

Youth aspirations and expectations

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There are 1.2 billion young people (aged between 15 and 24) living in the world today; that segment of the population is expected to increase and reach up to 1.4 billion by 2050, according to the 2017 World Population Data Sheet published by the Population Reference Bureau. Youth population is growing faster in the poorest nations, as the PRB states. Most of them, living in countries with developing economies, as well as countries impacted by conflict, violence and poverty, are expectedly seeking jobs.

The number of college graduates in the Middle East and North Africa region is expected to reach 30 million by 2020, but the region's economies are not creating sufficient high-skilled jobs for this increasingly well-educated population. This without a doubt leads to frustration and a waste of valuable human potential.

According to the International Monetary Fund report published in mid-2018, the MENA region, which has the world's second-youngest population after Sub-Saharan Africa, needs to create jobs for 27 million youth enrolling in the labor force.

"There is no greater challenge facing the MENA region in its efforts to build a future based on inclusive growth than job creation," the IMF report mentioned.

More than 10 million jobs need to be available each year for youth entering the Arab region labor market, Senior World Bank Vice President Mahmoud Mohieldin said during the Arab Economic and Social Development Summit held in Beirut in early 2019.

How can this be done? It will take a huge effort to develop economies that deliver more and better opportunities for the region's youth.

The problem is not only about unemployment, but also about low-quality jobs and underemployment. Young women are particularly vulnerable, being often segregated in informal and insecure jobs. The social cost of marginalized, dissatisfied and frustrated youth can be very high.

How can we meet youth expectations and aspirations for a better life?

Aspiration implies a possible vision of the future; on the other hand, expectation entails a sense of entitlement or a belief that something is likely to happen. "To aspire" is linked to desire, want, wish, hope and long for a higher goal, while "to expect" is to assume, anticipate, believe and consider an event likely. The two verbs are rooted in diverse emotional situations hinting a feeling of entitlement to a position in life.

How does this emotional context reflect in studies related to the role of education in building peaceful and secure societies?

Research has shown that unmet expectations and aspirations could be the root cause of peoples' frustrations, unhappiness, grievances and worries.

However, people tend to react differently to unfulfilled expectations depending on how devoted they are to a specific result. This emotion could escalate to a feeling of being victimized by one's circumstances. Handling expectations and aspirations is extremely important since thoughts can be manifested into actions when tied to emotions and intentions. A recent World Bank report, launched November 2018, "Expectations and Aspirations: New Framework for Education in the Middle East and North Africa," states that the structural characteristics of educational systems influence the youth's expectations and aspirations significantly

The report visualizes the power of quality education in building human capital and bringing change. It stresses the role of technological advancements in shaping new jobs and changing the nature of work. Decades of investments in education in the MENA region, manifested in high levels of present enrollment rates and gender equity, have not boosted human capital and socioeconomic wealth. The report states that the region is still challenged with having "low-learning and low-skills levels," focusing on credentials rather than skills, discipline rather than critical thinking, and memorization of theories rather than practice.

Reforms need to refocus on education as a "national emergency for stability, peace and prosperity" where classrooms are the platforms of change as stated in the report. Therefore, tackling these tensions in schools and classrooms is critical for developing a constructive and successful future for the region's youth.

Four factors, that shape the educational outcomes of the MENA youth need to be addressed: credentials vs. skills, discipline vs. inquiry, control vs. autonomy, and tradition vs. modernity. A new framework addressing these factors could unlock the potential of education, offering an opportunity to meet youth's expectations and aspirations. A "push for learning" with a "pull for skills" in the fourth technological revolution could unleash the untapped potentials and recourses of the region and build human capital.

A revolution led by technology is occurring across the world today that is changing the nature of development. This is why a policy reform that addresses both educational systems and labor markets' challenges could not be more timely.

According to the World Economic Forum, findings from various countries confirm that when internet access increases by 10 percent in a country, its GDP grows by 1.4 percent. Unfortunately, the MENA region has not yet decapitalized fully on the technological revolution.

In order to improve the odds for the next generation, more innovation is required in designing youth employment programs and building on evidence based and effective interventions. Young people in the MENA region are well educated and are already online. By embracing the digital economy and a new educational pact, youth will get the chance to work both offline and online.

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