

The role of social protection in young people's transition to work in the Middle East and North Africa

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Understanding the factors that limit transitions to decent work remains a central concern for policymakers, as changes in the world of work considerably affect the availability and distribution of quality jobs. In many parts of the world, youth employment outcomes have underwhelmed, despite increasing levels of education. Meanwhile, precariousness and long working hours are serious problems faced by a significant proportion of youths looking for decent work. To guarantee social, political and economic cohesion international organisations have increasingly highlighted the importance of providing adequate work opportunities for youths, whose rising population presents “a historic opportunity to invest in human capital by improving access to education, health and protection and enhancing the prospects for inclusive employment” (UNICEF 2019).

Many of these global issues are mirrored in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA). The region continues to face many social and economic challenges, many of which—whether related to low economic growth, social rights issues, internal and external migration, or political stability—have had significant impacts on labour markets in MENA, either directly or indirectly. A key measure to improve socio-economic conditions in the region is creating and sustaining enough decent and quality jobs for the population. This is particularly true for young people, who often face greater barriers and discrimination to enter the labour force.

Ensuring that young people are provided with adequate knowledge, skills and support to successfully integrate into the labour market is a growing concern throughout the region. It is expected that during the first half of this century, a large proportion of the population will move into their most productive years, thus creating a window of opportunity for a demographic dividend. However, such a dividend cannot be seized without an enabling environment in place to promote young people's transition to work (YPTW). Creating a stronger environment focusing on YPTW not only has the potential to improve labour market and economic outcomes, it can also lead to stronger ties for youth, thus improving the social fabric and lowering political unrest.

To complement education policy, social protection policies—including labour market policies—can play an important role in supporting YPTW. This can be done in different ways: some policies

might protect youth by mitigating the effect of unemployment and providing resources for livelihood creation; meanwhile, labour market policies have the potential to increase young people's chances in the job market by building capacity and creating better conditions for youth employment.

A report by IPC-IG and UNICEF MENARO (Bird and Silva 2020) focuses on the role of social protection to promote transitions to work for young people in MENA, especially among vulnerable groups. Despite high levels of unemployment, especially among the youth, government spending across MENA countries in active labour market policies (ALMPs) tends to be low. Moreover, most of the existing ALMPs, such as vocational and technical training, are intended for youths with higher educational backgrounds, while poorer groups and women tend to be under-represented.

Despite the limited attention in practice, evidence shows that labour market and livelihood programmes can lead to positive impacts on income and employment, especially when targeting poor and vulnerable youth. Country case studies covered in the report highlight how the administration of publicly-provided social protection programmes promoting employment tends to be fragmented from both education policy and existing social protection frameworks. However, there are interesting cases being developed in the region that create linkages between social assistance and activations programmes (such as *Forsa*, in Egypt). The case studies also find that advances have been made in recent years towards creating new, or expanding the role of existing, bodies in charge of institutionalising technical vocational education and training in MENA. Finally, policymakers in the region should consider taking steps to strengthen the role of social protection initiatives targeting young people to help lower youth unemployment and facilitate better transitions to work.

References:

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