

Adapting and Sustaining Demand-Driven Training Programs

A Case Study from the Middle East

While the unprecedented transitions taking place in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have been greatly stimulated by the activism of youth seeking better future for themselves and their societies, the region has the highest youth unemployment rate in the world. In 2012, the World Bank estimated an average unemployment rate of 22% for young men and 39% for young women. These numbers are likely to grow over the next decade, given the high number of youth entering the labor market ill-prepared for existing jobs, thus aggravating an already major challenge for local governments and the private sector.

In 2013, Global Communities, in partnership with the Caterpillar Foundation, launched the **MENA Youth Empowerment Strategy (MENA-YES)**, a three-year, \$4.5 million program to prepare vulnerable youth in Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen for the labor market. The program targeted disadvantaged youth aged 15-29, with an emphasis on low and medium-skilled individuals, particularly women.

The goals of MENA-YES were to:

- Link employers, training providers and jobseekers, to re-align curricula to meet market demand and develop meaningful skills that result in better job placement;
- Promote entrepreneurship; and
- Encourage pro-employment and pro-entrepreneurship policies.



In a relatively short span of time, the MENA-YES program achieved significant results. Collectively, the country teams increased the employability of 2,050 young people through building 318 partnerships with private sector firms, and developing and customizing 86 training modules to meet employers demand for skills. Over 1,800 youth also received training in access to finance, market development and business skills. While there were challenges in collecting robust outcome data, follow-up with a significant sub-set of graduates found that 60% of them were employed or in further training 180 days after program completion in Jordan and Lebanon.

MENA-YES was a sectoral, demand-driven training for employment program. In each country, a labor market assessment was used to identify segments of the economy that had skill gaps and demand for labor (e.g., hospitality, renewable energy, ICT, car maintenance). For each sector targeted, the program team then created a Sector Advisory Committee (SAC), consisting of hiring managers from the private sector and training institutions. SAC members worked together to identify skill gaps, hiring needs and training outlines specific to their sector. A training provider was then selected through a competitive process, and a new training curriculum was developed or an existing one realigned with the SAC-defined training outline. Simultaneously, the MENA-YES team worked with youth-supporting NGOs, relevant government agencies, social media and other recruiting channels to identify eligible and motivated youth interested in the training. Over two to three months, theoretical and practical job skills training was combined with soft skill development and mentoring, leading to graduation and certification of program participants. Graduates were then placed in internships, apprenticeships or full-time jobs.

This fairly sophisticated model was implemented in challenging environments. MENA-YES introduced several concepts that were either unknown or nascent in these countries, such as mentoring, internships, and Sector Advisory Committees. Cultural and religious norms created additional barriers for young women's participation in the program, and the prevailing attitudes and expectations about employment reduced many young people's interest in participating. In addition, insecurity and conflict in both Lebanon and Yemen directly impacted program implementation.

Each country team developed solutions tailored to their specific context to address these challenges including: engaging employer and training partners through Sector Advisory Committees; reducing drop-out rates by using a participant commitment letter; delivering training in Arabic while providing students

with technical terminology in English language; and providing graduates with certificates endorsed by local government.

The MENA-YES model contained design solutions to foster systemic change in the transition of disadvantaged youth to sustainable livelihoods by improving linkages and collaboration between the demand for and supply of skills in the marketplace. Although it is too early to make conclusions about the overall sustainability of the program, there is some very encouraging evidence that local stakeholders will continue to work together for the benefit of young job seekers in Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen.

MENA-YES Model Elements

The MENA-YES model is represented in the flowchart on page 5. Specific elements are described in detail below.

Program Stakeholders

A broad range of stakeholders were engaged in designing, implementing, improving and sustaining the model:

- Youth and youth-supporting organizations;
- Training providers, both public and private;
- Private sector employers; and
- Relevant government entities.

Target Group

MENA-YES program served disadvantaged, lesser educated youth, aged 15-29, initially in Beirut, Amman and Sana'a. (Training was expanded to additional cities in Jordan and Lebanon in the last year of the program.) Eligibility was further refined in each of the different program countries to account for regional differences, as well as focus efforts on vulnerable groups such as young women, orphans or those with disabilities.



Labor Market Assessment

In order to determine target sectors and communities for implementation, country teams conducted a rapid labor market assessment in the early stages of the program. After conducting desk reviews of available literature and data, they interviewed youth development stakeholders, such as the private sector, training providers, youth-supporting NGOs, and young people themselves. In their analysis, they also benefited from the knowledge and experience of Global Communities project teams already working in target countries.

Outreach and Recruitment of Program Candidates

In Yemen, the recruitment of program candidates was implemented in collaboration with youth-supporting NGOs. The NGO partners were notified of new training sessions, and they would refer a list of candidates to Global Communities. In Jordan and Lebanon, the country teams experienced challenges in identifying motivated youth for the program. Each created a two-pronged recruitment strategy consisting of referrals from a variety of sources including the private sector, training providers and other youth, and advertising online, through social media and in physical locations.

Orientation and Motivation of Program Candidates

Youth interested in the program attended an orientation session that could be up to two hours long. It covered a variety of activities including providing personal information, an explanation of the program and motivation to join from a representative of Global Communities, an opportunity for candidates to speak about themselves, and the creation of a WhatsApp group to connect candidates.

Selection of Program Participants

In Jordan, the Program Coordinator would bring each interested candidate to the office for a one-on-one interview in order to determine their motivation to join and stay in the training. During the interview, the candidate also would fill in the application form. In Yemen, referred candidates were interviewed and then presented to the selection committee consisting of representatives from Global Communities, the referring NGO partner and the training partner. In Lebanon, information collected during the orientation session was considered for selecting program participants, and those young people were contacted.

Private Sector Engagement

The MENA-YES model placed great emphasis on engaging private sector firms throughout the program cycle. When a target sector was identified, the program team created a Sector Advisory Committee (SAC), consisting of hiring managers from the private sector and training institutions. The concept of coming together with “competitors” in the sector was unfamiliar in these contexts and initially, recruiting SAC members was challenging. The teams began by approaching decision makers in large companies and prominent training institutions, based on Global Communities’ networks and their personal contacts. As the MENA-YES program gained reputation and visibility in markets, it became easier to entice human resource directors and training managers to participate on SACs.

The purpose of the SAC was to connect the private sector with the training providers and NGOs working with youth in order to better align the demand and supply for skills in a specific sector. SACs would meet to discuss hiring trends, job descriptions, competency requirements for each position and skill gaps left by the educational system. The goal of these discussions was to create an accurate and up-to-date syllabus or training outline for those entry-level positions with the highest number of opportunities in the market. Global Communities then used this outline as the basis for organizing a tender and selecting the right training partner for the course.

Private sector involvement did not end with their active participation on SACs. Firms were also engaged to visit the classroom and provide group mentoring sessions to the students, provide internship opportunities to



program participants, and consider graduates for their open positions.

Benefits to the private sector from their engagement with MENA-YES program included:

- Access to well-trained job candidates for their open positions leading to an increase in their business, and a decrease in their training costs;
- Linkages with training providers, as a source of candidates for future job openings;
- Networking with their peers in the same industry sector;
- Professional development for their associates through Corporate Social Responsibility seminars;
- Media exposure for their commitment to youth development;
- Helping their communities.

Selection of Training Provider

In the MENA-YES model, the training delivery was outsourced to the training provider selected through a tender process. Once the SAC agreed on a recommended training outline and Global Communities received enough commitments from the private sector firms in terms of internships and jobs, the country team issued a call for proposals, and conducted a competitive selection process. The selected training provider had to demonstrate its experience in training youth in skills required in the target sector, its willingness to create a new curriculum or customize an existing curriculum following the outline created by the SAC, and the adequacy of its trainers, facilities and equipment.

Preparation of Training

Before a training is launched, the training partner must deliver the customized training curriculum based on the agreed upon outline. The curriculum is then reviewed by the SAC and feedback is provided to the training organization for any further modifications. This process is lengthy, but it ensures the training is completely aligned with the exact needs of employers. Trainers are also informed about the specific characteristics of the student cohort so they can prepare their materials and adjust their approach to the special needs of the class. For example, many youth did not possess basic English skills. For training which covered new technologies in sectors such as renewable energy, hybrid car maintenance, computer graphics, photography and videography, the solution developed

was to deliver training in Arabic while supplying students with a glossary of terms in English.

Training

Across the three MENA-YES countries, the training was organized in a wide variety of sectors, with a number of training partners, and with slightly different cohorts of disadvantaged youth. All training courses did follow an established set of standards:

- The training was both theoretical and practical. The students had opportunities to practice what they learned in classroom;
- Soft skills and entrepreneurship training were incorporated into technical training;
- Students received group mentoring by volunteering professionals;
- Student attendance and participation in training were closely monitored to ensure all students completed the program;
- MENA-YES program coordinators visited the classes, and followed up with both instructors and students to resolve any concerns that might arise;
- Training was followed by workplace-based learning through on-the-job training, internships or apprenticeships;
- Graduation ceremonies were held to celebrate program completion and graduates received certificates.

The program was flexible when it came to training schedules—some courses were very intensive and met five days a week, while others met



less frequently; some classes were three hours long, and other lasted all day. The overall length of training also depended on the sector and the complexity of the curriculum. Most courses were one to three months in length.

Placement into Employment

The placement of graduates into jobs is the critical step for every workforce development program. Since a number of private sector employers were involved on the SACs in preparing the training curriculum, mentoring the students and even observing them in their workplace as interns or apprentices, the hiring managers developed a certain level of confidence in the ability of these young people to perform job duties at the required level. An estimated 40% of interns became full-time employees at the firm that provided the internship.

Program graduates were given a certificate, endorsed by the local government in some cases. The certificate was a valuable credential in securing a job, as employers placed high value on it. The program also promoted young graduates to prospective employers during the graduation ceremony or a job fair. Some graduates found jobs on their own, while others continued their education or training.

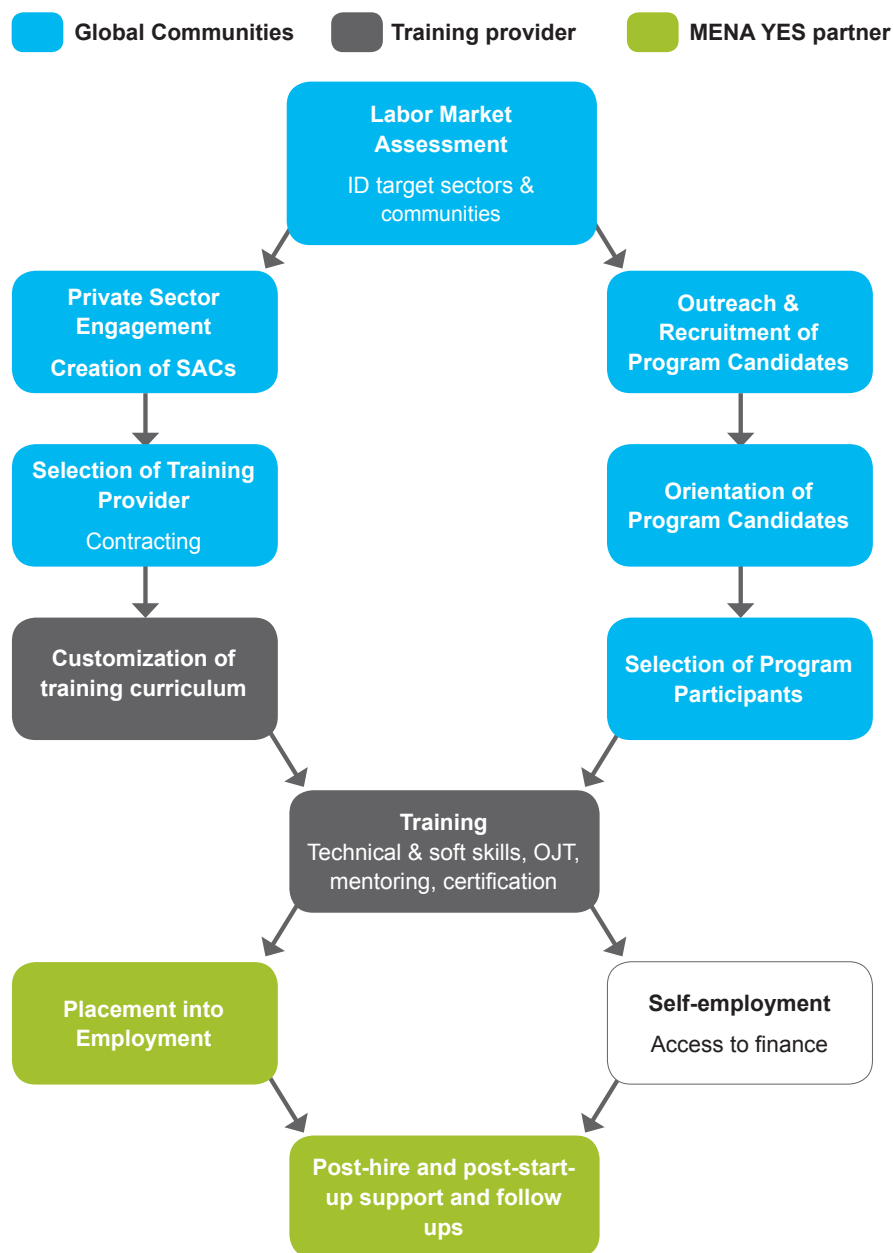
Self-employment

A relatively small number of graduates were interested in entrepreneurship opportunities in their field of training. Most students received limited training in entrepreneurship skills, access to finance and marketing/business development. In Yemen where the conflict made job placement challenging, Global Communities facilitated the development of a new credit product for young entrepreneurs.

Follow ups

The country teams had very close contact with youth while in training. A structured follow-up interview with all program participants was to be done at 90 days after graduation; in many cases, country teams stayed in touch with some of the graduates much longer. However, follow-ups proved to be very time consuming and challenging, and country teams were not able to reach every student from every class.

Program Model



MENA-YES Lessons Learned

While the MENA-YES program incorporated from the start a number of best practices in workforce development, the country teams encountered a number of challenges that they had to resolve. Learning from these obstacles, and adjusting the MENA-YES model to specific conditions in each country and sector, the teams created additional promising practices that can be adopted by others. Some key challenges and solutions included:

1. Recruitment of youth – In both Lebanon and Jordan, recruitment of program participants was one of the biggest challenges. Their education systems do not prepare youth for jobs, and do not provide career orientation to their students. Local government employment offices are not very active or effective in guiding youth to economic opportunities. To address this challenge, both teams implemented intensive recruitment efforts, and used a host of diverse recruitment and referral channels. In Lebanon, the team established links to various youth-supporting NGOs and asked them for referrals. Private sector partners were asked to refer the job candidates they did not hire. Ads and flyers were posted in locations where youth congregate, such as technical schools and sports centers. The program also established a Facebook page and used social media to recruit participants. The Jordan team experimented with various specialized websites, newspapers and radio stations to identify the

most efficient media channels for their recruitment ads. They also put ads in coffee shops and bus stops. They too established a Facebook page and used social media for reaching out to candidates. Training partners referred additional youth. Both teams, in Lebanon and Jordan attempted to work with governmental employment offices with limited success.

2. Drop-outs – All three country teams saw some students dropping out of training before graduating. There were a wide variety of reasons behind the drop-outs: some students found work while others lost interest in training; some could not afford the transportation costs to attend training while others did not get support from their families to stay in class. The teams developed creative solutions to address this issue. In Lebanon, the training certificate was only given to graduates who attended at least 80% of classes. Certificates were endorsed by the local government and they were highly valued. In addition, only graduates received four soft skills workbooks. In Jordan and Yemen, program participants had to sign a commitment letter when enrolling in training. Although not a legal document, the letter had the format of a contract and had a penalty clause for dropping out. (This penalty was never enforced, but it did have a strong psychological effect on students and their parents.) In Jordan, graduation ceremonies were held after the end of on-the-job training, to promote the retention of students during internships. In addition to these measures,



good orientation of participants before enrolling them in the program is essential for properly managing their expectations and reducing drop-out rates.

3. **Recruitment, retention and coordination of private sector firms in SACs** – While Yemen experienced challenges in recruiting employers to participate on SACs, Jordan had problems retaining private sector firms throughout the project. In Lebanon, the team had difficulties in coordinating SAC meetings with all firms engaged in one sector, due to security issues, traffic, distance and busy schedules. In Yemen, the team enlisted the help of the Chamber of Commerce to recruit SAC members. In Jordan, the team organized a two-day long CSR seminar for private sector partners in order to raise their awareness of the multiple benefits of community engagement. In Lebanon, when it was impossible to coordinate a meeting of all SAC members in one sector, the program team met with each member individually to gather their input, and then communicated the combined feedback to all. Well-structured and well-planned meetings are crucial to best

leverage the time devoted to a SAC by each member.

4. **Recruitment of volunteers for mentoring sessions** – In Lebanon and Jordan, teams had some difficulties with securing enough volunteers to provide group mentoring sessions to the students. The concept of mentoring is in very early stages in all three MENA-YES countries. The teams put extensive efforts into educating private sector partners on the benefits of mentoring for both mentees and mentors. Aside from organizing the CSR seminar, the Jordan team also developed a mentoring training for volunteers.
5. **Conflict in Yemen** – The conflict in Yemen since March of 2015 has brought daily airstrikes, loss of electrical power and the shrinking of the labor market. Job creation was extremely weak. MENA-YES continued to operate under tremendous difficulties, brokering partnerships, organizing training activities and graduations, and even bringing SAC members together. One adaptation was to offer trainings focused on sectors that were still growing and in demand, such as solar energy (due to the scarcity of electricity) and operating CCTV security systems. However, placing graduates in employment became almost impossible when jobs were scarce. In addition, in Yemen, employers require each newly hired individual to bring a “guarantee letter”, a commitment from a financially stable individual to cover any debt or damage caused by the new employee on the job. Since vulnerable job candidates rarely could find guarantors, their chances of securing employment were further diminished. Therefore, the team redirected the graduates to self-employment opportunities.

6. **Lack of youth-inclusive financial services** – In Yemen, the team discovered that their entrepreneurship graduates could not get loans to support their start-ups. Even microfinance institutions did not have any appropriate products for disadvantaged youth. The team partnered with Yemen Microfinance Network, an association of microfinance institutions, and with the Central Bank of Yemen to develop a new start-up loan product tailored to youth graduates of vocational training programs.



Sustainability

There is very encouraging evidence that local stakeholders will continue to work together for the benefit of young job seekers and entrepreneurs in Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen. Some of those indications of sustainability include:

- **A number of technical schools and universities have incorporated the new technical skills and soft skills curriculums in their programs.** For example, in Jordan, a new solar systems curriculum was developed by the Arab Community College (ACC) and delivered to 25 MENA-YES participants, along with soft skills training. ACC will continue to deliver the solar systems course to its own students on an ongoing basis. ACC also decided to provide the soft skills training to all of its students at the end of their first semester of education.
- **The coordination of SACs was transitioned to a sector-recognized organization.** SAC members were informed from the inception of the SAC that the role of Global Communities as the backbone organization would be transitioned over the life of the project to another entity that is respected within the sector. For example, the Jordan Hotel Association and the Jordan Hospitality and Tourism Education Company are continuing to convene HR managers from hotels on a quarterly basis to discuss sector needs.
- **A new financial product tailored for young entrepreneurs with vocational education in Yemen.** The lack of adequate microfinance instruments was a major problem for young entrepreneurs in Yemen. The country team partnered with microfinance institutions and the Central Bank of Yemen to develop and implement a new product customized for youth. The result of this partnership may remove a major barrier for young businesses in their access to finance.
- **Employers and training providers are convinced of the benefits and results of working together.** In interviews conducted at the close of the program, private sector managers and training firms were all deeply satisfied with their collaboration on the SAC and during the training. A vast majority of the graduates received workplace learning experience. It is highly probable that these relationships will continue to flourish past the end of the MENA-YES program. For example, in Lebanon, the Boubess Group, a large hospitality company operating multiple restaurants and hotels, contracted the training provider originally engaged by the hospitality SAC to provide training to all of its newly hired line cooks, not just MENA-YES participants.

SACs are core to the sustainability of the MENA-YES model. Creating lasting connections between the demand for and supply of skills in specific sectors bridges the skills gap and facilitates a systemic change in transitioning youth to jobs. While a program such as MENA-YES was relatively small in terms of overall numbers of youth served, its long-term impact could be significant if SACs remain active over time.

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