

## Ideas for change in education, jobs

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BEIRUT: For many graduates in Lebanon, the changing labor market is a cause for concern. In a region where the World Bank says 30 percent of the unemployed have university degrees, young Lebanese worry about an outdated education system that can't guarantee a career. "I am one of these young Lebanese people who has been directly affected by the rapid change in the nature of work ... and the lack of orientation and guidance regarding the labor market," Maria Tannous of the World Bank's Youth Action Group said at the "Youth, Jobs, Education and Technology" event held Friday at the American University of Beirut.

Students, academics and members of the tech sector gathered to watch and participate in a discussion on the challenges facing Lebanon's education system and economy as a whole between World Bank experts, entrepreneurs and three government ministers.

Tannous said when she entered university, she felt lost and unsure about choosing a major and ended up almost "randomly" in media and political science.

"Universities should ... collaborate with the Education Ministry to create a comprehensive program or brochure that includes ... the future career paths that such majors lead to. Students have to know about all the different majors and not just a specific department, such as engineering and medicine," Tannous told The Daily Star.

Most speakers commented on the mismatch between the skills employers seek and those Lebanon's education system provides. Suggestions for reform ranged from making preschool enrollment mandatory and teaching children "flexibility" from an early age. Enhancing partnerships between universities and the private sector and letting employers influence the curriculum were also put forward.

Stephanie Abi Abdallah, a panel participant and programs director at the Beirut Digital District, said students were not sufficiently exposed to the private sector. Deciding to not "just wait for the curriculum to change," the BDD has launched its own private academy with various "tracks" for schoolchildren, university students, the working population and corporations to encourage innovation and provide exposure to Lebanon's tech startups.

Summarizing a recent World Bank report on education in the region, the institution's Education Practice Manager for MENA Safaa El-Kogali said the most effective change would come from combining "a concerted push for learning" with "a stronger pull for skills" by employers and "a new pact for education" involving the public and the private sectors, teachers and students.

Kogali also referred to preschool enrollment and teaching children skills like "flexibility and adaptability" as the "smartest investment to make economically."

Caretaker Education Minister Marwan Hamadeh emphasized funding shortfalls and political divisions as key obstacles to education reforms. While technology seemed to be a "perfect recipe" that could unite the country, innovation moved "at a much quicker pace" than education, which made it difficult "to consolidate programs," he said.

Without "an inspiring leadership [and] a unified state, we are going to plunge into a deeper crisis and [the problems of] education will not find proper answers," Hamadeh said.

There's reason to be positive in some people's view, however.

"I think this is the third event this week that is talking about the future of jobs, and how tech and innovation are impacting the job market. Today all the stakeholders are realizing how important this issue is," BDD's Abi Abdallah told The Daily Star.

With "the World Bank committing to train up to half a million people in the next few years, and the government being part of the discussions, all of this is hopefully a good sign that something will be done," Abi Abdallah added.

"The first step to solving a problem is ... admitting that there is a problem to solve."

The dialogue also revealed a consensus on the nature of the country's problems. The World Bank presented two flagship reports: the World Development Report 2019 on "The Changing Nature of Work" and "A New Framework for Education in the Middle East and North Africa."

Caretaker Economy Minister Raed Khoury agreed with WDR 2019 Director Federica Saliola and caretaker Finance Minister Ali Hasan Khalil on the need to reduce vulnerability and protect everyone in a system that has shifted away from traditional "9-to-5 jobs" to more informal work not covered by social security. Saliola said there was a growing need "to protect people, not jobs."

Hala Fadel, chair of the MIT Enterprise Forum Pan Arab, remarked that so far, technology had accounted for zero percent of Lebanon's GDP, which Khoury said was "unacceptable and a shame."

If Lebanon is "not capable of creating this growth in our economy by at least using this new sector [technology], then I think we are doomed to die, as a country and as an economy," Khoury said in a speech that elicited applause.

Khoury referred to Lebanon's economic model as "lousy," dependent on "expats' money" and plagued by corruption. He contrasted its situation with that of Israel, which has some companies "listed in NASDAQ and are worth tens of billions of dollars." He said private sector growth could "create miracles" and produce jobs with the right regulations, infrastructure and financing, claiming that as of now, jobs were crowded out by public sector employment financed by taxpayers.

“Technology is one of the most important and promising sectors in Lebanon, and if we invest in it ... the benefits are much higher than what [most think] in terms of growth of GDP, creating jobs and facilitating our day-to-day life,” Khoury told The Daily Star.

A summary of WDR 2019 prepared for the Middle East also called on governments to invest in human capital (knowledge, skills and health), implement “a more flexible social protection system” decoupled from formal employment and “expand the tax base” through a variety of taxes, including VAT and a carbon tax, to finance investments.

Saroj Kumar Jha, regional director of the World Bank’s Mashreq Department, pointed to another reason to be optimistic. “The [policymakers’] participation represents a very strong appreciation of the key messages. ... We’re already talking to the government to convert this into an action plan, one on digital economy which includes digital infrastructure, digital education, digital governance,” he told The Daily Star.

In his concluding speech, however, Jha emphasized an issue that had not been raised, but that he said was crucial for addressing Lebanon’s economic situation: women’s participation in the workforce. According to the World Bank’s own data, female participation in Lebanon’s labor force stayed below 25 percent in 2017. “If you have a very low level of female participation, you won’t see [economic] growth,” Jha said.