Chapter 4

Labour market participation among

YOUTH

in the Middle East and North Africa and the special challenges faced by young women

Economic participation represents one of the most fundamental and rewarding ways in which young people can become involved in their communities and make a positive contribution to development. Earning an income through paid employment fosters independence and is an essential part of the transition to responsible adulthood. In the Middle East and North Africa, the shift from school to work is fraught with difficulties that at times seem insurmountable; youth face a relatively high degree of socio-economic exclusion and often find it hard to secure decent employment with competitive wages and adequate benefits, largely because they lack the appropriate skills and experience.

Young women in the region are doubly disadvantaged, as both age and gender considerations tend to limit their employment opportunities. Some women are able to find jobs, often after overcoming serious obstacles, but a relatively large number choose not to participate in the labour market at all. Female labour force participation has increased in many parts of the world over the past two generations, but in the Middle East and North Africa the gender gap in employment has remained wide; in 2005, the labour force participation rate of 25.1 per cent for young women was one of the lowest in the world and well below the rate of 54.3 per cent for young men in the region (International Labour Office, 2006b). These percentages represent the proportions of young people actively seeking employment. Only a quarter of the region's female youth are looking for work, and a significant share will not be able to find jobs; unemployment rates for this group in 2004 stood at 26.4 per cent in the Middle East and at 46.8 per cent in North Africa (International Labour Office, 2005).

An effort is made in this chapter to identify some of the key labour market constraints faced by young people in the Middle East and North Africa and to examine their causes and consequences, especially as they relate to the participation of young people in society and the process of development. The second part of the chapter focuses on the special challenges faced by young female labour force participants in the region. Interventions and policies aimed at strengthening youth participation in the labour market are explored. The situation in the Middle East and North Africa (a region defined in the present chapter based on World Bank criteria) varies considerably. For analytical purposes, the countries under review are generally grouped together on the basis of geographic and/or economic considerations, as shown in table 4.1. It should be noted, however, that the analyses presented in this chapter relate mostly to the Arab States and may be less applicable to other countries such as Israel and Malta.

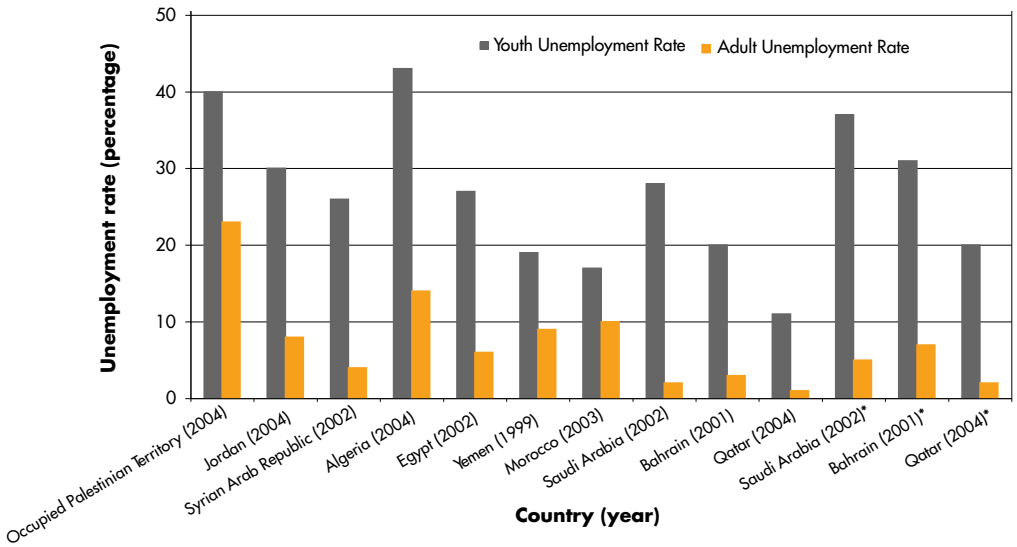
Table 4.1
Middle East and North Africa: subregional configurations used in this chapter

North Africa	Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States	South-West Asia (Non-GCC States)
Algeria	Bahrain	Islamic Republic of Iran
Djibouti	Kuwait	Iraq
Egypt	Oman	Israel
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	Qatar	Jordan
Malta	Saudi Arabia	Lebanon
Morocco	United Arab Emirates	Syrian Arab Republic
Tunisia		Occupied Palestinian Territory
Yemen		

THE UNEMPLOYMENT GAP BETWEEN YOUTH AND ADULTS

Youth unemployment rates are high throughout much of the Middle East and North Africa, both in absolute terms and relative to the corresponding rates for adults (see figure 4.1). Statistics suggest that unemployment among young people is lowest in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States, but the gap between this subregion and others virtually disappears when expatriate workers—who typically have work visas and are seldom unemployed—are excluded from the analysis; in Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, unemployment rates are higher for "nationals only" than for the population as a whole. In all countries, youth unemployment rates far exceed those for adults, which are typically below 10 per cent.

Figure 4.1
Unemployment rates for youth aged 15-24 years and adults aged 25-64 years in selected countries of the Middle East and North Africa



Sources: International Labour Office, LABORSTA database (2006); Bahrain Central Informatics Organization (2002); Planning Council of Qatar (2005); and Saudi Arabia Central Department of Statistics (2003).

Note: Statistics are based on the most recent available data.

* Nationals only.

Young people constitute one third of the working-age population in the Middle East and North Africa but account for almost half (49.7 per cent) of the unemployed, which suggests that joblessness is in many respects a youth issue rather than a generalized population issue (International Labour Office, 2006b). Since opportunities for labour force participation appear to increase after the age of 25, there may be structural factors that militate against the employment of youth. Alternatively, the process of acquiring marketable job skills may not be complete for many until they reach adulthood.

FACTORS LIMITING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION AMONG YOUTH

The labour market situation in the Middle East and North Africa has evolved over many decades and is the product of demographic, economic, social, political and cultural factors. This section focuses on three critical areas, examining how demographic changes, the complex dynamic between education and employment, and macroeconomic developments have affected opportunities and prospects for youth employment in the region.

Demographic factors

In the Middle East and North Africa, as in other regions of the world, high fertility and low infant mortality during the 1960s and 1970s were responsible for major demographic shifts, the impact of which is apparent today. The average fertility rate in the Middle East and North Africa was 7.2 births per woman in 1960, compared with 4.6 worldwide; this regional figure held relatively steady for more than two decades but declined sharply thereafter, falling to 3.3 births per woman by 2000. During the same period, infant mortality rates dropped by an average of 2.3 per cent annually, compared with an average decrease of 1.6 per cent at the global level (World Bank, 2005b). The population of the Middle East and North Africa more than tripled between 1960 and 2005 (see table 4.2) and is now estimated at nearly 350 million. Although the population has grown rapidly in all of the subregions under review, the rate of expansion has been most dramatic in the GCC States, where the number of residents has increased nearly seven-fold since 1960 (United Nations, 2007). The exceptionally high and volatile population growth in this subregion is partially attributable to the unique migration patterns prevailing in the area. These overlapping trends have translated into extremely high labour force growth rates over the past several decades (Kabbani and Kothari, 2005); as part of this dynamic, the youth labour force grew by 30 per cent between 1995 and 2005 (see table 4.3).

Table 4.2
Population statistics for the Middle East and North Africa, 1960-2005

Region/Country	1960	1980	2000	2005	Percentage change 1960-1980	Percentage change 1980-2000	Percentage change 1960-2005
National population (thousands)							
North Africa	61 455	100 618	160 073	174 525	63.7	59.1	184.0
Algeria	10 800	18 811	30 506	32 854	74.2	62.2	204.2
Djibouti	85	340	730	804	300.0	114.7	845.9
Egypt	27 840	43 674	66 529	72 850	56.9	52.3	161.7
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	1 349	3 063	5 346	5 918	127.1	74.5	338.7
Malta	312	324	389	403	3.8	20.1	29.2
Morocco	11 626	19 567	28 827	30 495	68.3	47.3	162.3
Tunisia	4 221	6 458	9 564	10 105	53.0	48.1	139.4
Yemen	5 222	8 381	18 182	21 096	60.5	116.9	304.0
GCC States	5 209	13 757	29 951	34 444	164.1	117.7	561.2
Bahrain	156	347	650	725	122.4	87.3	364.7
Kuwait	278	1 375	2 228	2 700	394.6	62.0	871.2
Oman	565	1 187	2 402	2 507	110.1	102.4	343.7
Qatar	45	229	617	796	408.9	169.4	1 668.9
Saudi Arabia	4 075	9 604	20 807	23 612	135.7	116.6	479.4
United Arab Emirates	90	1 015	3 247	4 104	1 027.8	219.9	4460.0
Western Asia	38 555	71 168	122 343	132 558	84.6	71.9	243.8
Islamic Republic of Iran	21 704	39 330	66 125	69 421	81.2	68.1	219.9
Iraq	7 332	14 093	25 052	27 996	92.2	77.8	281.8
Israel	2 114	3 764	6 084	6 692	78.1	61.6	216.6
Jordan	896	2 225	4 799	5 544	148.3	115.7	518.8
Lebanon	1 888	2 785	3 772	4 011	47.5	35.4	112.4
Syrian Arab Republic	4 621	8 971	16 511	18 894	94.1	84.0	308.9
Occupied Palestinian Territory	1 101	1 476	3 149	3 762	34.1	113.3	241.7
Regional total	105 219	185 543	312 367	341 527	75.7	68.2	223.1

Source: United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision* (New York: 2007).

As not enough jobs have been created in either the public or the private sector to accommodate the growing cohorts of young job-seekers, unemployment rates have soared, and many young people have dropped out of the labour force entirely. Consequently, the region now holds the distinction of having both the highest rate of youth unemployment in the world and the lowest rate of labour force participation among young people (see table 4.3). As noted previously, the vast majority of young women in the Middle East and North Africa are neither working nor seeking employment. The labour force participation rate for female youth has risen a couple of percentage points over the past decade but remains far below that for young men. Largely due to the low participation rates of young women, the youth employment to population ratio of 29.7 per cent is the lowest in the world. This means that only every third youth in the region has a job. This figure may not seem encouraging, but it does represent an increase over the 1995 ratio of 28.5 per cent; the Middle East and North Africa represents the only region in the world in which the share of employed youth in the total working-age population has increased over the past decade (International Labour Office, 2006b).

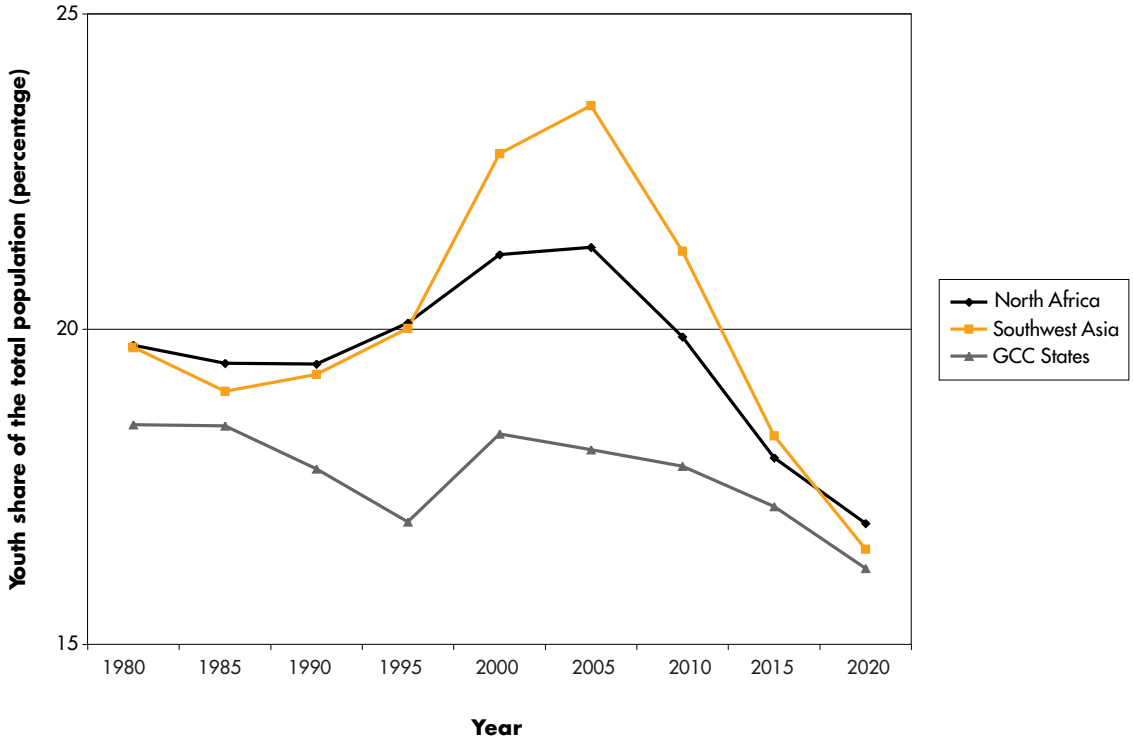
Table 4.3
Indicators of youth participation in the labour force: Middle East and North Africa

Indicator	1995	2005	Percentage change
Youth labour force (thousands)	25 086	33 174	32.2
Youth as a proportion of the total working-age population (percentage)	33.5	32.6	-2.7
Number of employed youth (thousands)	17 876	24 649	37.9
Number of unemployed youth (thousands)	7 209	8 525	18.3
Youth labour force participation rates			
Males	56.2	54.3	-3.4
Females	23.2	25.1	8.2
Total	40	40	—
Youth employment to population ratio	28.5	29.7	4.2
Ratio of youth to adult unemployment	3.0	3.1	3.3

Source: Compiled from International Labour Office, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2006* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2006).
Note: A dash (—) indicates that the amount is nil or negligible

As mentioned previously, population growth was exceptionally high in the 1960s and 1970s but slowed down considerably in subsequent decades with the sharp decline in fertility from 1980 onward. At the subregional level, differences in the timing of the demographic transition are apparent (see figure 4.2). In North Africa and Southwest Asia the proportion of youth in the total population peaked around 2004, while in the GCC States the already lower youth share dipped briefly between 1985 and 1995 but began to decline steadily around 2000. Figure 4.2 projects a degree of subregional convergence in the youth share by 2020.

Figure 4.2
Youth aged 15-24 years as a share of the total population in subregions of the Middle East and North Africa



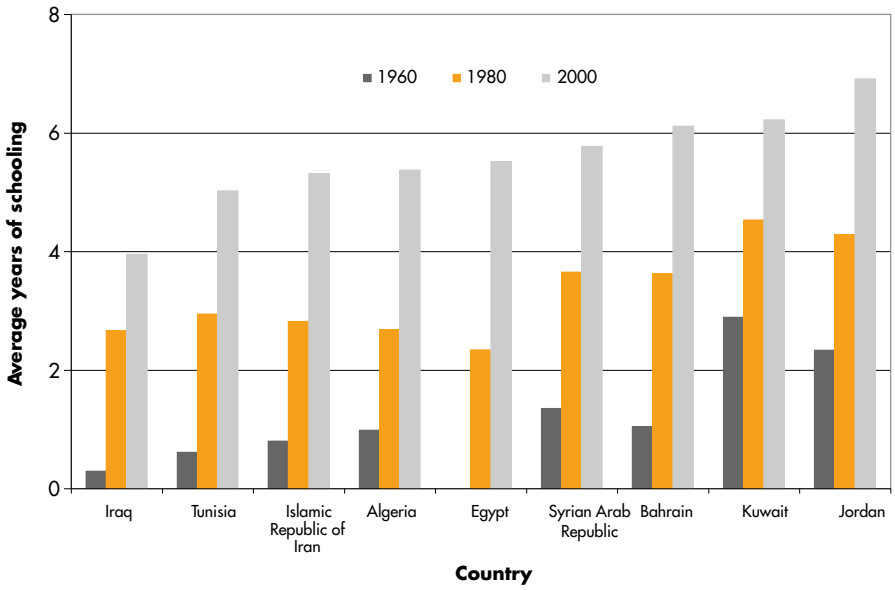
Source: United Nations (2007), *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision* (New York).

Youth employment prospects are likely to improve somewhat with the gradual easing of demographic pressures, but the potential gains may be offset by other factors that continue to impede labour force participation among young people in the Middle East and North Africa.

The failure to translate educational gains into gainful employment

Since the 1970s, the share of GDP spent on education has been higher in the Middle East and North Africa than in any other developing region. Educational expenditures have averaged around 5 per cent of GDP annually since 1975, compared with 2-3 per cent in other developing regions and 4 per cent worldwide. This investment has paid off in terms of educational attainment, particularly among girls. It is apparent from figure 4.3 that the average years of schooling have increased significantly across the region and that disparities among countries have narrowed over the past several decades; the regional average rose from just over one year of schooling in 1960 (the lowest in the world) to 5.4 years in 2000 (well above the corresponding figures for South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa). Progress has also been achieved in narrowing the gender gap in education; by 2000, the average years of schooling for females was 80 per cent of that for males (Barro and Lee, 2000).

Figure 4.3
Average years of schooling for those aged 15 years and above in selected countries of the Middle East and North Africa

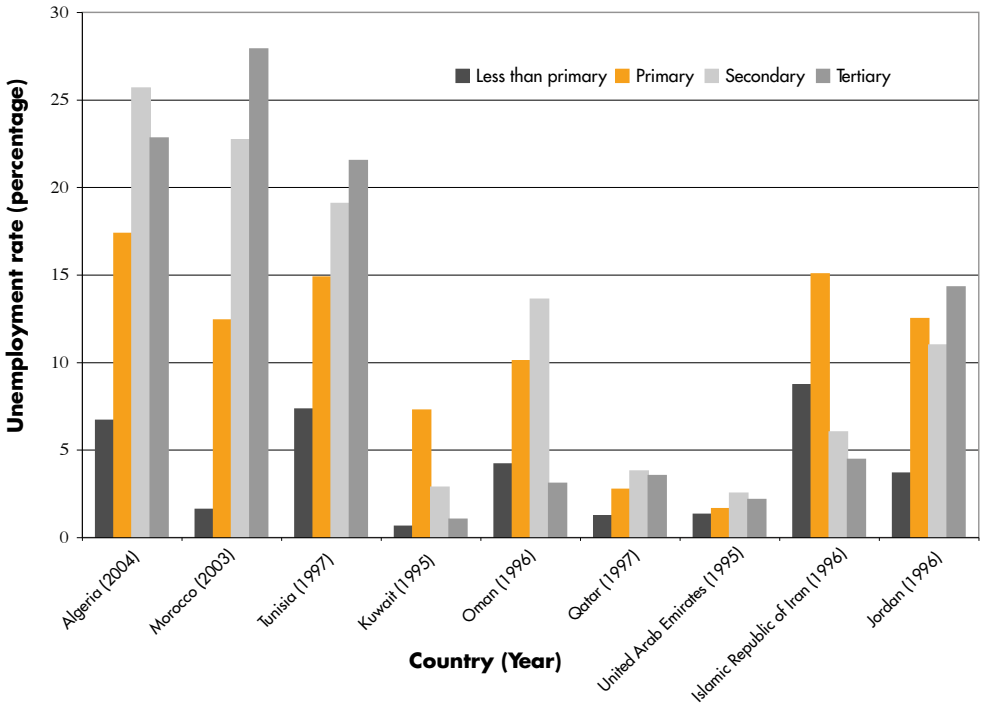


Source: Robert J. Barro and Jong-Wha Lee, "International data on educational attainment: updates and implications", Center for International Development at Harvard University (CID) Working Paper No. 42 (Cambridge: Harvard University, April 2000).

With increased school enrolment, illiteracy rates for youth declined to less than half of those for adults (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2007). In North Africa, gender disparities persist, with illiteracy rates for young females twice as high as those for young males. The gender gap in literacy is almost the same for youth as for adults in the subregion, which suggests that illiteracy patterns may extend across generations.

It is unclear whether educational attainment is directly correlated with employment in the Middle East and North Africa, as the relationship between the two factors is complex (see figure 4.4). In most of the countries in the region, unemployment is lowest among those who have not completed primary schooling; individuals from low-income households cannot afford to remain jobless for long. Unemployment rates are also relatively low among university graduates in the GCC States, where the public sector is a major employer, and in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, unemployment among university graduates is quite high. In 2006 around 27 per cent of Moroccan degree-holders were without work, compared with a national average of 12 per cent. In 1991, the Government offered tax breaks to private sector enterprises hiring university graduates, but this initiative yielded limited returns. High unemployment among youth has contributed to increased poverty—and to a sense of desperation exemplified by a protest incident in 2005 in which six unemployed graduates attempted to burn themselves alive (World Education Services, 2006).

Figure 4.4
Unemployment rates by level of education completed for selected countries in the Middle East and North Africa



Source: International Labour Office, *Global Employment Trends*, estimation model (Geneva: 2005); and International Labour Office, LABORSTA database (Geneva: 2006).
Note: Statistics are based on the most recent available data

One reason employment prospects are poor for graduates might be that the significant increases in educational attainment do not appear to have had much of an impact on worker productivity (Pritchett, 1999). Such poor returns suggest low educational quality, a lack of correspondence between student training and the needs of the labour market, or a lack of awareness among graduates of how to apply their skills in the workplace. It has been observed that in several countries in the region, educational curricula do not incorporate those technical and occupational components that are currently in high demand in the job market (Alissa, 2007).

Though school enrolment rates have risen or remained steady in the Middle East and North Africa, chronic underinvestment in higher education and in science and technology development has made it virtually impossible for most countries to build a robust and internationally competitive private sector and achieve broader economic diversification (United Nations Millennium Project, 2005). A number of countries have identified areas in which traditional education is incompatible with the demands of the global marketplace; many have introduced courses or curricula designed to expose students to modern business practices and have begun setting up work experience and mentorship programmes and developing entrepreneurial skills through competitions. These initiatives are often jointly run by Governments, non-governmental organizations, and local business communities and centre around private sector participation. A Junior Achievement programme known as

INJAZ is currently being implemented in several countries in the region; secondary school students, guided by teachers and volunteers from the business community, create and run genuine small businesses and participate in local and national competitions at the end of the school year (Junior Achievement, 2006). In Algeria, the National Agency for the Support of Youth Employment (ANSEJ) provides assistance to young entrepreneurs (see box 4.1). The increased investment in enterprise development targeting youth represents a step in the right direction, but efforts such as these have not been enough to provide young people with the knowledge and skills they need to participate fully in their communities.

Box 4.1

PROMOTING YOUTH ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN ALGERIA

Structural adjustment and public sector downsizing have made it difficult for young people to find jobs in Algeria. In 1996, the Government created the National Agency for the Support of Youth Employment (ANSEJ). The Agency provides counselling and other forms of support for young entrepreneurs and assists them in project implementation. The programme mainly targets unemployed individuals between the ages of 19 and 35 who possess the necessary professional qualifications and/or practical experience in their respective fields and can contribute 5 to 10 per cent of the investment amount. ANSEJ helps young entrepreneurs financially by providing zero-interest lines of credit and interest subsidies on bank loans.

The Agency's decentralized network extends across the country. In 2007, around 750 agents arranged for young entrepreneurs to receive funding totalling 4.5 billion Algerian dinars (US$ 64 million). The network has been electronically linked since 2002, and a database has been set up with information on young entrepreneurs and their businesses. ANSEJ published directories on microenterprises in 2002 and 2004 and organized three national exhibitions (in 1998, 2000 and 2003) as well as several regional salons. These events are intended to promote the products and services of microenterprises, to facilitate the establishment of direct links (and the creation of business networks) between them, and to encourage the development of a culture of entrepreneurship among unemployed youth by showing them what other young people have been able to achieve. In 2000, the Agency launched a website that provides extensive information on microenterprise creation and expansion.

By the middle of 2005 over 300,000 files had been submitted to the Agency and more than 65,000 microenterprises had been created, and by 2007 the investment total had reached around 114 billion dinars (US$ 6 billion); these small businesses are believed to have generated more than 186,000 direct employment opportunities.

Source: Jean-Paul Barbier, *L'Intermédiation sur le Marché du Travail dans les Pays du Maghreb: Etude Comparative entre l'Algérie, le Maroc et la Tunisie* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2006).

Macroeconomic, policy and other constraints

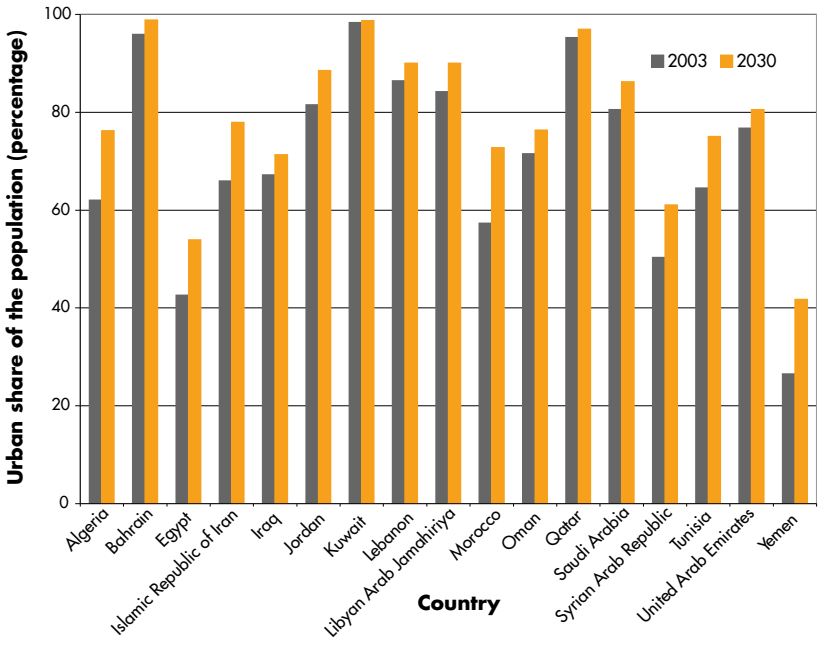
Apart from the labour market pressures caused by demographic trends and the mismatch between education and work skills, slow growth in many of the economies in the region has constrained opportunities for job creation. Weak labour demand, low wages in the private sector (especially the informal economy), lack of knowledge about how to find work, as well as lack of access to capital for entrepreneurial projects have all contributed to the poor labour market participation of youth in the Middle East and North Africa.

Faster GDP growth is seen as essential for job creation to accommodate the more than 1 million young people entering the region's labour markets annually (World Bank, 2000). Strengthening the economy requires a sustained commitment to private sector development, but many countries in the region have been somewhat reluctant to abandon what is generally perceived to be a reasonably supportive public sector system. The development model adopted by many countries of the region during the 1960s and 1970s reflected a strong public sector orientation, and new job opportunities were created with the expansion of the civil service, but a parallel trend towards over-regulation of the private sector limited enterprise growth and economic development (World Bank, 2004b). Since the 1960s, the Government has been one of the major employers in the Middle East and North Africa, especially for the highly educated. In the 1990s, public sector employment accounted for 17.5 per cent of total employment in the region—the highest proportion in the developing world. In this region, unlike other regions, wages were 30 per cent higher in the public sector than in the private sector (Schiavo-Campo, de Tommaso and Mukherjee, 1997a; 1997b). With non-wage benefits and job security factored in, it is not surprising that the region's youth have gravitated towards public employment (World Bank, 2004b). This is especially true for young females, who benefit from generous maternity leave policies, less discrimination, and more flexible work hours in the public sector.

The dynamics of the job market are changing. In recent years, many Governments in the region have implemented rationalization and retrenchment programmes and have privatized State enterprises, and young people are being encouraged to seek jobs in the private sector. However, because there are still bureaucratic obstacles to the development of private enterprise (only in sub-Saharan Africa is the cost of doing business higher), private sector expansion has been too sluggish to offset reductions in the public sector and accommodate the steady influx of new entrants to the labour market (World Bank, 2005a). As long as wages and benefits are better in the public sector than in the private sector, many youth, especially females, will elect to wait (often unemployed) for a civil service position. Many of those who cannot afford to be unemployed are compelled to work in the informal economy, where working conditions are poor, wages are low, and benefits are virtually nonexistent (Schneider, 2006). At present, the informal economy is something of a refuge for youth. In order to develop and take full advantage of the economic potential of young people in the region, greater effort must be invested in strengthening the formal economy and creating higher-quality job opportunities. Many youth consider their work in the informal economy temporary, biding their time until more attractive opportunities materialize. While this may be an effective strategy at the individual level, it ultimately represents an enormous loss in productivity for Governments that are unable to harness the full potential of youth in the labour force.

Because job opportunities are limited, young people in the Middle East and North Africa have increasingly resorted to internal and international migration in search of work. Urbanization trends are apparent throughout the region and are expected to continue (see figure 4.5). Urban residents already constitute the majority in every country except Egypt and Yemen, and throughout most of the region the rural population is either declining or growing more slowly than the urban population (United Nations, 2004; 2005b). Moving to the city carries no guarantee of finding a job. More than a third of the young people looking for work in the urban centres of Morocco remained unemployed in 2002; the same year, youth unemployment in rural areas was only 6.2 per cent, though this figure fails to reflect the (probably high) prevalence of underemployment and working poverty (El Aoufi and Bensaïd, 2005). Amid these uncertainties, many young Moroccans will choose to migrate to urban areas as long as wages and living standards are perceived to be higher.

Figure 4.5
Current and projected share of urban residents in the total population: Middle East and North Africa (percentage)



Source: United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision* (New York: 2007).

With the limited employment opportunities available, it is not surprising that the region registered an annual net migration rate of -0.8 per thousand between 2000 and 2005 (United Nations, 2005b). A reverse trend prevailed only in the GCC States, where annual net migration was 8 per thousand over the same period; recent policy changes designed to encourage the hiring of young nationals in the subregion could change these dynamics, however. Although migration can expand opportunities for youth, the resulting brain drain takes a heavy toll on labour-sending countries, which are unable to benefit from the returns on their human capital investment. By 2000, 39 per cent of Lebanon's highly educated were living in OECD countries (Docquier and Marfouk, 2005).

THE SITUATION OF DISADVANTAGED YOUTH

In the Middle East and North Africa, as in other regions, access to adequate health services and opportunities to obtain a quality education, participate in the job market, and earn a decent income are linked to socio-economic status. Certain groups are particularly vulnerable to exclusion and are unable to enjoy the full benefits of development; in the region under review, those facing the greatest challenges include youth in conflict situations, youth with disabilities, and young women. Cultural and religious traditions have had an enormous impact on the status of female youth and their prospects for personal and professional growth; in many parts of the region they constitute the largest disadvantaged group. The special situation of young women is explored in the second part of this chapter.

Youth in conflict situations

The countries of the Middle East and North Africa have experienced considerable conflict over the years. The region hosts the largest refugee population in the world and has also accommodated a substantial number of internally displaced persons (Roudi, 2001). Palestinians constitute the largest refugee group and are concentrated mainly in South-West Asia, though there is also a sizeable number of Afghans in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Iraqi refugee population is growing. Refugees often work in their host countries, increasing labour pressures. In many cases, however, they are prohibited from working, which places them in a precarious socio-economic position. Countries that have experienced conflict have sizeable internally displaced populations; recent statistics indicate that in Iraq alone some 1.2 million residents have been displaced (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2006a). Large-scale displacement creates imbalances in the population distribution and labour market structure, typically leading to higher unemployment. Internally displaced youth and young refugees are especially vulnerable in the labour market, as they may be forced to work under difficult or dangerous conditions.

In some areas, entire generations of youth have lived through conflict, suffering psychosocial trauma and enduring sustained economic insecurity; many have been internally displaced or forced to live as refugees. Violence against females has escalated in some countries experiencing social or political instability. Youth living in such volatile conditions are often extremely vulnerable and are unable to access important opportunities at a critical time in their lives.

Many factors that increase the risk of prolonged conflict are present in the Middle East and North Africa, including a relatively large youth population, a wealth of natural resources, a history of armed conflict, large numbers of displaced persons and refugees, negligible participation in public affairs, political exclusion, poor social protection, and a large informal economy. There is evidence to suggest that large youth cohorts with poor labour market prospects are more likely to participate in activities that undermine social peace and stability. With the region's youth bulge and the expansion of higher education, growing numbers of qualified young people are unable to find gainful employment. Under such circumstances there may be an increased risk of political violence (Urdal, 2005). Excluding education and employment variables, research on civil war suggests that simply doubling the proportion of males aged 15-29 in the population can increase the risk of conflict from 4.7 to 32 per cent (Collier, Hoeffler and Rohner, 2006).

Added challenges for youth with disabilities

An unfortunate corollary of conflict in the region is physical and psychological injury, including post-traumatic stress disorder. During periods of hostility within or between countries, young people may experience trauma resulting in temporary or lifelong disability (Caffo and Belaise, 2003). The stresses of war can trigger anxiety, sleep, conduct, learning and attention problems. A study on the war experiences of children and adolescents in Lebanon found that many had experienced repeated trauma, defined as specific incidents or activities related to conflict such as the development of a physical handicap, exposure to shelling and bomb explosions, torture, the destruction of one's home, and death in the family (Macksoud and Aber, 1996).

Disabilities—whether present at birth or occurring afterward—greatly increase the already substantial challenges young people face as they struggle to become active participants in society. Their difficulties may begin within the family, but pressures can intensify when it comes to schooling and employment. Illiteracy rates tend to be much higher among young people with disabilities; in Lebanon, for example, the rate is 23 per cent, compared with 3.7 per cent for all youth (Thomas and Lakkis, 2003). Because of physical or psychological challenges or because few opportunities have been available to develop marketable skills, young people with disabilities are often inadequately prepared for the workplace and are more likely than other youth to end up in low-paying jobs, to experience long periods of unemployment, to be laid off, and to face social prejudice; for young women with disabilities, these problems are magnified (Roggero and others, 2005). Many youth with disabilities will never be able to find employment and will therefore remain dependent on others, which is likely to affect their ability to function as equal participants in society.

A number of steps have been taken by Governments in the Middle East and North Africa to improve the situation of persons with disabilities, including the adoption of anti-discrimination legislation and the establishment of hiring quotas. Egypt instituted an employment quota of 1 per cent for persons with disabilities in 1975 and raised it to 5 per cent in 1982. In 2002, Tunisia introduced legislation to ensure that all students with special needs are provided with equal educational opportunities by 2015. In some countries, promising "social business" models based on public-private partnership have been introduced to assist disadvantaged youth. These efforts represent a step in the right direction, but much remains to be done to integrate persons with disabilities in the development process. While a number of countries have adopted appropriate legislation and policies, enforcement and implementation are often weak (World Bank, Human Development Department/Middle East and North Africa Region, 2005).

For all youth, but especially for those with disabilities, vocational education and training programmes are required to provide a structured link between school and the labour market. Fewer than 10 per cent of secondary school students in the region receive vocational or technical training, and the corresponding figure for youth with disabilities is even lower.

YOUNG WOMEN AND THE LABOUR MARKET: PROGRESS AND REMAINING CHALLENGES

Young women in the Middle East and North Africa are engaged in diverse types of work. Because of the structure of the family and its place within the community, rates of labour force participation among the women of the region have long been the lowest in the world. Female labour force participation rates changed little between 1960 and the late 1980s; since the early 1990s, however, they have increased by an average of 1.5 per cent annually (World Bank, 2005b). This shift is linked to a number of factors, including reduced fertility rates, higher levels of educational attainment among both sexes, and the general trend towards increased recognition of women's rights. While the aggregate labour supply pressures exerted by rising female participation rates are weaker than those deriving from demographic trends, they do affect female-dominated occupations and may have contributed to the gender disparities in unemployment.

Young women in the region have traditionally been expected to withdraw from the labour force upon marriage, when childbearing begins, or to engage in unremunerated work in family-run businesses or agricultural activities (Cairoli, 1999). This trend continues, though growing numbers of women are pursuing professional and technical careers alongside the more conventional cadre of women holding administrative, clerical and service-oriented jobs. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, women are most strongly represented in the service sector (18.1 per cent) and agriculture sector (13.2 per cent), but account for only 6.8 per cent of those employed in industry (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2004). In rural areas, substantial numbers of women are involved in family poultry enterprises, subsistence field work, and milk and cheese processing—informal economic activities that contribute significantly to the household income on family farms (El-Fattal, 1996). There are clear indications of increased female labour force participation, but change takes time in paternalistic societies with well-defined intergenerational hierarchies, and at this point the nature and extent of young women's participation still tends to be defined and constrained by their family roles and responsibilities. The economic empowerment of young women requires action on several fronts; for a start, steps should be taken to address such issues as job segregation, income inequality, and the relative lack of opportunities for advancement.

The role of the family

The centrality of the family in the Middle East and North Africa cannot be underestimated. Families, rather than individuals, are considered the building blocks of society and are largely responsible for shaping the norms that define the roles of young women at home and in the workplace. Family pressures and expectations intensify as a girl approaches puberty; she is brought up to assume a nurturing role and is often expected to marry and have children at a relatively young age. Issues of concern to the young women of today—including the focus and duration of their education, the transition from school to work, and the appropriateness and availability of different employment options—are regarded as variables influencing family honour and social status.

Gender roles and power imbalances both in the household and in the public sphere work together to perpetuate the dependency of women and to limit their options and opportunities for participation in society. Although the boundaries between the public and private spheres may be porous and flexible, the hierarchies of gender and age that permeate the family, social, political and economic structures are constant, and they define the nature and breadth of female citizenship and participation. Women's economic citizenship is determined by the State but is mediated by the family (or more specifically, by one or more of its male members); the legal definition of citizenship may differ from the practice of citizenship (Joseph, 2002; Kawar, 2000). The preservation of female modesty and the family honour is considered part of the male domain, so many of the choices and life decisions faced by young women are controlled by male relatives and reinforced by older females in the family. The dynamics of these relationships determine the extent of young women's participation in society; more practically, they serve to limit economic, political and other opportunities.

Marriage, childbearing and early workforce departure

Household survey data on the age distribution of female workers reveal that in most regions of the world, married women are far more likely than unmarried women to participate in the labour force, but in the Middle East and North Africa the opposite is true; the data indicate that female labour force activity in the region peaks in the mid-twenties, around the average age for marriage, while in much of the rest of the world this peak occurs during the late thirties or forties (Mensch, Singh and Casterline, 2005; Rashad, Osman and Roudi-Fahimi, 2005). In the Middle East and North Africa, single women are better represented in the labour force than any other category of women (World Bank, 2004b).

Youth-oriented sexual and reproductive health services are not widely available in most countries of the region (DeJong and Shepard, 2006). Nevertheless, fertility rates have generally declined since the 1990s, coinciding with the increased participation of young women in the labour force. Some women join the workforce in pursuit of a long-term career, but many others view their employment as temporary and as part of a long-term investment in marriage. Research indicates that in Egypt, for example, female wage-earners work partly to prepare financially for marriage, amassing funds that will fortify their families' contributions to their future households (Amin and Al-Bassusi, 2003). As noted previously, many women drop out of the labour force once they get married or start having children, their targeted employment objectives apparently having been met.

The age at marriage has major implications for a person's work situation—especially for young women, whose educational and employment opportunities have traditionally been limited by early marriage and childbearing. In the Middle East and North Africa, the age at marriage is rising for both sexes, though the male average is about four years higher than the female average (United Nations, 2000). Economic setbacks and stagnation are partly responsible for the decline in early marriage, as it often takes families some time to accumulate savings for a dowry, trousseau, and other costs associated with a wedding and setting up a household. Advances in education are also important, as higher educational attainment is positively correlated with a higher age at marriage (Mensch, Singh and

Casterline, 2005). Most families place a high value on education, as it represents a source of security for sons and, increasingly, for daughters; in many parts of the region it is becoming increasingly common for marriage to be delayed until after a young woman has completed her tertiary studies. Women's advocacy groups have been successful in getting the legal age of marriage for females changed to 18 years (equal to the minimum age for males) in Jordan and Morocco, and this has had an impact on the discourse surrounding early marriage (DeJong and Shepard, 2006).

The increase in the average age at marriage, in and of itself, is not likely to have much of an impact on young women's opportunities for participation. Persistent gender-based inequalities effectively limit economic prospects even for educated young women. Whether women marry early or relatively late, their mobility, autonomy, and decision-making authority within both the household and the workplace will be restricted as long as the present family system and social structure remain in place (Mensch, Singh and Casterline, 2005).

Progress in women's education is unmatched by opportunities

In parts of the Middle East and North Africa, the gender gap in education among youth has almost disappeared. In Egypt, for example, the differential in average years of schooling for men and women between the ages of 20 and 24 is 0.2 years (MEASURE DHS, 2006). In Jordan, the overall level of educational attainment is higher among young women than among young men; daughters are often the best educated members of their households (Rashad, Osman and Roudi-Fahimi, 2005; Kawar, 2000). It is generally acknowledged that those who are highly educated bring specialized skills to the market and can enhance overall productivity and the quality of goods and services in a country; throughout much of the Middle East and North Africa, however, educational gains have not necessarily translated into more or better jobs for young women. Although female education is increasingly being regarded in a positive light, employment opportunities for young women remain limited (Kawar, 2000; United Nations Millennium Project, 2005). Nonetheless, long-term prospects appear promising. Education exposes young men and women to new ideas, gives them greater access to certain kinds of opportunities, increases social mobility, and facilitates the political and economic integration of youth within the community. As growing numbers of girls and young women are given the chance to expand their knowledge and broaden their horizons as part of their educational experience, their confidence and sense of empowerment are likely to increase, leading to higher aspirations and greater autonomy. The Ishraq programme in Egypt exemplifies what can be achieved within this context (see box 4.2).

Box 4.2

THE EMPOWERMENT OF DISADVANTAGED GIRLS IN RURAL EGYPT

Ishraq is a multifaceted programme designed to strengthen functional literacy, life skills, health knowledge and civic participation among girls, and to challenge prevailing gender norms and community perceptions about the roles of females in society. Ishraq was implemented in four rural villages in Upper Egypt, targeting out-of-school teenage girls. The programme was launched in 2001 by four non-governmental organizations (Caritas, the Center for Development and Population Activities, the Population Council and Save the Children) in partnership with the Egyptian Ministry of Youth and the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood.

Ishraq provided development and support services for 277 girls aged 13-15 years, 84 per cent of whom had never attended school. In addition to literacy classes, the programme offered participants life-skills training, community engagement opportunities, and sports activities. Young female secondary school graduates from the community were recruited and trained as programme leaders. Each group of around 25 girls met four times a week for three-hour sessions. The meetings were set up to accommodate the girls' schedules, as they often had domestic duties and other work obligations. An important feature of the programme was the involvement of boys, parents, and community leaders, whose perceptions of gender roles became more progressive over time.

Ishraq benefited from rigorous evaluation; a pre-test/post-test design was used for participant assessments, and control groups were set up in two other villages. Two thirds of the girls who participated in Ishraq from beginning to end had entered middle school by the time the 30-month programme drew to a close, while none of the girls in the control villages had done so. Among the participants who took the government literacy exam, 92 per cent succeeded in passing it. The programme strengthened the girls' self-confidence, autonomy and negotiation skills and encouraged their involvement in public life. By the end of their Ishraq experience, the girls indicated an increased preference for delaying marriage and reduced support for female genital mutilation. Cooperation with local authorities helped ensure that girls would be able to obtain identification cards, an important step towards limiting under-age marriage and promoting active citizenship.

The Ishraq experience offers a number of important insights for enhancing the prospects of disadvantaged young women around the world. A second phase is under way, and programme leaders who were trained in the first phase will be involved in the second. Consideration is also being given to the establishment of a fund to provide Ishraq graduates with additional schooling and training opportunities. Collaboration with local non-governmental organizations will allow the replication of the programme in other localities.

Mobility restrictions affect employment prospects for women in the Middle East and North Africa. Although many young women hold the necessary academic qualifications, their job choices may be limited because they are unable to commute long distances or migrate for work. It is not unusual for males to leave their villages or countries in pursuit of employment, but female mobility often occurs only in conjunction with marriage. In Morocco, for example, work is the single most important reason men move from rural to urban areas (44 per cent), while a relatively small proportion (27 per cent) migrate internally for family reasons; in contrast, only 2 per cent of women move from rural to urban areas for employment, compared with 89 per cent for family reasons (Kabbani and Kothari, 2005). Social norms, including perceptions regarding the vulnerability of women and the need to protect them from danger, are largely responsible for limiting the international mobility of women from the region. Sex-specific customs and regulations are built into the structure of the family and public institutions and can make women less flexible as work-

ers (World Bank, 2004a). For example, women may be required to find work that is close to home or may not be allowed to drive. In Egypt, commuting times for male workers have increased in recent years, but female workers have been unable to participate in this trend, which places them at a disadvantage in terms of looking for employment (Assaad and Arntz, 2005).

Although women in the Middle East and North Africa are increasingly well-educated and highly qualified for various types of employment, their work is typically assigned less value than that of males; women who have the same qualifications, experience or job responsibilities as men are often paid substantially less (World Bank, 2004b). This is partly because men are still viewed as the breadwinners of the family. The gender pay gap is negatively correlated with the participation of women in the workplace. Though women's involvement in the labour force has increased in every country in the region since 1990, the educational choices of girls and young women often limit their access to certain types of employment, further entrenching wage differentials. Gender inequalities in education, training and recruitment are a major cause of persistent gender wage gaps, but qualifications are not always a factor.

For sociocultural reasons, the model of the sole male breadwinner informs the welfare and social security regimes of most States in the Middle East and North Africa, so the social safety net for the vast majority of women is either non-existent or dependent on the employment of others (United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2004). In more than half of the countries in the region, men and women are not equally entitled to non-wage benefits (World Bank, 2004a). Discrimination comes in a variety of forms, including differentials in allowances for housing, children and dependant spouses (offered only to a man for a wife) and the unequal treatment of unmarried female versus unmarried male employees (Akeel, 2005). The unfair distribution of entitlements affects the well-being of women in the workplace, and broader social policies favouring males reinforce the vulnerability of widows and non-working or unmarried women, who must rely mainly on the family for their social and economic security.

Females perform most of the agricultural work on family-owned land and/or in subsistence farming situations in the Middle East and North Africa; some are old and widowed, but most are poor, young and unmarried. Women's work in family-based agriculture represents 22.8 per cent of all agricultural labour in Jordan, and in the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia the corresponding proportions are 20.5 and 22.4 per cent respectively (El-Fattal, 1996). These figures are indicative of the significant, though largely undocumented, role that young women play in the economy. This situation is particularly compelling, and somewhat ironic, as women residing and working in rural agricultural areas perform a crucial function within the family and the national economy but generally have less control over decision-making, household revenue and family property than do women in urban areas.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The primacy of the family must be factored into any reform efforts aimed at improving the situation of youth in the Middle East and North Africa. Policy interventions designed to enhance the participation of young people in development must be undertaken concurrently with changes in the home. One of the most effective ways to facilitate the integration of youth in society is to provide them with opportunities for active participation in the labour market. The enforcement of policies that address gender inequalities and the situation of disadvantaged groups will contribute to the achievement of this goal and the broader objective of achieving "a society for all".

Young people in the Middle East and North Africa find it difficult to secure decent employment and are therefore unable to participate fully in society. Proactive policy interventions are essential for helping youth gain entry to the labour market. Early intervention is needed to discourage the practice of tracking girls into traditionally female specializations and occupations and to help open up new areas of study and employment for young women, fuelling their confidence and ambitions. Teachers, along with well-trained guidance and vocational counsellors, may be helpful in reducing gender stereotyping, allowing young women to pursue lifelong learning and career development. For those who stop working when they marry or have children, there should be more opportunities to re-enter the workforce at a later stage. Vocational education in fields not traditionally pursued by women should also be expanded. These and other changes should help to address the discrimination in compensation caused by horizontal labour force segregation and discourage the undervaluation of women's work.

Investment in education is important to ensure that young people acquire the skills they need to navigate the changing global economy. In the context of political and social conflict in the region, educational institutions must be provided with adequate support and protection to enable them to continue to meet the growing demand for schooling so critical to enhancing the participation of young people in development. It is also necessary to include young people, especially women, in the review and revision of curricula and training programmes to ensure that their increasingly diverse educational needs are met. Similarly, they should be included in efforts to develop and implement measures aimed at reconciling family and work responsibilities, focusing particularly on child-care arrangements, safe transportation, and increased flexibility in work hours. For these efforts to be successful at both the interpersonal and policy levels, the exclusion of young women from political and other decision-making processes must be addressed. Young people must be given the opportunity to voice their concerns and to become more involved in the development of economic, social and labour market policies.

At a much broader level, economic and structural reforms are needed to create a more favourable environment for poverty eradication and job creation in the region. Steps must be taken to further stimulate labour demand, especially in the private sector, so that the economy can better absorb new entrants to the labour market. Even though demographic pressures on the labour market are gradually easing, stagnant labour demand may keep youth unemployment rates high. Governments should continue working to improve

the business climate in their countries, removing barriers to private sector development and encouraging entrepreneurial activity. It is also necessary to have effective social protection systems in place to meet the needs of those who for various reasons are unable to find decent employment.

Action must be taken to ensure that young labour market entrants possess the skills necessary to secure employment and function optimally in the workplace. Aligning labour force capabilities with market demands is especially important. Interventions in the form of vocational education, apprenticeships, and career guidance services can begin before youth leave school. Programmes should also target youth who have completed school but are struggling with the transition to work; for this group, interventions may include job-search assistance and occupational counselling.

With appropriate guidance and support, young people are more likely to secure employment in which they can make best use of their skills. Ideally, occupational counselling should begin when young people are still in school. Guidance counsellors and community mentors can help students better understand the realities of work, the opportunities available in the marketplace, and the benefits of continuing their education. After students leave school, occupational counselling can be provided concurrently with job-search or job-placement assistance. In some parts of the region, public employment offices help match unemployed workers with registered job vacancies. Occupational counselling and job-search assistance generally produce positive results and can be delivered at low cost, especially when compared with formal training (Van Reenen, 2003).

Public works programmes can create short-term jobs during periods of high unemployment, especially cyclical downturns, and can thus act as a safety net. Such programmes have been used extensively throughout the region as a means of combating unemployment. In Egypt, for example, a public infrastructure project provides work for out-of-school youth in poor rural areas; between 1991 and 1997, the project created over 42,000 jobs, 90 per cent of which were temporary.

It is important that Governments in the Middle East and North Africa do not lose sight of the special needs of society's more vulnerable members, many of whom are young. Programmes targeting internally displaced persons are necessary to improve livelihoods and social stability, which can be very important in areas experiencing ongoing conflict. Continued educational gains are likely to open up opportunities for women to participate more fully in development at both the household and community levels. Only with increased participation in decision-making and full access to financial services and other forms of support can youth accumulate the social capital necessary to navigate the political, institutional and social networks currently closed to them. All young people in the region will benefit from policies that promote and facilitate their social, political and economic inclusion. Because young people hold the future in their hands, the region will benefit as well.

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