POLICY DIALOGUE REPORT

# YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND LIVELIHOOD IN SYRIA:

## *ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT AND PREPARING FOR RECOVERY*

Arab Reform Initiative

مركز بروكنجز الدوحة
BROOKINGS DOHA CENTER

**ACKNOWLEGEMENT**
The Arab Reform Initiative and Brookings Doha Center would like to thank Theodosia Rossi for extensive help in preparing this report.



Cover Image: University students during an exam at their college in Damascus, Syria - May 2020
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JULY 2021

# Introduction

In the decade preceding the conflict in Syria, economic growth averaged a healthy 4.5% per year and youth unemployment rates declined from 26% in 2001 to 20% in 2010. Programming for youth economic inclusion, such as entrepreneurial development, was producing a notable degree of success, despite being hampered by systemic corruption and nepotism. Since 2011, however, the economic crash that accompanied the conflict has produced a catastrophic loss of job opportunities for youth in both the formal and informal sectors. Youth unemployment in 2015 was estimated at a staggering 78%, and while entrepreneurship has in fact grown in certain areas as a coping mechanism, the situation today is so dire that even existing livelihood strategies are not enough to cover basic needs.

Yet, evidence from comparative contexts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and globally demonstrates that livelihood recovery and employment stimulation cannot wait until the end of conflict. On the contrary, it is necessary even under the extremely precarious and unstable conditions of conflict to conceive of programs to promote job creation and livelihood development for young people to ensure viable longer-term economic inclusion and to help stabilize and sustain post-conflict recovery efforts.

What meaningful alternatives to traditional youth employment schemes exist to promote livelihoods in the various conflict contexts in Syria? What types of programming and interventions would be most helpful and effective? And how can we conceive of youth livelihood and employment promotion in terms of peacebuilding and good governance in the post-conflict period?

To answer these questions, the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) and the Brookings Doha Center (BDC) jointly organized a closed policy dialogue on April 28, 2021, bringing together a group of distinguished scholars and practitioners. Held under the Chatham House Rule, and taking a whole-of-Syria approach, the policy dialogue explored how various actors are addressing the needs of youth in Syria through programming and interventions, as well as insights that can be gained and applied from youth livelihood programming in other conflict contexts.

This report presents the insights that emerged from the policy dialogue, including what lessons can be learned from comparative cases and what promising present-day projects are currently being implemented in Syria. The report provides the reflections of the group on possible solutions that can not only provide for youth economic wellbeing, but also contribute to reconciliation and reconstruction at the community level.

# OPENING REMARKS:

## *The Impact of the Conflict on Youth Livelihood and Employment Trajectories in Syria*

The Syrian conflict has left a trail of destruction in its wake over the past decade, with very high costs across a range of indicators, including the loss of lives, communities, and livelihoods. Over 500,000 Syrians have died, 6 million have become refugees, and 7-8 million have been internally displaced. Today, over 13 million people in Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance. The life expectancy of a Syrian child is 13 years less than before the conflict, and at least 1.75 million children have been forced out of school.

By 2020, the conflict's cost in terms of physical damage and lost economic activities had reached probably close to around $500 billion. Syria's gross domestic product (GDP) has declined by 79%, from $62 billion to $13 billion, and its poverty rate has risen to 70%. Meanwhile, the country's unemployment rate was 50% for the entire adult population and 78% among young people. And this was all prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Lebanese financial crisis, the U.S. Caesar sanctions, and the recent currency devaluation. Indeed, an employee who was making $500 a month in 2010 would only earn around $20 a month today.

Individuals, organizations, and governments should not wait until the conflict in Syria ends to address these issues; instead, they should begin laying foundations that can be built upon later.

# PANEL 1:

## *Youth Programming Across Syria: How Are International Organizations and NGOs Responding?*

### Current Programs for Youth Livelihood and Employment

Any discussion about the role of international organizations and NGOs in responding to the livelihood and employment needs of youth in Syria must be conducted with realism and honesty. The honest and responsible answer to the question, "How are we responding?" is that the international community is doing nowhere near enough to address the staggering challenges of youth unemployment. In 2020, the segment of the humanitarian response plan (HRP) delivering livelihood programming amounted to only 1% of the overall HRP budget. This acute funding gap in early recovery and livelihood support has been a perennial feature of the humanitarian response in Syria as many donors prioritize life-saving assistance over building resilient systems. While life-saving assistance continues to be relevant, imperative, and critical in some areas of Syria and for some population groups, elsewhere conditions are ripe for scaling up early recovery.

In many countries in the world, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is one of the lead agencies working on youth employment. Yet, the UNDP spends less on this issue in Syria than in any other conflict-affected population in the Arab region, including Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, and Palestine. For example, the UNDP spends roughly four times more per capita in Iraq than in Syria. With such low spending, no matter how innovative or creative its programming, the UNDP simply will not have a tangible impact on youth unemployment and livelihoods in Syria. In addition, many donors prefer to invest in individual livelihood solutions, such as vocational training and asset distribution. However, given the scale of the operation in Syria, the absence of up-to-date labor market information, and the nature of the economic crisis, organizations must address the structural issues impacting Syria's labor market, private sector, and economy in order to create sustainable solutions.

More than 10 years into the crisis, it is estimated that two-thirds of Syria's basic socio-economic infrastructure is damaged, more than half of it severely, and around 69% of communities have access to less than 12 hours of electricity per day. It is necessary to rebuild Syria's infrastructure, and especially to improve access

to energy and transportation, in order to address the issue of youth unemployment in a way that is scalable and sustainable. Hence, it is critical to invest in structural approaches, such as fostering inclusive business environments in both urban and rural areas.

It is also clear that the challenge of youth unemployment and livelihoods requires political solutions as much as economic and social programs. Without some political progress toward easing the security concerns facing youth, for instance, it will be impossible to offset the current negative trends of rising youth unemployment, youth suicide rates, attempts at illegal migration, and rates of participation in illicit activities. National and international policies are necessary to address the factors driving Syria's economic collapse and to eventually set the country on a path to sustainable recovery. Livelihood recovery and employment stimulation cannot wait until the indefinite political end to the conflict. In fact, job creation and livelihood development for young people are essential to advance inclusivity, address the root causes of conflict, and avoid future instability.

The UNDP in Syria manages a portfolio of different projects and interventions aimed at creating livelihood and employment opportunities for youth. These include traditional emergency and recovery programming, such as vocational training, distribution of productive inputs and toolkits, job placement, on-the-job training, and business revival activities. In addition, the UNDP seeks to engage youth in designing projects that reflect their aspirations, with specific attention paid to young women and persons with disabilities. It runs various projects to support youth in transition, helping them to transform their business ideas and graduation projects into startups across the country. In two years, the UNDP has nurtured and supported over 100 startups. While this is a very small number, it gives hope and sheds light on how Syrian youth have the potential for change.


Some of these startups came up with new products during the COVID-19 pandemic and were featured in global forums on innovation solutions. In addition, a joint mentorship program was established by the UNDP and GSMA (a global organization representing mobile operators) to support women entrepreneurs using technological solutions.

The crisis in Syria has widened inequalities and exacerbated social and class differences. It has also made it difficult for youth to access livelihood opportunities and to live in a decent and dignified manner. All of these factors have the potential to fuel future instability: first, by deepening social cleavages and perceptions of exclusion and injustice; second, by intensifying the competition for limited livelihood opportunities; and third, by increasing the pool of young Syrians at risk of participating in illicit economic activities and being recruited into armed militias. High youth unemployment also represents an opportunity cost in terms of the potential role for youth in rebuilding their country. Youth who are preoccupied with their and their families' survival are youth who are not proactively engaged in recovery, who do not have the means to express views on the future of their communities, whose voices are underrepresented and unheard, and who will become part of a new, more divided generation.

## *Empirical Evidence on the Benefits of Programming*

One of the primary factors hindering programmatic interventions in conflict contexts is that the various involved actors are often talking at different levels and focusing on different things. To sum, they are at one or the other corner of this graph:

The case of Syria is in the top left of the graph, with massive violent conflict, high levels of destruction, and a government that does not particular care about people. At the same time, many economists and development specialists operate in the bottom righthand corner, focusing on issues related to development and how to help people obtain jobs and live meaningful lives. Programmatic interventions often include experts in one narrative or the other, but rarely feature teams of people who are experts in both. The problem is that the issues of achieving peace and providing jobs are typically intertwined. So, how can we create narratives and interventions that operate at both the macro and micro levels?

As part of a joint project between the World Bank and various UN agencies, a team of academics conducted a 10-year global survey of programs that try to combine these two narratives. They found 2,415 total programs, 51 of which were quite well evaluated and combined job components with some sort of evidence. The survey also included a case study analysis of 33 programs that combined the two narratives of macro-level peace and micro-level employment, as well as an assessment of how jobs connect to peace.

In the specific case of Syria, there is evidence from both within Syria and from Syrian refugees living in neighboring countries of such programmatic approaches. Yet, the evidence is thin and there is a need for a lot more understanding in order to give better guidance to policy. Many other countries are at risk of experiencing the same story as Syria. In comparing the downward trend in life satisfaction in Syria before the start of conflict and life satisfaction in Lebanon in recent years, the similarities are striking. This could be an early indicator of a similar crisis unfolding in Lebanon. The implication is, if we do not manage to get people into jobs and help people get livelihoods, we might be seeing a lot more crises elsewhere.

In another project, researchers conducted an impact evaluation to assess how food security interventions can help the situation in Syria. Data collected on treatment and control groups revealed that the former performed better across a range of indicators, including agricultural production, food security, and resilience. Even simple agricultural interventions were shown to be effective; for instance, providing seeds to poor farmers in rural Syria reduced the trend of marrying off young daughters by 80%. Likewise, a study on the issuing of UNHCR work permits to Syrian refugees in Jordan demonstrates the value of livelihood interventions. Many Syrian refugees in Jordan had high levels of applying emergency coping strategies; meanwhile, for those who had work permits, the level of emergency coping strategies was vastly reduced. Issuing work permits involves providing a legal framework and harnessing political will. Yet, the evidence indicates that this does not just benefit Syrian refugees, but also helps build social cohesion in Jordan. Overall social cohesion significantly improved in the treatment group compared to the control group here.

There is strong scientific evidence showing that employment and livelihood interventions implemented during conflict can work. Hence, the concept of waiting until conflict ends is absolutely unjustified. This is not something that many European governments like to hear, as they do not want to deal with the situation on the ground involving people trying live and earn a living, preferring only to think of the humanitarian context. Conclusions from the empirical evidence indicate that how programs are designed matters. It is not necessarily a question of money, but rather of how to spend it. Employment programs in conflict settings like Syria can facilitate peacebuilding and social cohesion and reduce the likelihood of disagreement or violence in the future; yet such integrated programs, while effective, are also the most difficult to design because they must combine peacebuilding expertise and employment expertise.

## *Structural Approaches Despite Conflict Dynamics*

Given that those involved in employment and livelihood projects in Syria cannot wait for the conflict to end or on a sustainable national economy to emerge, what else can be done while other issues are being sorted? One structural approach that has demonstrated a degree of success are external partnerships with agency-owned businesses. Creating an MoU between either national or international NGOs and ministries of the government is critical because nobody has the potential outreach of the government. As a caveat, though, here we are talking about the civil government, neighbors and friends who work in government offices, not authorities related to politics of the situation. Moreover, given security issues, such programs require a large number of staff and/or paid volunteers to avoid moving people around and to keep them local and known. This lowers security risk and increases the chance for effective interactions.

One such partnership was with the Ministry of Agriculture, which led to capital improvements and training in agricultural extension, as well as employment opportunities. For example, one of the partnership's projects, conducted in rural areas of Hama and Damascus, trained women on how to grow mushrooms as well as how to add value by preparing them as ingredients ready to be sold to final consumers. The project provided the necessary equipment to grow and prepare the mushrooms. As such, this project focused not just on entrepreneurship, but also on recreating value chains that take the product to its final user.

This structural approach also seeks to bridge two different markets: the government market and the black market. The government market cannot supply all the producers' needs, and thus it is necessary to find a balance so that people have a chance to control their inputs and payments for acquisition of raw materials.

As another example, a partnership was agreed with the Ministry of Affairs and Labor in order to make use of unused land surrounding a center for incarcerated youth. The land was cultivated and improved and water wells were re-dug. Youth for the center and the surrounding community developed an interest in farming, learned from agricultural experts, and received vocational training. A important lesson is that while it is vital to pursue national solutions to conflict, it is equally vital to account for local capacities and needs and to develop local capabilities to reestablish livelihoods and rebuild communities.

In another scheme, a rural cooperative was created to restore veterinary services. Rather than working with individual veterinarians, groups were organized to co-invest in equipment and diagnostic treatment. The original investment capital for the cooperative—the only capital from outside the country—came from Oxfam. In a similar employee-owned scheme, the Syrian Society for Social Development started an agency-run clothing and tailoring business with hubs in four cities: Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. This scheme involved a more traditional approach in which the agency owns and operates the business, but its employees are part-owners. So as the business succeeds, the employees succeed. It also stimulates cottage industries, whereby women do not need to leave their homes but produce the equivalent of what a factory would.

External partners to these schemes can also go beyond training to provide support for people who have been through trauma

and assist people with rebuilding their lives. This can also include providing advice and guidance on building legal frameworks to establish businesses, as well as the provision of technical platforms. In Jordan, for example, a digital platform was developed to help Syrian refugee creators of digital media enter the market and ultimately sell their goods. Such platforms mean that individual entrepreneurs are not necessarily limited by their geographic locations.

It must be remembered that it is on the ground and among the people that we come up with the best ideas. Last year, a photography training school was established in a refugee camp, targeting Syrian youth 14 to 16 years old. They responded so well to the training that the images they took were exhibited in a Manhattan art gallery and auctioned off, raising $50,000 that was reinvested directly in the camp school. This is perhaps the first time that refugee youth have ever donated to a refugee youth project. The technology that exists today does not have to be limited to the elite. We must think about how to democratize technology so that everyone benefits.

## *Discussion*

There are several elements to the context of youth in conflict that must be kept in mind. In the Syrian context, there are children who were not more than seven years old when the conflict started; today, they are 17. They know nothing but conflict, living in poverty, fighting for food, and looking for water. These children were robbed of their youth and have been left behind. There are youth who are thinking about becoming doctors and lawyers in an economy that just does not support these ambitions anymore. A report published last year by the Norwegian Refugee Council looked at the aspirations of youth; it is tragic to compare these aspirations to their reality. There are young women and girls who have seen and experienced unspeakable things. For these youth, the positive realm of possibilities is severely reduced: they do not know what the future looks like, or what they would like to do. Syrian youth still believe that working for the government is the best option to attain good and dignified work. Is this really what youth should aspire to in the future? Is this quality employment? Or is this a return to the past? As we look for solutions moving forward, we must make sure that our solutions do not condemn youth to poverty. A job in agriculture puts food on the table, but it is not a forward-looking strategy—it is a coping strategy. When looking toward the future, it is necessary to consider work and the economy in the future. If funding and sanctions allowed, international organizations and NGOs would be providing high tech training for girls, teaching them coding, and exploring artificial intelligence and cryptocurrencies.

Conducting interviews in comparable contexts of ongoing conflict provides a better understanding of how conflict gives individuals a continued sense of broken promises and not being able to achieve one's aspirations and expectations for the future. This actually shapes people's risk profiles and economic preferences. From the perspective of youth in conflict, sometimes hope has a cost. Trying things that continue to fail has a cost. If organizations design interventions that ask youth to take on a certain amount of risk, they must acknowledge that the youth's expectations and aspirations may not come to fruition. Practitioners must not only account for measurable factors, such as needs assessments, but also for perceptions, aspirations, and feelings. For individuals, these are often the same: perceptions shape one's reality. Organizations must understand not just how youth's lives are today, but also how they imagine their lives will be when they grow up.

When examining the roles of international and national NGOs, it is necessary to examine the systems that regulate their work, specifically in Syria. Many of the programs that aim to provide economic support for youth have failed to reach their objectives. The reasons for this are numerous, including the ongoing war, illicit economic activities, and the impact of displacement on social capital. The failures of these economic empowerment programs are often due to systemic factors and to the mentality behind international interventions in conflict areas. One of these factors is the short-sighted vision of many programs in Syria. NGOs and individuals alike are often expected to implement prepackaged solutions to the Syrian conflict without understanding the actual needs of the communities or environments in which they are operating. This has led to programs that are unsustainable and incapable of making any impact.

One example of this was in northern Syria, where some donors pushed to plant wheat in areas where it was not cultivated and where the environment and infrastructure were not prepared for such activity. This project not only failed to produce anything, but also damaged the lives of farmers and the land. A second example is women's economic empowerment programs in Syria, which mostly provide sewing workshops or makeup kits to women rather than actually supporting them economically. Many donors do not want to provide employment opportunities or create revenue-generating programs in Syria because of the associated risks, which is understandable. What is less acceptable is that they are not willing to examine alternatives to high-risk projects or to figure out solutions to important issues, such as how to transfer money within Syria or how to setup the proper infrastructure for micro-financing.

These kinds of funding policies have led to a situation in which the private sector in Syria, specifically in areas outside regime control, has been absorbed by the NGO sector. As a result, skilled youth now have more incentives to work with NGOs than to work as teachers or establish their own small and medium enterprises (SMEs). For the foreseeable future, Syria will rely greatly on international funding. For NGOs to play a role in recovery, we need to re-examine the entire system, including funding policies. We should focus on educating local partners and tailoring programs to meet the needs of local Syrian communities.

In the case of Syria, one key issue is the fragmentation of political space. Different areas are controlled by Kurdish forces, Turkish forces, and militias: how can organizations stage interventions

without becoming politicized? The easy answer is that creating jobs for youth is not political. Unfortunately, making this claim can lend unintended legitimacy to controlling authorities. For example, the EU tells external parties not to be too visible in Turkish-controlled areas for fear of legitimizing Turkish aims in Syria. So, how can organizations reach out to youth without taking a political position or supporting specific state/non-state actors, especially when such links can delegitimize or damage said organizations? It thus hard to stay independent and make sure not to provoke unintended side effects, as it is at this moment of losing independence when major supporters will pull the plug. However, staying small and focused in order to remain independent and avoid risking political interference by state or non-state actors also limits the ability to reach scale and achieve impact. It is a difficult and delicate balance.

Local organizations play a critical role in youth programming. Unfortunately, they receive less than 1% of international funding, and so struggle to survive. Yet, creating a vibrant civil society is fundamental to rebuilding broken and suffering communities. Increasing support to local organizations is therefore a major issue. Likewise, one of the main issues with the "localization" of aid and development is that "local" is not well-defined. In the Syrian case, even major national NGOs and CSOs are still treated as passive recipients of international funds—as mere implementers of pre-packaged projects, rather than drivers of change.

There are several local organizations doing incredible work on the ground and crowdfunding platforms for humanitarian crises, such as CanDo, could be a means of increasing support to them. Likewise, the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee recently released its guidelines for working with youth, which may provide insights into working with and for young people in humanitarian settings. The Norwegian Refugee Council also published a new study providing a framework for understanding "youth wellbeing in displacement" in 2020.

# PANEL 2:

## *What Alternatives Exist? Insights from Comparative Cases and Existing Projects*

The Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (led by the Overseas Development Institute) has conducted research providing in-depth insights into livelihood promotion in conflict contexts outside the MENA region. This research project, which lasted for 10 years, aimed to understand how people make a living, access services, and perceive the state in conflict-affected places. It involved deep qualitative research on country-specific cases, as well as comparative work to draw out shared features across different countries. It also included an individual panel survey of over 10,000 people, conducted three times at intervals of three years, asking participants about income, health access, their perceptions of government, etc. This research allowed for a deep longitudinal understanding of how households that have experienced conflict make a living and demonstrated that, even after a conflict has ended, people continue to experience fragility, thereby demonstrating that there is no conflict/post-conflict binary. Economic difficulties are not necessarily related to a conflict, and continuing uncertainty and fragility is a given.

On average, shocks were continuous and common, but not necessarily linked to conflict. Shocks included land disputes, livestock disease, and health problems. Livelihood strategies are thus constantly being disrupted by shocks, and households in these contexts tend to diversify in order to become less vulnerable. Households also tend to take on debt to cope with shocks and smooth out consumption; however, taking on too much debt can contribute to economic fluctuation. Household borrowing tended to be for immediate, basic needs, and borrowing tended to be from family and friends, highlighting the importance of social connections to coping strategies.

The research also revealed a patchwork of livelihood strategies, as well as agricultural decline involving movement from rural to urban contexts that that cannot absorb labor. Four main strategies that most households tend to follow in post-conflict economies emerged. The first is migrating for work, which can bring in remittances. This strategy entails high start-up costs in terms of taking on debt, however, and is not really the gamechanger it is often imagined to be. The second is self-employment or entrepreneurship. The third is casual wage labor, which can be precarious and involves the potential for abuse. The fourth is living on debt. These strategies are rarely a choice and are often a last resort. As a consequence, household income tends to fluctuate, which makes it hard to chart a path to economic recovery.

Indeed, even the research on entrepreneurship/self-employment demonstrates that it has a lot more in common with a coping strategy than with a choice. The promotion of entrepreneurship tends to be pinned to a set of assumptions that do not align with how economies actually work. These include the assumption that all are willing and able to live with debt, that entrepreneurship is a universal skill or value, and that people's understanding of risk and the economic behavior coincides with entrepreneurial good practices. Entrepreneurship programs need to be accompanied by safety nets so that people do not just take them on due to a lack of other options.

Yet, efforts to investigate specific programming for youth livelihood and employment promotion in comparative conflict and post-conflict contexts are severely hampered by problems related to measurement and the lack of precise definitions. Very few medium-term evaluations (five or more years) on the impact of youth programming in conflict contexts exist, and many

projects are short-term and not expandable. As such, in a lot of contexts, once the projects stop, not much will change after, and no systemic measurement is undertaken to access long term impact.

Moreover, the definition of "youth" varies widely according to factors such as context and culture. Youth are not a homogenous group: those in rural and urban areas are not the same, those in regime-held and non-regime-held areas are not the same, etc. And because youth is a transitory period of life, marked by a process of social, economic, and political integration, it is difficult to track long-term effects as youth enter adulthood. In this transitory period, youth enter their economic life in disorganized formal labor markets, which has consequences for their future prospects and professional growth. Likewise, conflict can severely disrupt their education. The economic integration of youth is thus linked both to their specific context and macro-economic situation. Organizations should perhaps think about youth integration into economic and social life first, and about livelihood second, as the former could promote the latter.

Indeed, if organizations want to tackle the issue of youth unemployment, they should focus on policies (rather than programs, although these are also important). In comparative cases from the MENA region, youth lose many years of education to conflict, but also gain many skills from the market in the meantime. The question then becomes: how can they certify the skills they have learned? In Jordan, for example, efforts have been undertaken to certify young people through a methodology of "recognition of prior learning" and to shift the mindset of "learning to earning" toward one of "earning to (continuous) learning." This is relevant in the Syrian case, where many young people have lost out on years of schooling.

Nonetheless, there are not enough opportunities in the job market, which is a problem that must be addressed. If the private sector does not have the capacity to create enough jobs, there are other programs that can support youth, such as public works. Indeed, governments should step in and create jobs, especially for low- and semi-skilled laborers. Public works could be implemented in Syria, but this would require investing in rehabilitation and reconstruction, which must be labor intensive in order to create jobs. Using digital platforms to conduct job searches can also provide opportunities for youth to learn new skills. Initiatives linked to promoting digital skills can also be cost effective.

Finally, given the emphasis in the MENA region on entrepreneurship as a solution to the problem of youth unemployment, it is important to recognize that not everyone has the entrepreneurial spirit. Training is not enough; people need access to financing. As such, external actors need to work on policies to foster financial inclusion among youth. And if youth are encouraged to work in private sector, those jobs need to be "decent," formal, and come with a living wage; otherwise, youth will continue to seek public sector jobs. While the International Labour Organization has different programs that offer support to youth, the most important thing is to have a short, medium, and long-term perspective.

# Discussion

In Syria, as in other conflict cases, techniques to recover from war trauma must accompany youth programming. While practically all youth in programs in Syria initially screen positive for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), this can be treated through specific programs that teach trauma management techniques. It is essential to address the psycho-social needs of youth because mental health problems can have such an impact on issues like youth engagement and commitment.

Research on youth in Syria also reveals a strong and recurrent desire to do whatever is necessary to leave the country and settle elsewhere. Even when youth try to engage with civil society actors, it is to make their CVs stronger so that they can apply to scholarships to find a way out. Girls are also trying to use marriage as a means of escaping Syria. This is a worrying trend because it is not possible to rebuild Syria from Europe. Many Syrians in Lebanon try to send money to family in Syria, and encourage them to develop income-generating projects to acquire independence. Yet most of these projects fail or are unprofitable.

Programs need to be localized, even as far down as the village level, especially given the context of insecurity and nonexistent transportation, which renders travel between areas difficult to impossible. Checkpoints, for example, are a nightmare and many youth try to obtain security cards just to be able to move safely. These security and economic challenges are the main obstacle preventing meaningful activity in the government-controlled areas. Other evidence, however, shows that youth in Syria are very resilient. A Mercy Corps study, for example, found that at least 35% of youth in Syria adopted new livelihoods. Youth in Syria are leaving agriculture and are more connected with new technology and social media than people expect. Likewise, markets are functioning in Syria despite the conflict.

Nonetheless, economic development cannot be promoted in a context of hyperinflation, lack of infrastructure, etc. It is important to recognize that the Syrian economy is much, much poorer now than it was for many years before. This entails at least three things. First, memories of better living standards in the past are not helpful for planning the future. Both at the macro and individual levels, endowments are much lower than they once were. Second, Syria is now an arid, low-income country and expectations should be adjusted accordingly. Third, sectors like rain-fed smallholder agriculture really matter. Talk of digital economies may end up feeding an illusion rather than offering realistic hope of jobs or growth.

While investing in entrepreneurship will be key, and the skills of Syrian workers used to be very high, there is now an

absence of education for young people. Capacity-building focusing on vocational and soft skills will need to be provided. Likewise, when considering financial support, training for entrepreneurship should be within a value chain. Simply providing a microentrepreneur with a sewing machine without connecting her to the market and raw materials will not allow for income generation, and may indeed end up with the sale of the machine itself.

One of the daunting technical challenges for youth programming in Syria is also a question of expectations: organizations on the outside seem to be expecting youth development to not only produce jobs but also to produce civic engagement, youth agency, etc. To create these major youth development outcomes, we may need a major, all-encompassing approach to economic empowerment of ultra-poor families—we may need to start really big and ambitious and then work our way down.

Economic engagement and employability must be supported by life skills-based education, as well as meaningful social and community engagement. Youth are divided into two groups: those in school, whose education was not disrupted, but who are graduating into a labor market that cannot absorb them; and those who have left school and are the most disadvantaged.

Times of conflict are the perfect moment to build trust with local actors and try new approaches, as well as test how one can work in a conflict-sensitive manner. True scaling only makes sense after a peace settlement, or at least a stable long-term ceasefire and end of political boycotts. While current limitations in the Syrian context will make large-scale investment ineffective, it is still necessary to pilot test and act.

## About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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