

Perspective from the Gulf Region: MENA's Post-Covid-19 Recovery Must Include Its Youth

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Introduction

Nearly half of the population of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region consists of children and young people in the age range of 1-24 years old, and as of 2015, there are almost 80 million youth aged 15-24 years old (UNICEF, 2019). Before Covid-19, Arab youth were already concerned about issues such as high unemployment rates, the quality of education, and limited access to services. According to the World Bank (2021), a total of 29.4 percent of the youth in the MENA region were unemployed as of 2017, which is the highest rate of its kind in across the world's regions. For instance, Tunisia's youth unemployment rate reached 35.78 percent in 2019, and the Palestinian territories' youth unemployment rates reached 42.08 percent as of 2020 (World Bank, 2021). This issue, one of the prominent reasons for the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, strongly indicates the level of poverty in the region and the challenge this presents for governments.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has compounded existing problems in the MENA region's education and employment sectors. According to UNICEF (2020), more than 100 million children in MENA have been negatively affected by school closures and the transition to online learning. Weaknesses in digital infrastructure and technological inequality have also further restricted students' access to education. Furthermore, according to the 2020 Arab Youth Survey, 20 percent of Arab youth said they or someone they knew had been fired because of Covid-19, which illustrates a significant increase in joblessness in a region where the unemployment rate has persistently been higher than the global average.

As Covid-19 did negatively impact all countries in the MENA region, some countries, like in the rest of the world, were hit more than others. However, some region governments have been able to adjust and respond swiftly, such as was seen when the UAE used innovative containment measures and technology, Jordan imposed an immediate lockdown, and Morocco put in place a program for rapid testing (OECD, 2020).

This paper will examine the related issues of educational disruption and increasing unemployment by examining the causes of these phenomena. It will then make several recommendations to remedy the situation based on the perceptions of Arab youth as the generation most likely to suffer long-term effects from the economic and social impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Including the region's youth in the post-Covid-19 recovery is a key strategy for shaping the future of their countries, as they are more ambitious, demanding, courageous and politically aware. The youth are a demographic dividend that are at the forefront of innovation and human capital in all of the Middle Eastern countries.

Digital Divide

Closure of educational institutions are among the preventive measures that countries have put in place to limit the pandemic's spread. Such measures have dramatically disrupted the educational sector in the region and unearthed preexisting systematic flaws related to teaching and technological applications. The transition to distance learning proved seamless for some countries, but complicated for others, largely because existing technological capacity failed to meet the unprecedented challenges the world was experiencing. Moreover, although many, if not all, MENA countries were able to accommodate their students, the limited access to the internet and overall resources such as tablets, computers, and TV exacerbated the digital divide and directly impacted students' access to practical learning opportunities.

A survey conducted by UNICEF measured the impact of the pandemic on seven thousand families across Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia (UNICEF, 2020). The survey revealed that only 55 percent of the children aged 5-17 had access to distance learning. It is unclear whether the remaining countries had any at all. Moreover, not all countries made distance learning available for all grades, while

others limited it to exam preparations only. UNICEF's survey has also reflected those issues that foreshadowed the region's digital gap. Many parents complained that internet access and technological devices were not available at home. This was compounded by some parents' and children's lack of digital knowledge, which prevented them from effectively carrying out their online lessons. More specifically, this factor was especially evident in the case in low-income households.

Moreover, reports have shown that access to technology and the internet was less available for women within some Arab households, most likely because of high expenses, gender roles, and the gravitation towards supporting males' education over females. Additionally, half of the 84 million female population in the MENA region are not connected online and do not own a technological device (ESCWA, 2020). In light of an exponentially high illiteracy rate among females, the region must urgently address such discrepancies.

Such challenges were affecting the region's higher education sectors at a disproportionate rate (World Bank, 2020). UNICEF and the World Bank (2020) have warned of the long-term repercussions of the inequalities mentioned above on youths' learning experience, development, and ultimately, their chances of succeeding in school and employability. Thus, governments must build their technological capacity, extend access to technology to include all members of society, and improve students' and parents' digital skills. It is important to note that some MENA countries successfully adapted and ensured continuous learning embodying a model to be followed by such countries as Saudi Arabia, UAE and Tunisia. Wherein the countries' infrastructure allowed guaranteed access to devices, the internet and utilized online educational platforms to all of their students.

Unemployment rates in MENA post Covid-19

The rapid increase of unemployment rates due to Covid-19 worldwide has had the most profound impact on the MENA region. Youth unemployment was already a significant challenge due to political turbulence and corruption that has affected many Arab countries since the events of the Arab Spring. There is a significant difference between unemployment rates in the GCC and non-GCC countries. However, related challenges include the need for economic diversification to create productive employment opportunities for the youth and reduce gender discrepancy in the labor market (ILO, 2020).

The issue of gender inequality in the labor market is a crucial challenge facing the whole world. However, the MENA countries face greater disparities in this respect compared to other global regions. Although the total unemployment rates in the region are relatively high, the rate of unemployed women has increased at an even higher rate. The International Labor Organization (ILO, 2020) reported that the rate of young unemployed women in the MENA region reached 42.1 percent in 2020, more than double the rate of young unemployed men at 19.8 percent. However, the rate of women attending higher educational institutions in the same countries is higher than that of men. For instance, women constitute 54 percent of university students in Algeria, 67 percent in Saudi Arabia and 53 percent in Palestinian territories (ISPI, 2018).

One of the factors contributing to the high rate of women's unemployment in MENA is the "legal and social barrier" that prevents women's access to jobs (OECD, 2017). Another significant factor contributing to this trend is the rapid development of technology and the digital sector. Fifty six percent of women in the region are not internet users, which exacerbates gender-skewed unemployment rates in an undeniably digital world (Afouaiz, 2021).

According to OECD (2021), 68 percent of the working population in MENA work in the informal sector; this high preponderance of informal work is worse in vulnerable countries such as Yemen, which has recorded a total of 78 percent of the working population being dependent on informal employment. Due to the limited employment opportunities in public and private sectors in the region, there has been an increase in such jobs being taken by the youth in the region, such as tutoring, tailoring, babysitting, gardening, selling from home, car lifting, among many other activities. Even though the informal economy does not provide a stable income and often offers work for overqualified people, it is still an important source of opportunities for those with no alternative jobs or income. The circumstances of those youth working in informal sectors has worsened as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, as the crisis has led to people to losing these jobs because of lockdowns and restrictions.

Recommendations/Conclusion

Addressing the challenges confronting MENA youth in the post-Covid-19 recovery should be a significant priority for regional countries aiming to offer their people a better future. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the youth population just as much as the working-age population regarding employment, education, and mental health. While the younger population will face the long-term consequences of the

pandemic, including them in the post-pandemic recovery journey is vital for the MENA region's stability, security, and prosperity.

Youth are the most crucial human resources for nations seeking economic recovery and development. In general, young people have faced two significant crises in their lives affecting them either directly or indirectly. These have highlighted the importance of building governmental strategies that decrease exposure to shocks that have an impact on the youth's future in terms of their education, employment and societal stability within individual nations. Governments need to redesign their core strategies to deal with the fall out of pandemics and focus more on digital youth work. Success will be measured through the successful investment of each nation in the security of the next generation.

For governments and policymakers to tackle the issue of youth unemployment in the MENA region, they need first to address the situation, provide youth with sufficient education and training, encourage them to innovate, and provide them with business opportunities that would further enhance their ability to contribute to the development of their countries. To do so, governments and policy makers should provide special funds allocated to youth initiatives and programs and make room for youth to be included and represented.

Investments in the future of the youth can come in a form of strategies, diversity and inclusivity within societies. In this context, governments need to seek opportunities that would deepen young people's sense of belonging by engaging them in policy responses and recovery plans. These opportunities could be enhanced if governments consider developing partnerships with national statistical offices and research organizations to gather evidence on the impact of the pandemic on their societies according to age groups. As a result, governments will be able to allocate their resources in a way that would fulfill the needs and requirements of all generations in an equal manner. Also, youth-led organization in partnership with the government should be encouraged, as in examples such as the Federal Youth Authority in the UAE and All Jordan Youth Commission, which have been active and involved in post-pandemic recovery plans.

With such programs, governments will be able to give youth a sense of responsibility and decrease the inter-generational gap of mistrust. The youth could be increasingly integrated into the decision-making process by acting as a "connective tissue" in the public sector and building a bridge between short-term issues and long-term objectives that include equality, resilience and inclusivity (OECD, 2018). To keep the youth engaged and mobilized within their communities, governments need to plan national youth volunteering programs and methodologies that would allocate clear aims and responsibilities, as well as sufficient financial resources, which will then help enhance the development of youth resilience.

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