



ITUC CSI IGB

Arab Trade Union Confederation

Founding Congress

Overview: Youth in the Arab Region

- One out of every five persons in the Arab Region is between 15-24 years old and more than half of the population is below the age of 25.
- Each year, over 500,000 people enter the labour market in the region, most (90%) are youth.
- Arab countries have the highest regional youth unemployment rate in the world, particularly affecting young Arab females.
- Arab youth unemployment is the highest globally at 23.2%, compared to a world average of 13.9%¹.
- Youth are almost entirely excluded from participation within parliaments in more than half of the Arab countries, reaching a low of 7%.

1-By end of 2010 a growing youth bulge, unprecedented levels of corruption based on elite control of national wealth, and a technology revolution that rendered parts of the Arab States all combined have lead to the start of uprisings. Changes that have swept through the Arab world since then have highlighted the need for a new development model that is inclusive, sustainable, and rooted in social justice.

High youth unemployment in particular has contributed to the Arab Spring and will loom large in the social and political landscape if it is not adequately addressed. Tackling unemployment is a longstanding but increasingly urgent challenge for Arab countries, where joblessness remains the highest in the world and largely a youth phenomenon. Yet, even while the Arab youth unemployment rate exceeds that of any other part of the world, recent events in the area have contributed to a decline in economic activity and to even more joblessness; high unemployment rose in Arab countries in 2011, with large increase registered in Tunisia and Egypt.

Due to previously high levels exacerbated by the present crisis, the Middle East² has the highest youth unemployment rate of all regions globally. Joblessness among young people is estimated at 23.2%, and is projected to increase to 30.0% by 2018.

¹ ILO "Regional Report: National Events on Youth Employment in the Arab States" 2013

² Including Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, OPT, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, UAE, Yemen, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia

2-Demographics:

Current demographic trends began in the 1950s. Over the past 50 years, Arab countries experienced large declines in infant mortality which, combined with high fertility rates in 1950-80 led to strong population growth. That translated into big labor force growth rates from 1970 through 2000 and beyond; projected demographics indicate that youth will continue to be dominant in the population structure. Demographic pressures will thus remain as a leading cause of high youth unemployment in the Arab world. Growth of the labor force in Arab countries will continue to outpace that of most other parts of the world.

High demographic growth and rural migration have contributed to the social burden faced by several successive governments. These governments face the task of finding new job opportunities while addressing budget deficits.

3- Education

Arab countries have made great strides in education. At the secondary level, the gross enrolment rate has risen from just over 20% in the 1970s to nearly 70%. Today, the total student population is almost 80 m, meaning that almost one Arab in four is in school. Especially notable is how Arab women have closed the gender gap in education in many countries. University enrolment rates for women exceed those of men by 120% in the six Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states³ with rates elsewhere in the Arab world varying between 20-40%. This has had far-reaching impacts on social relations, as women become more educated than men but are still expected to be content with traditional gender roles of mothers and housewives and unable to make the transition to work. Their labor force participation has improved in some countries but they are often limited in choice of occupation. However, **while large numbers of young people are graduating, they have not necessarily had a high quality education and do not always have relevant skills that equip them to compete in the labor market.** In any case, irrespective of the level of economic and social development, youth face difficulties in finding jobs because of the mismatch between education/training and labor market requirements.

What the arguments for providing pre-employment skills miss in general is the dynamic nature of labor markets, especially after the huge economic change introduced due to technology and globalization. A good summary of the current and future state of affairs is that students are being taught to do jobs that do not yet exist, using technologies that have not been invented, to solve problems not yet known.

³ S. Sulieman "Education and Skills Development" in ILO/UNDP A Review of the Determinants of Decent Job Creation and Policy Options for a New Inclusive Development Model in the Arab Economies 2012

Strong labor force growth, skill mismatches, labor and product market rigidities, bloated public sectors, lack of youth employment policies, and high reservation wages thus remain key factors behind the large and persistent level of youth unemployment. Lack of suitable skills is an important constraint to hiring, and Arab unemployment rates tend to be highest among the most educated. Taken together, this suggests that education systems in the Arab world fail to produce graduates with needed skills. Hiring and firing regulations in most Arab countries are more restrictive than those in the average emerging and developing counterparts. Such rigidities could significantly limit employment creation, particularly for first-time job seekers, by discouraging firms from expanding employment in response to favorable changes in the economic climate.

4-Youth labor market participation

Young Arabs face joblessness despite the very low labor force participation rate (LFPR) of youth which is the lowest of all parts of the world, at **23.2%**, compared to a world average of **13.9%**⁴. This is explained by the share of young people in education but also by the large number of discouraged youth who are detached from the labor market.

Gender is a major fault line on the labor market; in many Arab countries, **unemployment among young women is much higher than that of male counterparts**. Exclusion from training and education in labor market relevant skills is a serious concern, as young women are being tracked into traditional home-making with little returns in the labor market, or into undervalued jobs that are an extension of care roles. This is largely result of preferences of parents, teachers, school administrators, and employers that see women's places in the job market as secondary to men and only where appropriate. On the other hand, high-income jobs often require long hours of overtime, usually not compensated by the sharing of domestic work with the husband at home, which adds to the burdens of women having to choose between family and work. Without a push towards sharing household care duties between men and women, many households opt instead for hiring domestic workers, transferring discrimination practices to under-paid and sometimes abused migrants, mainly from outside the Arab world. 5

The worldwide rate of unemployment is 13.9%. Youth unemployment reached 21.5% in Algeria, nearly 30% in both Egypt and Tunisia and 17% in Morocco.

The agricultural sector is one of the region's most important economic sectors. It accounted for 33% of economic output last year, second only to the service sector, which accounted for 50%. However, these sectors do not provide sufficient wages to pull people out of poverty, which results in the growth of non-official, non-structured economic activities.

Migration of young Arabs is also an important element in the jobs market. For example, of the total 100,000 Jordanians who graduate annually from universities and look for work, the government

⁴ ILO "Regional Report: National Events on Youth Employment in the Arab States" 2013

⁵ ILO "Regional Report: National Events on Youth Employment in the Arab States" 2013

provides 10,000 vacancies and the rest have to either find jobs in the private sector or abroad, usually in the GCC countries⁶.

5-Arab Youth and Unions

The Arab Spring did open up a much wider space for trade union actions, but youth participation in unions remains low. With the recognition of freedom of association and expression in law and in practice in Egypt and Tunisia, great opportunities to create and strengthen trade unions have emerged there and in other parts of the Arab world.

Obstacles in joining unions: Youth often see unions as irrelevant to their needs. Apart from the unions' actual inability to help young people, among other reasons, the perceived irrelevance is because comparatively greater job security, higher wages, and more generous wage benefits offered by the public sector continue to attract labor market youth entrants. State wages often remain higher than those offered by the private sector in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia for example; and despite much change, Jordanian youth still strive for government employment. Yet in many cases, unions do not exist, sometimes being banned, in the public sector, so there tends to be a dichotomy between union membership and entry into employment of youth.

Increased understanding of labor and other rights and how to defend them is needed for youth, and this can be provided by unions as encouragement for young people to join.

The First youth Network Conference was organized by ITUC in November 2014; where participants discussed obstacles in the labor market and in joining unions. The Full report of the conference is attached with this overview.

⁶ Malkawi K "Young Jordanians look abroad for better jobs, higher pay" Jordan Times 12 August 2013

For more information:

Malkawi K "Young Jordanians look abroad for better jobs, higher pay" Jordan Times 12 August 2013

ILO "Regional Report: National Events on Youth Employment in the Arab States" 2013

S. Sulieman "Education and Skills Development" in ILO/UNDP A Review of the Determinants of Decent Job Creation and Policy Options for a New Inclusive Development Model in the Arab Economies 2012

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http://www.arab-api.org/images/publication/pdfs/300/300_wps1015.pdf

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ITUC Conference of the Arab Youth Trade Unionists Network

12-14 November 2013

Amman, Jordan

Summary of discussions:

Thirty two young trade unionists (16 male, 16 female) participated in the 1st ITUC Arab youth conference which took place in Amman, Jordan from 12-14 November 2013. Participants came from Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, Palestine, Mauritania and Morocco; In addition to six participants from LO-Norway, two participants from ITF, and two participants from PSI.

The meeting started with a welcome speech by Abdessattar Mansour, Program Director, ITUC, followed by a speech by Fazel Sabetzadeh, MENA Officer, and Kent Rune, Youth Officer from LO Norway, then a speech and a key message to participants by Maria Tsirantonaki, Youth Officer, Equality Department, ITUC-Brussels.

The Meeting was an opportunity to discuss major challenges/problems that young people in the region face both at the workplace and in the union, including young people's access to union leadership and political participation.

The key challenges identified by the participants in each area are summarized as follows:

- Youth and Labour Market :
 - Lack of vocational training opportunities
 - Mismatch of supply and demand in the labour market (there should be strategies to match education and labour market needs)
 - Migration
 - Low wages; youth are paid lower than the minimum wage
 - Informal economy
 - No access to social security
 - University students don't know their rights when they enter the labour market
 - Child labour

- Youth participation in unions :
 - Lack of space and programs for youth within the union
 - Unions' prevailing culture in society, including gender discrimination within the unions
 - Lack of union education
 - Lack of organising skills and outdated strategies of organising youth
 - Lack of awareness of labour rights
 - Youth are excluded in the development of policies

- Youth Committees (if existed) are just formal structures with no plans
 - Negative perceptions in society regarding joining unions in particular for women.
- Youth political participation and access to union leadership:
- No confidence in politics, no trust in politicians; however, after the revolution youth is regaining confidence

The participants already initiated a network during the first day of the conference, aiming at achieving interregional support, and promoting young people's demands within the unions and at the workplace, calling it The Arab Youth Trade unionists Network. They have established a Facebook page to facilitate communication and share information:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/242681779224161/>

Next Steps/Action Plan

Based on the discussions, and the initiative of establishing a network; the participants identified key priority areas and activities which they wish to carry out in 2014:

- **Eliminating youth unemployment and the culture of shame**
Strategies: Change society's perceptions on vocational training; Change labour policies/ vocational education policies

Activities:

- 1) Awareness-raising activities, including development of booklets, use of social media, outreach activities etc.;
- 2) Prepare education curriculum;
- 3) Activate vocational training;
- 4) Cooperation with public media;
- 5) Conduct a baseline study and database, in cooperation with CSOs, to track labour market needs in each country;
- 6) Develop projects to employ the youth; look for donors to fund the youth projects.

- **Elimination of all forms of precarious work in the public and private sector**

Activities:

- 1) Training of trainers: training on labour rights for young workers and organising skills for organisers to reach out and organise young workers in precarious jobs;
- 2) Awareness-raising campaigns: including development of brochures, magazines, etc.;
- 3) Review legislation and social dialogue mechanisms;
- 4) On-going evaluation

- **Increase wages for young workers, especially minimum wage**

Strategies: ensure that minimum wage laws are applied – compliance with minimum wage laws; campaigns to increase minimum wage; introducing a law which penalises employers who don't pay the minimum wage

Activities:

- 1) Create a database with wages/minimum wage per country/ per sector;
- 2) Identify key sectors dominated by young people;

Awareness-raising campaigns on national and international labour laws; educating workers on the importance of being paid the minimum wage and having access to social protection;

- 3) Building partnerships with social institutions;
- 4) Workplace visits.

Conclusion and recommendations:

The Conference highlighted and discussed the main challenges that young people face in the MENA regions\ . The participants showed deep interest in working together to support young workers and promote their labour rights in their respective countries and in the region.

In order to support the work and activities of the network, the participants came up with the following recommendations:

- A network for young unionists in the region should be supported by ITUC.
- The network should focus its work on programs and campaigns that promote and support the labour rights of young workers.
- A regional campaign under the network should be launched on raising awareness on young workers labour rights.
- Support the work plans of The Arab Youth Trade unionists Network, and translate them into solutions that ensure decent work for young people and their promotion in leadership positions in unions.
- Establish youth committees/structures in trade unions at the branch level and confederation level, and activate the existing youth committees.
- Establish an online communication platform for the network (a Facebook page has been already created).
- ITUC MENA office shall assign a coordinator for the network to follow up on the activities of the network and work on raising funds for youth programs in the region.

- The network should build alliances with civil society organizations and global union federations.
- The network should have a logo.
- Ensure current members of the Network are involved/engaged in the future activities of the Network.