional learning. INJAZ Al-Arab works with schools to bring business people and entrepreneurs into the classroom to teach, share their experiences and engage students in a dialogue – something students rarely experience.¹⁶⁹ The ILO's KAB also takes a more engaging teaching format. Teachers who embrace the interactive format enjoy it and students are more likely to feel engaged and develop more positive attitudes towards private-sector employment and entrepreneurship.¹⁷⁰

In recent years the region has also seen a dramatic increase in enterprise support tailored for youth and offered by

governments or the private sector. These include business incubators and accelerators, skills training and development, career guidance, mentoring, volunteering and internships, and networking, and so on. Dubai, for example, hosts a Google-partnered Tech Hub in the Middle East and offers young entrepreneurs affordable co-working and office spaces.¹⁷¹ Similarly, the Greek Campus, founded in 2014 in downtown Cairo, has expanded to three locations, including one in Saudi Arabia, and helps 90 start-ups annually.

YOUNG WOMEN FACE ADDITIONAL HURDLES. FIRST, THEY ARE LIMITED IN THEIR JOB PROSPECTS COMPARED TO THEIR MALE COUNTERPARTS, MAINLY WORKING IN SALES, AGRICULTURE, TEACHING OR PERSONAL CARE.

Despite these positive developments and increasing support structures, young people still find it difficult to start and grow a business. They face not only the same barriers that other private-sector enterprises do, but additional ones as well. Oasis 500, a leading accelerator based in Jordan, provides founders with a 6-month, hands-on acceleration programme. In addition to funding, technical supervision, mentorship and networking opportunities, Oasis500 provides back office support. Since launching in 2010, it has invested close to 10 million USD in over 150 start-ups.¹⁷² So far, however, it has had only two successful exits and most start-ups remain at the pre-launch stage. Youth entrepreneurship programmes are not always seen as effective for unemployed youth since entrepreneurs tend to be older with lower levels of educational attainment and represent a different demographic.¹⁷³ Furthermore, entrepreneurship is not associated with higher earnings.¹⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the idea of supporting young people to create their own opportunities is a long-term proposition, as it requires the development of an entire entrepreneurship ecosystem. This will take time and accumulated effort over the long term. One major constraint is lack of access

to finance. While SMEs in the region comprise about 96 per cent of all registered companies and half of all employment, they only make up a small proportion of bank lending.¹⁷⁵ Dedicated accelerators like Oasis 500 are helping to bridge this gap by financing young entrepreneurs, but they can only reach a small number of start-ups. Access to finance is heavily restricted for youth perceived to be high-risk because of their lack of income, collateral and credit histories. Young people also of-

ten lack access to business networks,¹⁷⁶ and struggle to pay high commissions, fees and interest rates to lenders.¹⁷⁷ As a result, they resort to other sources of capital, including family and informal lenders to fund their ventures.¹⁷⁸

To widen youth's access to finance, some attempts to increase the availability of start-up financing have included seed funding, grants, loan guarantees, microfinance, and alternative instruments like crowdfunding, along with angel investments and venture

THE IDEA OF SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE TO CREATE THEIR OWN OPPORTUNITIES IS A LONG-TERM PROPOSITION, AS IT REQUIRES THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ENTIRE ENTREPRENEURSHIP ECOSYSTEM.

capital for young people. Sometimes, financing is supplemented with courses on financial education, business development and business communications. Most MENA countries now offer some form of financial and business development services for youth-led enterprises. For example, since 2014, the Moroccan Caisse de Dépôt et de Gestion Group (CDG), a state-owned non-profit organization, has been running a small loans programme for youth-led start-ups.¹⁷⁹ There is a bandwagon effect when it comes to youth lending. In 2009, when Silatech, a foundation dedicated to supporting youth employment and entrepreneurship in the Arab region, launched activities in Yemen, none of the country's microfinance institutions (MFIs) had a product or service dedicated for youth. After developing a series of products with Al-Amal Bank, other MFIs quickly followed suit. By 2014, nearly all of Yemen's MFIs had youth-oriented financial products and services. Across the region, research has found that loan repayment rates of young entrepreneurs were on par with, or better than, those of adults.¹⁸⁰ Enhanced access to finance may help ensure that entrepreneurship is a less precarious pathway for young people, particularly since most active MFIs in

the region do not tailor any financial services to youth.¹⁸¹

Unfortunately, despite the visible widespread enthusiasm for youth entrepreneurship, there has been no improvement in aggregate youth employment outcomes. Evidence from research and impact evaluations points to a range of weaknesses, including lack of funding, failures to target youth from low-income backgrounds,¹⁸² weak school-level entrepreneurship education and low levels of R&D transfer.¹⁸³ Beneficiaries of entrepreneurship policies are generally limited to youth from privileged backgrounds as training sessions are often run in English and located in affluent areas of major cities. Furthermore, while evidence suggests these programmes are effective in shifting attitudes, they have generally been unable to create jobs en masse or improve entrepreneurs' earnings.¹⁸⁴



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Youth in work: An eye to advancement

There is a final aspect to address on the demand side of youth transitions from learning to earning and finding decent work.

For most young people, the transition to work does not end with securing their first job. Rather, the first job is often a stepping stone in their career. However, young people in MENA face significant hurdles to transitioning after procuring their first job. This is concerning because, in principle, in terms of their life course, it is better for a young person to start in a low-paying job or apprenticeship that provides them with experience, skills development and career advancement than a better-paying job that provides few such opportunities. However, career mobility is not common in the region, and hampered by weak demand. Young people, their families, and policymakers tend to fixate on short-term working conditions rather than prospects for job mobility and career advancement. What young people, and their families, need from their governments are clearer guideposts regarding accessible jobs that will provide the greatest returns over their lifetime.

Whether in the formal or infor-

mal sector, youth face unfavourable working conditions. The majority of employed youth are in low-quality jobs, with low pay and lacking security and social protection.¹⁸⁵ More than half of the employed young people in the region accept an oral agreement rather than a written contract, making them vulnerable to exploitation. Meanwhile, nearly 40 per cent work more than 50 hours per week.¹⁸⁶ In addition, employed youth typically do not have access to non-wage benefits such as severance pay, medical insurance and performance bonuses. In Egypt, Palestine and Tunisia, more than 70 per cent of employed youth lack such benefits.¹⁸⁷ As a result, 48 per cent of employed young Egyptians (15–29 years old), 47 per cent of employed young Tunisians, and 42 per cent of employed young Palestinians expressed a desire to change their current job. These youth listed the desire to earn a higher wage as the top motivation (around 30 per cent on average), while around 20 per cent wanted a permanent position, and another 20 per cent were seeking better working conditions.¹⁸⁸

With respect to skills mismatches, some 43 per cent of MENA youth considered themselves undereducated for the job they hold, while 11 per cent

considered themselves overeducated or overqualified. Over-education is mainly observed among youth in clerical positions (45 per cent) and elementary work (35 per cent). Under-education is observed in higher positions such as managers,¹⁸⁹ potentially an indication of non-meritocratic hiring practices.¹⁹⁰ At the same time, employers remain reluctant to hire new job entrants without experience because they cannot afford to hire the wrong person. In Lebanon, employers receive hundreds of applications for a single position from desperate youth, who often do not have the right qualifications. The lack of available jobs in the country, especially those paying in dollars, make the market very competitive and the recruitment process difficult and costly, especially given that many young people are not looking for a continuing position within the organization, but rather consider it a placeholder while searching for contracts abroad.¹⁹¹

Young women face additional hurdles. First, they are limited in their job prospects compared to their male counterparts, mainly working in sales, agriculture, teaching or personal care. Such occupational segregation, which is mandated by legislation in some countries,¹⁹² represents a persistent

source of gender inequality, narrowing options for women and leading to long queues for limited positions in their preferred (i.e. socially acceptable) sectors. In addition, many young women leave employment altogether to focus on family obligations.¹⁹³ Once employed, despite being more likely to hold a professional position with a formal contract compared with young men, young women were more likely to be contracted for a limited period (33 per cent) compared with young men (22 per cent).¹⁹⁴

Once successfully employed, women in the region continue to face discriminatory practices at work. Whether at entry-level or a managerial

position, women in MENA report low levels of support from their colleagues when making work-related decisions compared to men. On the other hand, women in senior positions report remarkably higher support levels.¹⁹⁵ Yet, women have fewer opportunities for promotion, and their numbers in leadership levels are low. According to a survey by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC), only 56 per cent of women felt that they were treated equally to men when it came to promotions.¹⁹⁶ They are also significantly underpaid, with a gender pay gap of around 50 per cent.¹⁹⁷ Indeed, gender marks the largest contributor to circumstantial pay inequality in the region.¹⁹⁸

Young refugees also suffer from harsh terms in employment. Legal constraints in host communities limit formal work for these youth. However, because of their vulnerable residence situation, they are often obliged to accept informal, precarious low-skill jobs with difficult working conditions, low pay, long working hours, and an absence of non-pay benefits like medical insurance, paid leave and severance pay. For instance, in Lebanon only 2 per cent of surveyed Syrian refugees had social security coverage while 55 per cent of Syrian refugees in Jordan had a short-term employment agreement. Young refugees work mostly in agriculture, construction, retail or the repair industry with seasonal, temporary and informal work agreements. In addition, they are more exposed to vulnerabilities such as seasonal unemployment and job losses during recessions, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Lebanon, 60 per cent of Syrian refugees were let go during the pandemic.¹⁹⁹

MENA governments are more interested in getting young people into jobs and then worrying about their access, or lack thereof, to social protection. Many young people secure their first job through a national employment programme or scheme. However, the

effectiveness of such programmes is often limited because of an absence of a coherent policy framework, limited understanding and consideration of the constraints facing youth, weak participant targeting and implementation capacity, high fragmentation levels between relevant agencies and institutions, and lack of evaluation and monitoring mechanisms.²⁰⁰

A SECOND MAJOR INFORMATION GAP OCCURS WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVE SCHOOL AND SEARCH FOR A JOB. EXTENDED UNEMPLOYMENT PERIODS ARE OFTEN THE RESULT OF UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS AND ASPIRATIONS.

Algeria's active labour market programmes for youth employment

In 2008, the Algerian Government implemented the Action Plan for Promoting Employment and Combating Unemployment to address the high levels of informality in the private sector. The programme targeted different groups of jobseekers aged 18–35 years: first-time jobseekers with university or below-secondary qualifications; young jobseekers with no training or qualifications; and senior technicians. Workers were offered contracts of 1–3-years and the employer's contribution to social security was covered by the State.²⁰¹ Little information has been published about the outcomes of the programme, the number of beneficiaries or the dropout rates. However, one research paper found that the effect on new jobseekers was not significant, suggesting that most employers were not ready to offer formal employment for new entrants. There was also a lack of M&E, which could have enhanced its effectiveness over time — a common issue in policymaking throughout the Middle East.²⁰²

Jordan's national employment programme

Jordan's national employment programme was established as part of the government's economic action plan for 2021–2023, looking to empower Jordanians aged 18–40 years. With a budget of 80 million Jordanian dinars (US\$113 million), it aims to motivate the private sector to hire unemployed Jordanians in all economic sectors and all governorates of the Kingdom. Through the programme, employers contract workers for one year, including 1–3-months on-the-job training. The programme subsidizes training each participant to a value of 50 or 80 dinars (US\$70 or US\$113), depending on the job requirements. In addition, for a 6-month period, it contributes 130 dinars to the worker's salary, 10 dinars to transportation allowance and 10 dinars to social security.²⁰³

2.3. Supporting transitions

So far, we have discussed how young people in the MENA region are leaving school with knowledge deficits, weak technical and basic skills, and limited work experience. They then confront a labour market with limited opportunities for decent employment and a business climate that does not support entrepreneurship. Governments have tackled both sides of the transition, working to reform education systems to better prepare young people for the world of work, while trying to create a more enabling environment for business to unlock economic growth and job creation.

Governments, international organizations, civil society organizations, private-sector actors and others have also introduced programmes that support youth during the transition process itself. Sometimes referred to as labour market intermediation programmes, these services can be grouped into three types. First, there are information services to help youth and firms make more informed decisions. Second, there are initiatives that help young people experience workplace environments

and become familiar with the world of work, such as on-the-job training, internships and job shadowing. Finally, there are programmes that directly support youth in transition, including wage subsidies and subsidies for transportation and childcare.

Career guidance and information services

The MENA region suffers from information gaps throughout the transition process. In most countries, young people have little idea about suitable careers or even what jobs might be available when they leave school. Upon completing school, they have little information about entry-level positions and wages. They also lack fundamental employment skills such as how to write a résumé, introduce oneself, write an email or prepare for an interview. Educational curricula typically neglect such important preparations, while employment programmes often focus on finding a job instead of building employability and job readiness, which would significantly facilitate young people's transition and integration into the labour market.²⁰⁴ When starting a new job, young people have little understanding of the requirements and realities of work. They often have little information about specific firms, whether they are good places to work or offer opportunities for professional development and career advancement. Similarly, firms have little information about the knowledge, skills, and abilities of job

applicants, who typically lack references or previous work experience.

This information gap begins while young people are still in school and considering a career. There is a lack of career guidance services and limited information to support career and employment decisions. In fact, the effectiveness of deploying "career guidance" services in many parts of MENA is itself debated. The words "career" and "guidance" carry connotations that often do not match

the social and cultural contexts of the region. *Career* is almost exclusively used to describe well-paid formal jobs, not the more common informal jobs in which most young people actually work.²⁰⁵ Similarly, *guidance* entails notions of "self-determination". Since most young men and women are financially dependent on their parents until they complete their education, decisions about career choices are often made at the family level.²⁰⁶

EVEN PUBLIC CAREER FAIRS TEND TO EXCLUDE YOUTH FROM LOWER SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS. MONETARY CONSTRAINTS PLAY A BIG ROLE, SUCH AS AFFORDABILITY OF TRANSPORTATION AND INFORMATION FRICTION, AS INFORMATION ABOUT SUCH EVENTS TENDS TO BE MADE AVAILABLE MAINLY THROUGH PRIVATE CAREER CENTRES AND ELITE UNIVERSITIES.

Indeed, when asked what kind of career they would like to pursue, young people are often confused by the question. Many expect, or feel obliged, to follow in the footsteps of a family member or learn a specific trade. Young people are often unaware of their own strengths and weaknesses, and what it takes to master a certain job.²⁰⁷ For those who plan to go on to university, the decision of career often depends on the grades, not their aptitudes or preferences. Finally, in nearly all cases, the choice of career involves a family discussion. Families often discourage young people from pursuing certain sectors all together because they are not prestigious.²⁰⁸ Parents often insist: “Get your engineering degree, then you can study whatever you want. However, family members often do not have sufficient information about the job market, and typically offer outdated career advice.” In this context, young people need more than simply career guidance. They need useful, reliable information to help them make better choices and which they can use to negotiate with their families.

Thus, career guidance should provide youth with up-to-date information about the job market to help

them – and their families – make more informed decisions about careers and current job opportunities.²⁰⁹ Information becomes even more crucial when a country’s economy is not performing well, with many sectors and industries shutting down or shrinking, while others are seeking new recruits, such as the crisis in nursing staff following the recent exodus from Lebanon.²¹⁰ This might include access to aptitude tests, information on entry-level wages for different occupations, and information on expanding industries. Even if young people believe that a specific career path is a viable option with a promising future, without information to back this up, discussions can quickly descend into a clash of opinions – a clash that parents often win. In Palestine, the School-to-Careers project sponsored by USAID included the family in the career guidance process by preparing guidebooks, which career counsellors used to help parents understand the guidance their children were receiving and to facilitate family discussion.²¹¹

A second major information gap occurs when young people leave school and search for a job. Extended unemployment periods are often the result of unrealistic expectations and aspirations. Many young people have expect-

YOUNG PEOPLE FROM RURAL COMMUNITIES AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES ARE OFTEN GUIDED TO ACCEPT WHATEVER JOBS ARE AVAILABLE, FOLLOW A FAMILY TRADE, WORK ON A FAMILY FARM OR IN A FAMILY SHOP, OR SECURE A POSITION THROUGH A FAMILY FRIEND.

tations about salaries and positions that do not match those available in the labour market.²¹² Some benefit from family connections to help them secure a job, often at reasonable terms, after completing school. Others from disadvantaged backgrounds may take jobs with weaker conditions simply because they do not have such connections and cannot afford to engage in an extended job search. Such outliers create confusion for regular jobseekers about what constitutes a “suitable” job offer.

Here too, the willingness of young men and women to remain unemployed in search for suitable employment depends not only on their own expectations but also that of their families.²¹³ Suitability depends on the position, sector, industry, salary, benefits, distance to work and many other factors. Furthermore, these concepts have both absolute and relative dimensions. Young jobseekers and their families are concerned that wages offered are enough to support them, but also that they reflect fair market value. However, there are few information sources to draw upon to determine the fairness of an offer. This lack of information can lead young people to both accept low offers and

prolong their job search in search of higher offers than are available.

One of the main challenges of career services is their lack of accessibility. Programmes are typically located in well-off urban areas or run by private institutions that do not cater to disadvantaged youth.²¹⁴ Young people in rural areas or from low socioeconomic backgrounds have poor access to reliable information. Only 15 per cent of active labour market programmes (ALMPs) in the MENA region target low-income groups.²¹⁵ Even public career fairs tend to exclude youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Monetary constraints play a big role, such as affordability of transportation and infor-

mation friction, as information about such events tends to be made available mainly through private career centres and elite universities.²¹⁶ Initiatives like the GIZ Employment Promotion Project in Egypt have tried to address the “contextual, cultural and social” differences among youth.²¹⁷

Finally, businesses also lack information about young job applicants. School credentials do not adequately reflect knowledge and skills. This makes firms hesitant to hire a young person without prior work experience or reliable references. Labour laws that limit the ability of firms to fire workers add to their reluctance to give young job applicants a chance. One work around that firms often use is to hire young relatives of current employees who vouch for them. While people often bemoan the wasta system, this arrangement allows managers to lean on their relative if a young hire does not work out. The way forward is not to combat such connections, but to make credentials more reflective of actual skills. MENA governments must reform their education systems to ensure that knowledge and skills are reflected in credentials. In addition, they must create opportunities for young people to accumulate valuable work experience before their first full job.

YOUNG JOBSEEKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES ARE CONCERNED THAT WAGES OFFERED ARE ENOUGH TO SUPPORT THEM, BUT ALSO THAT THEY REFLECT FAIR MARKET VALUE. HOWEVER, THERE ARE FEW INFORMATION SOURCES TO DRAW UPON TO DETERMINE THE FAIRNESS OF AN OFFER.

Lack of work experience

Where can youth acquire the necessary skills to increase their employability? In the MENA region, 20 per cent of unemployed youth cite lack of qualifications or job experience as the main obstacle to finding a job.²¹⁸ This is not surprising given that less than 2 per cent of MENA youth take up an internship or apprenticeship before their first job.²¹⁹ Volunteering and social work is not common in the region. While not necessarily linked to their education, being part of civic associations and organizations, such as the Scouts or the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, teaches youth valuable interpersonal and other skills like communication, teamwork, time management and problem-solving.²²⁰ The stigma surrounding unpaid work, internships, and entry-level jobs in the region is present among youth from all socioeconomic classes, but mainly upper- and middle-income groups. This makes young people less likely to improve their skill set and gain experience before trying to enter the labour market.²²¹ Not only has this led to the emergence of a skills gap in the economy, but it also decreases their employability and reduces future earnings.²²²



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In poorer communities, young people – especially young men – are often forced to accept informal, low-paying jobs, sometimes while completing their studies, to help support themselves and their families. They typically cannot afford to invest in unpaid training and internships.²²³ While internships might increase their earnings in the long run, it remains a luxury they cannot afford. By comparison, wealthier families have traditionally shunned working before completing school, especially in paid positions. In many parts of the MENA region, if the family allowed their son or daughter to work while studying, it signals that they cannot afford to support them. However, by labelling pre-graduation jobs as “internships”, this stigma is disappearing. Many private, Western-style universities are including compulsory internship or training components into curricula. However, the social stigma surrounding entry-level jobs and internships remain salient among middle-income youth whose families do not already have “high standing”.²²⁴

Such stigma does not only exist within families; it exists within the job market itself. In Morocco, a 24-month internship programme called *Idmaj* [insertion] suffered from the stigmatizing effect of paid internships.²²⁵ While

the programme reduced the likelihood of an individual being unemployed by 7.5 percentage points in the short run, it had a significantly negative effect on the wages of the programme's beneficiaries. Instead of being a stepping stone towards a better job, the limited skills learnt during the internship combined with the stigma surrounding assistance programmes led employers to label beneficiaries as unproductive and deserving of lower wages.²²⁶ The stigma in this case stemmed from the programme's association with assistance programmes and not the idea of internships or entry jobs itself. However, it illustrates the importance of structuring internships to minimize negative perceptions.

Young women face an especially precarious transition process, as social norms dictate that they work in formal job settings to minimize the potential for harassment and bias. Even open-minded upper- and middle-class families worry about their social standing and are selective in terms of what jobs are acceptable for young women. This limits the range of internships and entry-level prospects that young women can select from. Furthermore, social considerations extend beyond the formal sector to include travel dis-

tance and the number of women in the firm. However, entry-level positions in the formal sector are extremely limited. Many jobs are still concentrated in the informal sector, particularly agriculture, which requires skills often ignored by career education programmes and only acquirable through informal apprenticeships or trial-and-error.²²⁷ Consequently, as noted, most young women simply drop out of the workforce after failing to find an acceptable employment opportunity.

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Direct support for job search

Even after acquiring the skills and experience needed to enter the labour market, there remains the problem of accessing that market.

The region suffers from a lack of effective job-search institutions. This is reflected in the data: 58 per cent of unemployed MENA youth depend on personal connections, while only 32 per cent register at an employment centre.²²⁸ Most MENA countries have invested in establishing employment centres and agencies to link employers with jobseekers. In Algeria, the National Employment Agency (ANEM) requires, by law, private firms and municipalities to report any job vacancies.²²⁹ The Department of Employment and Training in Jordan's Ministry of Labour keeps records of both jobseekers and job vacancies, in addition to its role in supervising private employment agencies.²³⁰ However, such governmental employment institutions often lack proper funding, training and staff. Private-sector employers are also disinclined to use these agencies to advertise jobs. Also, many jobseekers choose not to register themselves. These factors combine to make these centres an ineffective method of job search for young people.²³¹

Young people are increasingly turning to online portals to look for work. Between 2012 and 2018, the number of unemployed youth in Egypt searching online for jobs increased by 66 per cent.²³² Around 17 per cent of unemployed Egyptian men and 12 per cent of unemployed Egyptian women were registered with employment websites. Governments have been involved in creating and running some of these sites, while others are private endeavours.²³³ Online job search has been found to increase the likelihood of an unemployed young person finding a job by 10 percentage points.²³⁴ Internet job search is especially effective for youth trying to get their first job.²³⁵ However, online search is mainly effective in urban areas with a critical mass of jobseekers and employers.

There is a strong socioeconomic dimension to job searching and job matching. Young people from rural communities and low-income families are often guided to accept whatever jobs are available, follow a family trade, work on a family farm or in a family shop, or secure a position through a family friend. These positions may not match their aspirations or capabilities, but simply reflect what is available and what their families have access to. At

the other extreme, young people from high-income families also have access to family connections or may be expected to work in their family business, once they graduate from university. In both cases, the type of career services they could benefit from are limited and they are usually better off acquiring the necessary skills through mentorship.²³⁶

AROUND 17 PER CENT OF UNEMPLOYED EGYPTIAN MEN AND 12 PER CENT OF UNEMPLOYED EGYPTIAN WOMEN WERE REGISTERED WITH EMPLOYMENT WEBSITES.

In the Gulf, nationals have, historically, had access to lucrative jobs in the public sector. Young nationals are focused on acquiring the necessary credentials to secure a government position, rather than building skills demanded by the private sector. However, in recent decades, most Gulf countries have not been able to guarantee public-sector jobs to all young nationals, resulting in high rates of youth unemployment. Gulf countries have introduced workforce nationalization programmes aimed at getting the private sector to employ more nationals through mandates and incentives. Although these programmes have opened more work opportunities for young nationals, there remains the issue of job mismatches, in terms of both skills and expectations. Nationalization programmes have shaped the career aspirations of young graduates, who have come to expect supervisory and managerial positions upon graduation.²³⁷ In Kuwait, nearly 25 per cent of fresh graduates in business were placed in managerial positions with no prior work experience.²³⁸ However, here again, there are not enough such positions. As the number of national graduates has increased, it has been harder to provide them with positions that satisfy their aspirations.

Subsidized wages and unemployment benefits

Monetary assistance programmes for youth have proven to be ineffective in the MENA region. Where young individuals move out of the parental home after school and become financially independent, such programmes help them pay for rent and other necessities while improving their skills through internships or training. In the MENA region, though, individuals continue living with their parents until they get married and become financially independent. Given that only 20 per cent of MENA youth between 15 and 29 are married or engaged, unemployment benefits have the opposite effect in the region.²³⁹ Instead of acting as a stepping stone towards formal employment, paid training and cash assistance decreases the urgency to find a job. With the large number of people enrolled in employment and training programmes, it is difficult to track trainees' attendance. Additionally, for those who attend training programmes or internships, receiving a fixed amount from the programme does not push them to improve their skills and they end up with minimum wage levels of productivity.²⁴⁰

Nonetheless, examples of successful subsidized internship programmes include a youth internship programme in Yemen that provided participants with valuable job experience, with better long-term employment outcomes, or "post-programme persistence".²⁴¹ The main difference between this programme and others was the structure of the subsidies. Instead of paying participants directly, 50 per cent of the intern's wages were subsidized for 6 months. Receiving payments in the form of a wage from the employer removed the charity stigma and replaced it with a sense of formal employment. This encouraged both the employer and intern to take the programme seriously. Since employers were still required to pay 50 per cent of the interns' wages, they were motivated to ensure that interns worked hard and gained new skills. In addition, a matchmaking service linked employers with potential interns.²⁴² Giving firms a degree of autonomy made the programme more competitive.

PART 3. THE WAY FORWARD

**UP
SHIFT**
social impact workshop
MOROCCO

3.1. A new call to action

Two decades ago, the international community sounded the alarm on the precarious employment situation for youth in the MENA region.²⁴³ In 2004, a World Bank flagship report estimated that MENA economies would have to create 97 million jobs between 2000 and 2020 to accommodate their growing populations.²⁴⁴ One of the challenges facing researchers at the time was that data and analyses on MENA youth were limited.²⁴⁵ Over the following decade, a substantial amount of data was collected by the ILO,²⁴⁶ the World Bank,^{247,248} and others.^{249,250,251,252}

MENA governments responded to the call to action. With the support of international organizations and the donor community, a large number of studies, policies and initiatives were developed to address youth unemployment. Between 2007 and 2014, Egypt alone implemented over 180 such projects.²⁵³ During this time, the ILO and World Bank collaborated on several youth initiatives, including the Global Partnership for Youth Employment, which focused heavily on the MENA region, and Taqem, an initiative to help build programme evaluation capacity in the region.²⁵⁴ In 2009, UNICEF and the

American University of Beirut collaborated on “Youth in the Arab World”.²⁵⁵

During this time, governments across the region adopted national youth strategies covering multiple dimensions, including migration, health, education, employment, culture and civic and political participation.²⁵⁶ Countries included Djibouti (2001–2005), Jordan (2005–2009), Palestine (2011–2013), Lebanon (2012–present), Morocco (2015–2030) and Yemen (2005–present). Yemen adopted a National Action Plan to focus specifically on youth employment.²⁵⁷ National youth strategies were also developed, but not formally adopted, in Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Syria.²⁵⁸ These national strategies provided a roadmap for introducing policies and programmes and coordinating efforts across multiple institutions, a notable governance deficit throughout the region.

Yet, despite decades of action, youth unemployment has remained persistently high across practically all countries of the region and labour force participation remains low, especially among young women. Education and skills gaps remain and have even worsened in some countries. With few exceptions, private-sector reforms have

THAT WEAK YOUTH EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES HAVE PERSISTED FOR DECADES, DESPITE POLICY AND PROGRAMMATIC EFFORTS TO ADDRESS THEM, IS REFLECTIVE OF A FRAGMENTED POLICY ENVIRONMENT AND WEAK INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT REFORMS.

not created an enabling environment for businesses to grow, thrive, and create enough decent jobs. MENA countries have thus far not been successful at overcoming the underlying barriers and bottlenecks hindering young people's transitions from learning to decent work, thus limiting their ability to contribute meaningfully to their countries and communities.

That weak youth employment outcomes have persisted for decades, despite policy and programmatic efforts to address them, is reflective of a fragmented policy environment and weak institutional capacity to implement reforms. MENA governments have been unable to fundamentally transform the region's political economy in order to stimulate job creation. Likewise, educational reforms have not taken a human-centred approach more responsive to the needs of young people. Finally, countries and international institutions have not been able to coordinate effectively and work to tackle bottlenecks and policy challenges.²⁵⁹

The transition from learning to decent work is complex and covers diverse areas of learning, skills, job matching, employment, job creation, job advancement, entrepreneurship, social protection and more. The core

issues and policies supporting young people's transition span a wide range of government agencies, including education, vocational training, labour, social affairs, commerce, finance and economic planning, and others. To address this fragmentation, most MENA countries have introduced ministries of youth and sports to help coordinate youth policy, but ministries of youth typically lack implementation capacity and must rely on front-line ministries to deliver programmes, services, and reforms. In addition, there remains a disconnect between youth policy, employment policy, TVET policy and economic policy, as well as a functional disconnect between the ministries dealing with youth, employment, education and economic development. A more coordinated long-term effort is needed. As discussed throughout this report, gaps, bottlenecks and policies in one aspect of transition affect other aspects, and shape incentives, opportunities, and choices that young people face. What are needed are coordinated long-term efforts by multiple stakeholders and a sustained commitment to action. International organizations, policymakers and other actors must work together to pur-

sue a coordinated, holistic approach over a number of years.

The persistence of weak outcomes also reflects governance deficits in administering education and youth employment policies and programmes. These include limited institutional capacity to implement ambitious strategies and the limited collection of feedback on implementation that is vital for course correction. Surprisingly, it is uncommon for organizations and government agencies in the MENA region to assess the impacts of programmes and policies, making it difficult to gauge a policy's success or failure, and deter-

MANY COUNTRIES HAVE ADOPTED AMBITIOUS STRATEGIES TO TACKLE YOUTH TRANSITIONS, BUT ACTUAL POLICIES ARE OFTEN SHORT-TERM OR PROJECT-BASED BECAUSE OF A LACK OF RESOURCES.

TWENTY YEARS AGO, A DEMOGRAPHIC WAVE CAUSED THE SHARE OF YOUTH IN THE MENA POPULATION TO BECOME THE HIGHEST IN THE WORLD, PLACING PRESSURES ON THE REGION'S EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND LABOUR MARKETS.

mine whether success or failure was due to features of design or implementation. In 2004, a global review of youth ALMPs found no published impact evaluations from the MENA region.²⁶⁰ The ILO's Tajeem Initiative was launched in 2009 to bridge this evidence gap. By 2014, 2 per cent of MENA programmes listed in the Youth Employment Inventory had undergone an impact evaluation – still far below the 10 to 35 per cent range in other regions.²⁶¹ This gap in evidence limits improvements to ongoing programmes and allows ineffective programmes to continue.

Many countries have adopted ambitious strategies to tackle youth transitions, but actual policies are often short-term or project-based because of a lack of resources. But there is also a myopic focus on immediate results in response to fast-changing political leadership. Identifying good practices and scaling up successful projects is not enough to make systemic change. Improving governance structures and implementation modalities are key to achieving long-term impact. Sometimes, even donors push for immediate results, and this may reduce a programme's effectiveness over the long term. International organizations need to consider the local context and adopt

a flexible and patient approach, so the desired results are reached.²⁶²

Delayed transitions mean that many young men and women sit idle rather than contribute productively to the development of their communities and countries. This represents wasted potential on a massive scale. Human capital, reflected in the collective knowledge, skills, effort, and ingenuity of people, is the main engine of economic development. In the MENA region, much of this latent potential is being squandered. At an individual level, delayed transitions are a source of frustration for young people. The coming decade will usher in several challenges that promise to further complicate the transition from learning to earning. Under their current governance structures, MENA countries are not well equipped to handle these challenges.

3.2. Challenges and opportunities ahead

Several global drivers of change will affect economic, social, and environmental outcomes across the world, including climate change, demographic shifts, urbanization, technological change and transitions to renewable energy.²⁶³ Each driver alone represents new opportunities for young people, such as technological innovation, green jobs and demographic dividends. Together, for countries willing to adapt and invest in upskilling their workforce, they present an opportunity for rapid development.

Demographic shifts

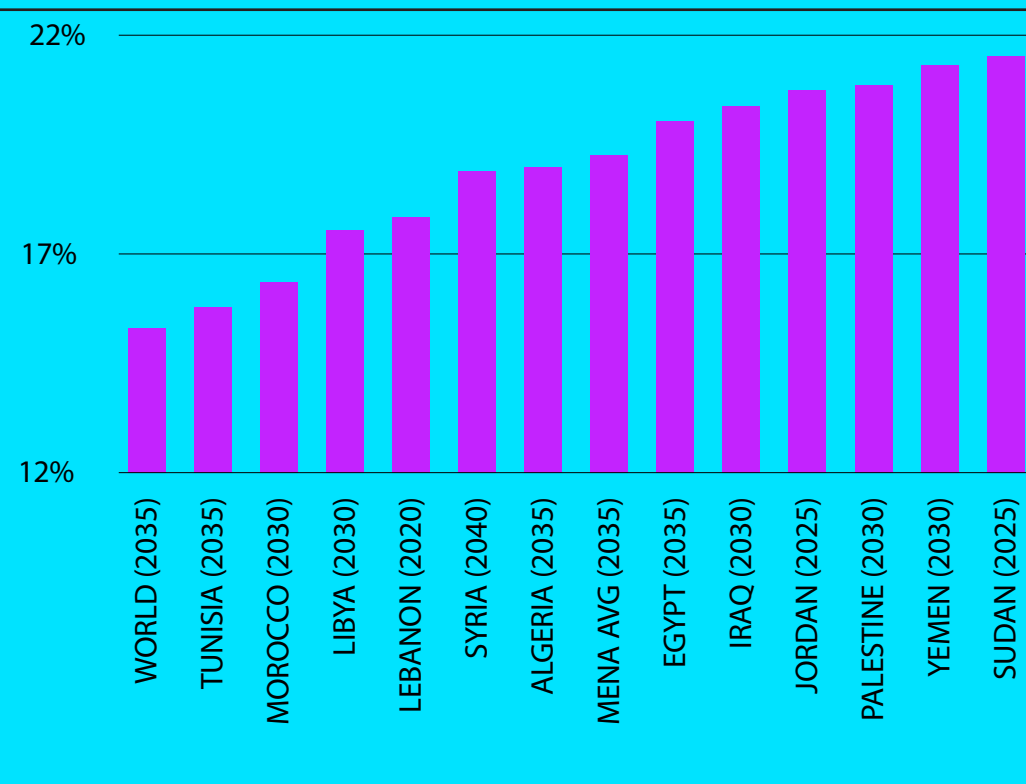
Twenty years ago, a demographic wave caused the share of youth in the MENA population to become the highest in the world, placing pressures on the region's education systems and labour markets. Education quality suffered as countries attempted to accommodate more students, while labour markets could not absorb the new cohorts, delaying youth transitions and fomenting the frustrations that foreshadowed social unrest in 2011. While there were differences in timing and magnitude across countries, regionally the youth bulge peaked in 2005 and declined over the subsequent decade.

A second wave is now on the horizon. These represent the children of the first wave. While, not as steep as the first wave, the second wave is arriving as other megatrends are hitting the region, compounding the pressures. The share of youth in the population is expected to increase to 18.3 per cent by 2035, compared with a global average of 14.9 per cent.²⁶⁴ Again, the timing and magnitude of the pressures will vary across MENA countries. Most affected will be Sudan and Yemen, followed by Palestine, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt (FIGURE 11). Once again, the region's education systems will feel

the pressure of the demographic wave and strain under the weight of a tight fiscal space. As the demographic wave proceeds, labour markets will witness the pressure of more young people looking for work. Yet, this demographic transition has a silver lining. Dependency ratios will

decline, creating favourable conditions for savings and economic growth. However, favourable conditions will only translate into benefits if countries prepare young people with the skills needed to succeed in the labour market and provide them access to decent, productive jobs.²⁶⁵

FIGURE 11. PEAK SHARE OF YOUTH (15–24 YEARS) BY COUNTRY



SOURCE: UN (2022)

Technological innovation

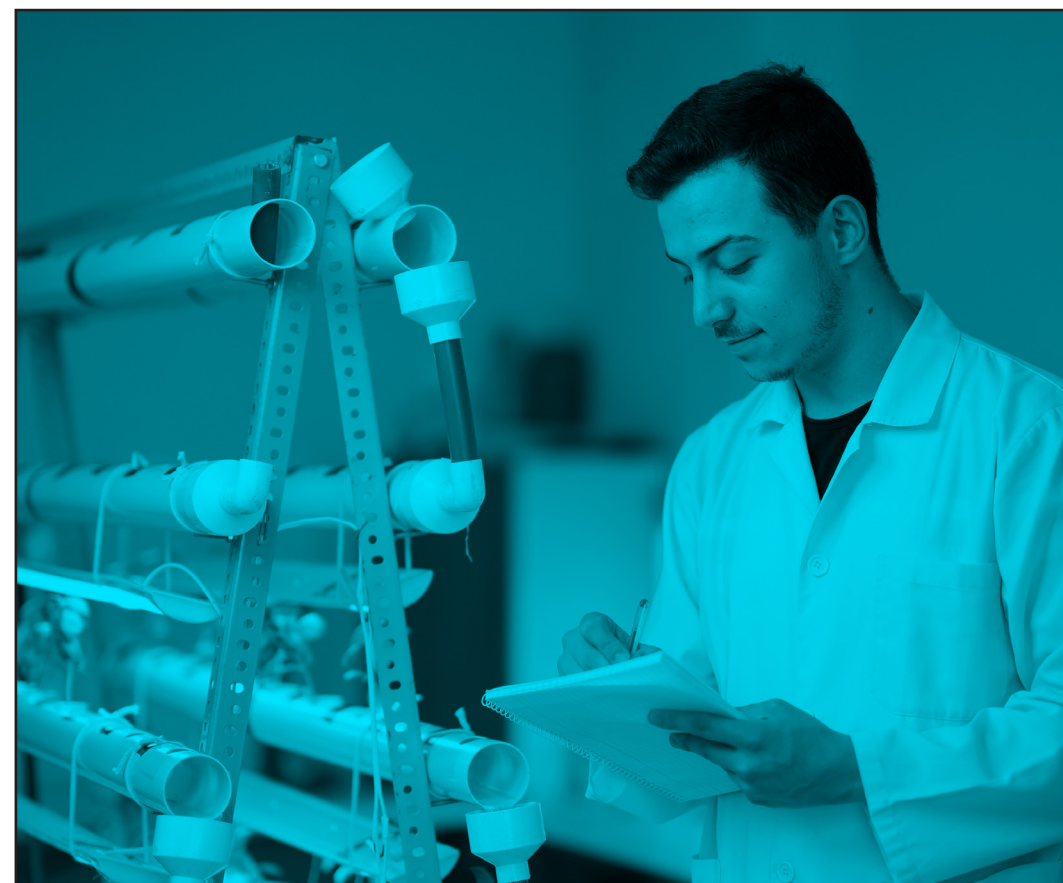
Another global driver of change is the accelerated pace of technological innovation. Collectively referred to as the fourth industrial revolution, increased digitalization, automation and use of artificial intelligence is changing how people live, communicate and work. Technological innovation can be an engine of economic growth and job creation, offering new possibilities in education, communication, and productivity. But it can also exacerbate wage inequality and displace workers. Around 45 per cent of work activities in MENA could potentially be automated in sectors as diverse as manufacturing, transportation, construction, hospitality, and retail.²⁶⁶ At the same time, technological innovation can improve lives and livelihoods, making it easier for people to learn and work across borders and boundaries, without necessarily having to leave their own countries.

Education systems have not kept pace with changing market needs nor provided youth with the skills they need. Nor have they supported lifelong learning. The region is falling behind even as it prepares for the fourth industrial revolution. The kinds of technical skills required for the future can

be characterized into different levels. Everyone needs basic IT skills – using computers and other electronic devices. This should be standard in schools, like languages and mathematics. Another level covers technical and complex problem-solving skills to complement artificial intelligence. These skills are related to critical thinking, and include creativity, emotional intelligence and collaboration. A third set of skills includes soft skills that are not directly linked to technology but are important for making it, such as active learning, curiosity and leadership. Education systems of the MENA region are lagging in all these levels. The result may be a shortage of key skills at the same time as there is an abundance of unskilled young people looking for work.²⁶⁷

To benefit from the opportunities presented by the fourth industrial revolution, MENA countries will need to introduce more adaptive education systems. They will need to evolve and adapt quickly to changing market environments and opportunities, and be flexible enough to embrace and support different learning styles, rather than forging students into the same uniform mould. Necessary steps will include building the IT skills of teachers and trainers, integrating IT skills

throughout the education curricula, creating more space for critical thinking and problem-solving, providing teachers with the necessary training and autonomy to pursue differentiated learning and devoting more resources to lifelong learning.



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Climate change and increased urbanization

Climate change will affect the entire world, but it has special significance for MENA.

The region is by far the most water-stressed region of the world.

Renewable water resources amount to just 520 cubic metres per person – less than one seventh of that of the next closest region, sub-Saharan Africa.²⁶⁸

This has implications for agriculture, as rural populations are already struggling to earn a living. Young people in rural areas will face shrinking employment opportunities in the agriculture sector, as cultivated land becomes ever more scarce, and this will reduce economic activity in rural areas more generally, affecting other economic activities that rely on farming income.

Lower levels of economic activity and opportunities in rural areas will, in turn, induce more young people to migrate to urban centres. Increased competition over jobs and resources will place greater demand on public services and urban infrastructure, setting the scene for increased stratification of public services, increased marginalization of low-income populations and greater disparities in income and wealth. Increased rural–urban migration will strain

education systems. Rural schools may struggle to operate with fewer resources and students. Meanwhile, urban schools will suffer overcrowding and stretched resources. Private schools will grow as parents move their children from burdened public schools, exacerbating inequalities at a foundational level.

Climate change, environmental degradation and the green energy transition will increase demand for workers, requiring more young people with green skills. According to the ILO, greening economies could create a net gain of 18 million jobs by 2030.²⁶⁹ Climate mitigation measures alone will require many workers. Furthermore, green energy promises to lead economic diversification efforts, especially for Gulf countries. Green jobs will flow to economies able to graduate young people with the right skills to do them. Here too, education and training systems in MENA are lagging, and the region is in danger of forgoing future opportunities.

THE REGION IS BY FAR THE MOST WATER-STRESSED REGION OF THE WORLD. RENEWABLE WATER RESOURCES AMOUNT TO JUST 520 CUBIC METRES PER PERSON – LESS THAN ONE SEVENTH OF THAT OF THE NEXT CLOSEST REGION, SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA.

3.3. An action-oriented agenda

Despite significant differences in economic development and political conditions, the factors underlying the high rates of youth unemployment and joblessness are remarkably similar across MENA countries.

Differences between countries are mainly about the degree to which one factor is more important than another. Thus, policy implications are, in many cases, similar. The high-income countries of the Gulf employ foreign workers; their main issues are skills gaps and mismatches in expectations that prevent young nationals from taking jobs in the private sector. The middle-income countries also suffer from skills gaps, but the main issue is a lack of decent employment opportunities. Conflict countries were once middle-income countries, and they too suffer from weak capacity and a lack of opportunities; but they must first move beyond a state of conflict.

Another feature of the region is that bottlenecks and barriers to transitioning to decent work are fundamentally structural. High rates of youth unemployment and joblessness have resisted decades of initiatives and reforms and it is difficult

to identify youth interventions that are considered unqualified successes. Interventions typically treat the symptoms, not the underlying causes. This is not to say there are no positive outcomes, but there are no long-term solutions independent of structural reforms.

The fundamental issues facing young people as they transition must be addressed. Much like a house, successful interventions need to be supported by a solid foundation (the basics) and strong pillars (implementation capacity). Our policy recommendations are thus

grouped into three layers. The foundational layer involves structural solutions. These are familiar to policymakers. Indeed, there is broad consensus regarding *what* needs to be done. The second group are the pillars, focusing on the mechanics of implementation. There is less understanding of how institutional capacity-building solutions can be implemented effectively. The third group highlights areas that need attention –promising interventions that have the potential to improve young people’s lives and livelihoods.

THE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES FACING YOUNG PEOPLE AS THEY TRANSITION MUST BE ADDRESSED. MUCH LIKE A HOUSE, SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTIONS NEED TO BE SUPPORTED BY A SOLID FOUNDATION (THE BASICS) AND STRONG PILLARS.

Getting the basics right

Structural challenges relate to the functioning of education systems, the business climate and the labour market.

Long-term solutions must address these structural issues. It is far more impactful and cost-effective to ensure that graduates are ready for work, and capable of pursuing lifelong learning, before they leave school rather than develop a stellar remedial training programme for them afterwards. MENA countries have made remarkable progress in increasing

access to education at all levels. However, the assembly-line approach to education has meant that less attention has been given to the quality of education and the development of essential life skills. This is especially concerning given that the future will be characterized by rapid technological progress, whereby a premium will be placed on skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and adaptability.

Future educational reforms should focus on building capacity to adapt curricula more quickly, improving

teacher training and autonomy, providing greater school autonomy, creating learning environments that can accommodate students with different approaches to learning, and creating space for students to develop critical thinking and enquiry.

TVET must connect better with practical experience and offer pathways to higher education.

TVET is still relegated to second-class status, often characterized by outdated equipment and poor links with the labour market. It is difficult for TVET students to continue on to university, so youth and their families perceive TVET to be a dead-end track. Nevertheless, TVET has long been the focus of reform efforts centred on modernizing equipment, updating curricula, reducing fragmentation across ministries, and improving links to the labour market through private industry councils.

Future reforms should continue to improve links with the labour market by concentrating on the skills needed by the market, engaging the private sector in national skills governance and skills delivery, increasing allocations within national budgets for modern equipment and teacher training, and introducing more internships, dual track, and workplace learning programmes. Governments should unlock

private-sector resources through public-private partnerships, tax incentives, and on-the-job training. Governments can reduce social stigma by building pathways to general education tracks supported by national skills coordination bodies and NQFs. TVET systems should spearhead gender mainstreaming across industries and establish opportunities within the system for lifelong learning.

MENA governments must enable the formal private sector to grow and create jobs.

The private sector must be enabled to grow and create enough jobs. It must also become more competitive in order to create productive, decent jobs. MENA governments have focused on improving the business climate and supporting youth entrepreneurship, but the rentier nature of their economies and insider access to opportunities persist across the region.

MENA governments should pursue macroeconomic stability and foster an enabling investment climate. Future reforms should increase the availability of export-oriented free zones and special economic zones that, while regulated, are less susceptible to bureaucratic red tape and insider access. This approach should be extended to innovation-driven growth sectors that

VIABLE WORK EXPERIENCE OPPORTUNITIES ARE TOO FEW IN THE REGION. THIS IS ESPECIALLY THE CASE FOR YOUNG WOMEN WHO REQUIRE ASSURANCES OF A SAFE WORK ENVIRONMENT. ONCE THEY ARE WORKING, YOUNG PEOPLE NEED OPPORTUNITIES TO ADVANCE THEIR CAREER, WITH SUPPORT FOR CHANGING JOBS.

can become globally competitive and create jobs. Governments should continue to support youth entrepreneurship, including access to finance and mentorship for young women.

Young people need jobs that support career advancement and enable job mobility. Young people need access to decent work opportunities, with good wages, benefits, and working conditions. They also need transitional activities in the form of social work, volunteering, internships and on-the-job training. Viable work experience opportunities are too few in the region. This is especially the case for young women who require assurances of a safe work environment. Once they are working, young people need opportunities to advance their career, with support for changing jobs. Such opportunities are lacking in the region.

Future policy reforms should expand frameworks and initiatives that support internships, apprenticeships and on-the-job training. Initially, these might be at the expense of pay and job security but there should be no compromises on health and safety measures. Governments should incentivize firms to develop employee skills and create pathways for advancement, and require firms to incrementally increase wages, benefits,

rights at work and job security.

Policymakers, youth and businesses need better information to make better decisions. Most MENA countries do not publish enough information on labour market needs and trends. As a result, young people do not have access to basic information on employment options and opportunities, career pathways, prevailing market wages, or even information on their rights as employees. Likewise, businesses do not have enough information to anticipate skills gaps and make solid business and investment decisions regarding employees. Even policymak-

ers often do not have good information upon which to base evidence-based policies and programmes.

Governments should enhance labour market information systems so that they produce more useful, timely and future-focused information to youth-serving organizations, businesses and policymakers. Future reforms should expand the provision of information and career guidance to help youth better understand their own competencies, as well as careers that align with their aptitudes and preferences.

MONITORING OUTCOMES AND EVALUATING IMPACTS IS ESSENTIAL FOR IDENTIFYING COURSE CORRECTIONS AND ESTABLISHING EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS PRIOR TO SCALING UP A PROGRAMME. IF COURSE CORRECTION IS NOT POSSIBLE, IT IS FAR BETTER TO FUND OTHER EFFORTS THAN CONTINUE TO ALLOCATE RESOURCES TO A FAILING PROGRAMME.



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Improving implementation

MENA governments must increase coordination across ministries supporting youth transitions. The transition from education to employment is a complex process, requiring coordination across a variety of government agencies, each with its own mandate and priorities. These include the ministries of education, labour, social affairs, and economic development. Governments have tried to improve coordination by forming high-level coordination bodies and introducing ministries of youth and sports. However, these bodies often lack authority over other stakeholders in the process, limiting their effectiveness.

The various government agencies need to better coordinate with youth-oriented organizations. They need to update national youth policies and ensure that priorities are reflected and harmonized within national budgets, with sufficient allocations for skills development, employment support services, social protection and enterprise development. These strategies should be linked to implementation plans and coordination mechanisms, such as decentralized skills planning, performance-based budgeting, and impact assessments of proposed policy

changes and new programmes. The latter would require policy actors to at least consider a policy's potential impact on youth.

Youth-serving organizations must improve monitoring, evaluation and implementation. M&E of youth programmes is far less frequent in MENA than in other developing regions. Monitoring outcomes and evaluating impacts is essential for identifying course corrections and establishing evidence of success prior to scaling up a programme. If course correction is not possible, it is far better to fund other efforts than continue to allocate resources to a failing programme. Weak M&E can result in implementation problems going undetected, including the mistargeting of beneficiaries and mission drift, resulting in weaker-than-expected outcomes.

Not all policies and initiatives require a fully fledged multi-year impact evaluation, but they do need credible information on performance that can help identify gaps in delivery, support mid-course decisions and identify programmes with poor outcomes. Strategies are not enough; governments must invest more in building the capacity of agencies to execute policies and strategies. Youth-serving organizations should also role model

what they expect of their youth. They must embody positive reform and change. They must become learning organizations and hubs for policy innovation and programme design and evaluation. They must model equality and equity. If not the institutions responsible for educating youth and promoting private-sector development, then who?

MENA governments must create space for young people to become involved in policy. The public-sector-led development model has created a sense of disempowerment and dependency among the region's youth. Many look to their governments and others to

solve their problems. Even for young people with a sense of agency, there is little space or opportunity for youth to engage policymakers and youth-serving organizations regarding the social issues that affect them.

Governments and youth-serving organizations must involve young people in finding solutions to the issues that affect them. Young people should be involved in problem identification, decision-making and policy development in order to design more relevant solutions. Creating a space for social dialogue and encouragement is often all young people need to take initiative.

GOVERNMENTS SHOULD CONTINUE TO EXPAND BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP TRAINING IN SCHOOLS AND ENSURE ADEQUATE ACCESS TO FINANCE AND MENTORSHIP SUPPORT FOR YOUTH.

Designing successful interventions

Ideally, public and private youth-serving organization across the region will focus on getting the basics right and improving their capacity to deliver effective programmes. A third key element is to identify and design promising interventions that can support young people's transition from leaning to earning and decent work. This report identified a number of interventions, beyond the basics, that have demonstrated promising results and have the potential to be scaled up.

Governments must improve the design and targeting of youth transition policies and ALMPs. Governments across the region have invested resources in developing policies and ALMPs aimed at supporting youth transitions. While these have been typically designed with reference to good practices, most are not designed from a human-centered perspective or in consultation with beneficiaries and stakeholders. As a result, they often do not consider the realities on the ground and may not reach those greatest in need of services. Furthermore, governments tend to focus more on policies that support education and

work, such as training and wage subsidies, and less on services that support young people in their transition between the two.

Governments need to introduce more targeted human-centred programmes and services that support young people's efforts to transition from education to employment. These include building employability skills (communication, writing a résumé, interview preparation, etc.). They also need to place greater emphasis on providing employability training, career guidance, job placement, subsidies for transportation and day care for children. Such programmes should be designed with input from stakeholders and potential beneficiaries.

Governments and youth-serving organizations should continue to support youth entrepreneurship. Despite some concerns that young entrepreneurs earn less, on average, than employees, global trends in technology, green industries and others favour an entrepreneurial approach to work. Furthermore, successful entrepreneurs create jobs for both themselves and others. In other words, the social returns can be greater than the personal returns to entrepreneurs.

Governments should continue to expand business and entrepreneurship

training in schools and ensure adequate access to finance and mentorship support for youth. Public procurement policies should ensure that a minimum share goes to small enterprises, especially youth and women-led firms. Projects that target specific gaps should be developed and supported. For example, space should be made for successful female executives to mentor young women entrepreneurs.

Lifelong learning must become a priority. Change is coming more quickly than formal education systems can respond. Rapid digitalization and automation will affect all aspects of life and work. Likewise, climate change will require countries to adapt quickly to shifts in weather patterns and introduce mitigation measures. Young people need to develop skills and behaviours that will allow them to become better lifelong learners. To do that, they will require information resources and opportunities for continuous education and learning.

The foundational skills and behaviours for lifelong learning need to be developed while children and young people are still in school. However, governments can provide a strong support system for lifelong learners. This might include providing access to education resources and materials, increasing

Arabic language educational content in bookstores and online, and streamlining approval processes for online courses and certifications.

The international community must continue to create and support economic opportunities for young refugees. The MENA region hosts the largest refugee population in the world (on a per capita basis). Host countries and international organizations have undertaken a massive effort to support learning and education for refugee children and adolescents, and this has been most successful at the elementary stage. At the secondary stage and beyond, education needs to be linked

with viable pathways to decent economic opportunities.

Governments and the international community must continue to support and expand educational opportunities for refugee children and youth. They must also work to create more opportunities for refugees to work in host communities or migrate to other countries where such opportunities exist. Such job opportunities can be in sectors where refugees would not compete directly with host populations, or on online platforms connected to worldwide opportunities. The latter requires strong training, good electricity and internet connections, and access to banking services.

GOVERNMENTS NEED TO INTRODUCE MORE TARGETED HUMAN-CENTRED PROGRAMMES AND SERVICES THAT SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE'S EFFORTS TO TRANSITION FROM EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT.

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