



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

For youth in Jordan, much like the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in general, the transition to adulthood is stalled due to a multitude of issues that are inherent to the country's social, political and cultural structures and ingrained perceptions that limit their ability to complete an education, get a job and have a meaningful role in civic life.

Because of the centrality of youth to effective and sustainable development, the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) mission in Jordan (USAID/Jordan) seeks to develop a deeper understanding of this population segment in Jordan. Hence, this assessment was requested to be conducted by the USAID/Jordan Monitoring & Evaluation Support Project.

The results of the assessment are intended to support the design of programs that follow USAID's "Youth in Development Policy" with an "intentional, ongoing process of assisting youth in their transition from childhood into adulthood"¹ as USAID/Jordan develops its youth strategy and programming to address the Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) 2013-2017.

The assessment targeted Jordanian and Syrian youth in communities with a high prevalence of school dropouts and poverty. To identify a typology of communities with at risk youth the assessment looked at the following criteria in order of importance: dropout rate of 0.4 percent and above as identified by the Ministry of Education (MOE); high concentration of Syrian refugees as identified by the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR); regions with high poverty rates; and communities selected through critical case sampling during consultations with USAID.

The assessment reached over 800 youth through focus groups in age cohorts of 10-14, 15-18 and 19-24, segregated by age, sex and nationality (Jordanian/Syrian). The assessment also conducted focus groups with 175 parents and teachers in the same locations as the youth participants. Because USAID's Youth Policy recognizes the vital role of youth themselves participating in the program design process, the assessment engaged 13 youth assessors to observe focus groups, validate focus group findings and conclusions, and produce a video in which they conducted interviews with other youth to tell the story they wanted to be told of youth in Jordan. The video can be viewed on USAID's YouTube channel at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHo4IU2okWE>.

In keeping with the objective of the assessment, the findings presented reflect the situation of youth development *as expressed by youth themselves* relative to three thematic areas of importance to USAID:

- Persistence in education;
- Transition to the workforce; and
- Voice and participation.

The findings presented represent the issues that were raised most frequently by focus group participants. The assessment did not reveal significant regional differences. It did however identify substantial nationality and gender differences in addition to differences between age cohorts.

¹ USAID. *Youth in Development Policy: Realizing the Demographic Opportunity*. Washington, D.C., 2012, p. 11. Available at: http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/Youth_in_Development_Policy_0.pdf.

FINDINGS

Persistence in Education

Jordanian and Syrian youth characterize school as a disengaging environment rife with violence and overcrowded classes, housed in dilapidated structures, with teachers uninterested in students' learning.

Teachers are youth's biggest source of frustration. The majority of youth report teachers' high absenteeism, high turnover, and unresponsiveness to youth's requests for support. Youth doubt teachers' competence and emphasize teachers' limited set of disciplinary approaches: physical and emotional abuse. The pervasive culture of physical and verbal abuse combined with teachers' perceived disinterest and incompetence reinforce low self-esteem among youth and hinder their learning. With the advent of Syrian refugees, the academic system is too overloaded to accommodate the varying degrees of ability within each class, resulting in students with low academic performance falling even further behind. As a result, youth and parents see little value in the education students currently receive, thus perpetuating the cycle as illustrated in the chart below.

Young male and female cohorts have high career aspirations limited to esteemed professions such as doctor, lawyer and engineer. The older they are, however, the less they believe that doing well in school and completing school will allow them to attain their aspirations.

The majority of Jordanian youth believe that school does not provide them with the necessary skill sets to enable them to enter the workforce. Youth feel they are not learning what they need to learn to succeed and lack options to acquire necessary knowledge and critical thinking skills. Even when they value education, Jordanian parents and youth point to high unemployment as a reason for not staying in school.

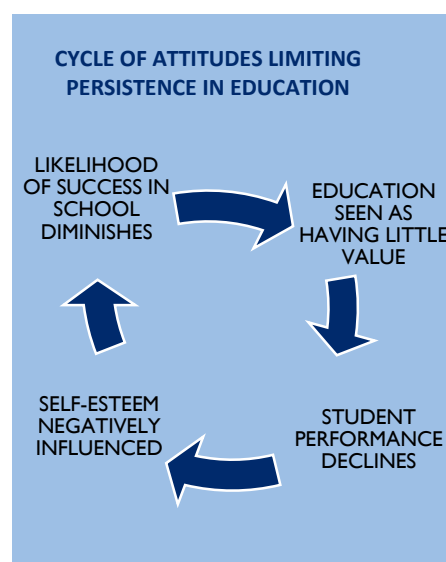
For Syrian youth, doing well in school is dependent upon their ability to cope with what they perceive as blatant discrimination and to adapt to the different school curricula in Jordan. Ultimately, most of them believe that succeeding in education is dependent upon their return to Syria and their own curricula.

When faced with family financial needs and a lack of peer role models who have managed to remain in school and succeed in life, Jordanian and Syrian males see little reason to remain in school and choose to drop out.

While parents and male students are typically aligned in the decision to remain or drop out of school, the situation for females is different. Decisions to remove females from school are generally made by parents who are more preoccupied with family honor which is directly linked to their daughters' reputation. If parents perceive that the school environment facilitates socialization with males in a way that could endanger this reputation, they will be removed from school in favor of marriage. However, the decision to remove females from school becomes easier when they are not performing well in school. When females are able to demonstrate academic accomplishment, their parents are more inclined to allow them to continue their education. Ultimately, however, most female students said that the decision to complete their education is made by their family, not them.

Females and parents view females' education as profoundly linked to their role as wives and mothers rather than to their own personal and professional development. As they grow older, females internalize restrictive gender roles and accept the limitations imposed on them.

When youth are forced to leave school, they are unaware of the services that would lead them to



informal and non-formal education, which minimizes their future opportunities. Thus, while female choices are more limited by social norms, employment in general is limited by what youth perceive to be available temporary jobs at low pay (JOD 225/month for factory workers). As a result, youth remain trapped in a cycle that fuels low self-esteem and progressively delays the opportunities to diversify their career paths and gain independence from their families.

Workforce Transition

As youth attempt to enter the workforce, they believe that *wasta*² is necessary to secure employment. Fueled by their lack of awareness of alternative job-seeking strategies, youth believe that connections more than educational credentials play a major role in hiring decisions. Despite reports indicating sectors of employment potential, most youth believe that there are few opportunities for work. In general, it is commonly believed that there are only two acceptable career paths; a limited set of prestigious careers that require accomplished academic performance, and the government job market which is currently saturated. Youth have few role models who are considered successful outside of these realms. Nonetheless, as youth get closer to the age of marriage, they are more willing to consider any type of job in order to get married and support a family.

For females, social constructs rather than choice determine whether they will work at all, and if they do work, in what type of occupation. Few females are able to pursue career aspirations or even casual employment due to social norms that tie their career to particularly restrictive notions of appropriateness and mobility. In addition, while vocational training is regarded by youth and parents with favor, many females state that the only training available to them is in occupations that are “appropriate” such as home based activities. Females question the usefulness of such training which, in their opinion, does not prepare them for the job market.

Lastly, most Jordanian youth and parents in the north and central areas of Jordan believe that Syrians are flooding the job market and driving wages down. In the meantime, Syrians are excluded from the formal job market and feel exploited as they are forced to work at below-market wages in the informal economy to earn an income. These perceptions of job market dynamics are sowing seeds of communal discord and generating tensions between the two communities.

Voice and Participation

Youth voiced awareness of the issues they would like to change or address in their communities such as corruption, community cleanliness, drugs, social norms, unemployment and poverty. Despite youth’s ability to recognize these issues, the majority of youth feel a sense of resignation towards their role in making change happen and in taking personal responsibility for addressing communal problems. They are pessimistic about the potential effect of taking initiative and feel that they are not listened to by adults. When spaces for engagement are available, they are generally adult-led or – managed which diminishes the youth’s involvement and responsibility. While youth are interested in changing the way things are in their community and society, they have very limited ideas about how to effect such change.

Jordanian and Syrian youth did not report any leadership activities. Syrian (and to a lesser extent Jordanian) youth have a lot of free time due to a dearth of extracurricular activities; when activities are available, costs are prohibitive for them. Programs in scouting were mentioned favorably by Jordanian males. Some youth acknowledge that there are student parliaments however they are adult-led and adult-controlled, and are perceived to be ineffective in facilitating youth leadership and civic engagement.

Both males and females frequently mentioned regularly attending classes at Qur’anic centers where they are taught to recite and memorize the Qur’an. Most parents encourage this participation. The

² Wasta is the practice of favoritism based on family and tribal relations and is the only way for many people to get a job in Jordan. Adapted from: Sa’ad Ali, Ani Raiden and Susan Kirk “Wasta in the Jordanian Culture: A study in the Banking Sector,” *Intl. J. of Innovations in Business*, Vol. 2 No. 6 (2013): 529-50.

centers are regarded as safe spaces for youth, particularly for females. As a way of filling their free time, youth also report online engagement through social media.

Beyond Qur'anic centers, most females participate in few other activities outside the home. Females report feeling infantilized by society. While they say they have some space for voicing opinion within the family, females feel it is limited to the proposition of solutions to “small problems.” Males tend to exclude them from decision-making in the household and make decisions on their behalf.

CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, the findings across all three areas — persistence in education, workforce transition, and voice and participation — fall within two major themes:

1. Pervasive lack of ideas, awareness and alternatives
2. Debilitating sense of disempowerment

While these themes clearly emerged across cohorts, youth are not a homogenous population. Their experiences are shaped by their socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, education and gender.

As previously noted, the environment in which youth grow up in Jordan is plagued by a multitude of challenges, including a discouraging education system, violence and discrimination, *wasta* and favoritism, entrenched conservative social and gender norms, a lack of alternative role models, an unfavorable job market, and few outlets for exercising meaningful participation in civic life. This hinders the healthy development trajectory for youth transitioning to adulthood, resulting in a stalled transition, or *waithood*,³ a situation that is particularly pronounced in Jordan and refers to the prolonged period of idleness and stagnation in which youth find themselves with little prospect for independence. Furthermore, the willingness of the family to financially and emotionally subsidize this stalled transition contributes to the length of *waithood* and youth's ability to develop the adaptive capacity to address challenges.

The nuances of the various contexts in which youth find themselves including school, family and community are stunting their cognitive, social and emotional growth and in turn their successful transition into adulthood. In school, the quality of education available and the perceived lack of competent and emotionally supportive teachers, coupled with regular physical and verbal abuse, affect the youth's ability to acquire knowledge and develop self-esteem and necessary critical and reflective thinking skills. Syrian youth face the same challenges in addition to discrimination and curricula-related issues that further taint their educational experience.

Young male and female cohorts have high career aspirations. The ambitions of older youth are tempered by economic realities and, for females, by an additional layer of restrictive social norms. Youth point to prevalent unemployment and low wages which call into doubt the benefits of staying in school and chips away at their perceived value of education. When youth drop out their options are limited by a lack of awareness of alternative educational opportunities including non-formal and informal education.

To secure gainful employment, and in the absence of adequate career counseling services, Jordanian youth place the burden of finding work on a network of connections that they or their families can access. Their own credentials and educational attainment are seen as tangential to this endeavor. Syrian youth have no means of finding employment in Jordan as they cling to the hope of eventually returning to Syria. The current dynamics of the job market as well as discrimination against Syrians is affecting social cohesion in a community unsensitized to the influx of another wave of refugees.

Youth and their parents view vocational training favorably but point to the dearth of available opportunities in their immediate communities. Economic realities are indirectly ameliorating the

³ Djavad Salehi-Isfahani & Navtej Dhillon, “Stalled Youth Transitions in the Middle East: A Framework for Policy Reform,” *The Middle East Youth Initiative Working Paper*, No. 8, Wolfensohn Centre for Development, October 2008.

image of vocational training and tempering expectations. Nevertheless, the academic stream remains youth's first choice in education. While cognizant of restrictive social norms, most females harbor the hope for future employment calling for vocational training opportunities that provide more marketable skills to enter the job market.

Jordanian and Syrian youth operate in a system where their voice is often proscribed, since traditional adult-child power dynamics are based on the perception of young people's inferiority and, conversely, adult territoriality or "the tendency of adults to maintain some areas of knowledge and activities as adults-only preserves."⁴ Young people are thus left with few choices. Many youth choose to leave the country to find success elsewhere. Those who cannot leave choose to embrace the traditional social and gender norms and values that the family embodies.

Syrian youth in particular have no opportunities to channel their voice in Jordan or to be civically active. Most Jordanian youth can identify social and economic issues they would like to change in their community but do not have the skills to develop or advocate for solutions. The lack of change agents in their surroundings feeds this disability.

The circumscribed ability to voice opinion coupled with a rationed access to civic experience contributes to youth feelings of uselessness and disenfranchisement. Against this background of power dynamics and limited individual agency, the main support network that remains for youth is the family. It is the safety net that provides protection and support and as a result, youth's allegiance stands firmly with it.

Despite the structural obstacles and ingrained perceptions of limited opportunity and powerlessness, however, youth are interested and motivated to effect change. The youth focus groups and literature review findings demonstrate that despite suffering and hardship, some youth remain resourceful and adaptive, and respond competently to the challenges.⁵ This assessment can attest, albeit in small numbers, to these resilient examples of young males and females who remain optimistic, believe in their potential, both individually and collectively, and show strength and willingness to act if provided with guidance.

Because the findings point to contributing factors that are deeply entrenched in cultural practices and norms, interventions directed only toward youth are unlikely to be successful. Instead, a holistic approach that engages parents, teachers, and community members in addition to youth will be required to shift this paradigm. A shift in perception and behavior will need to take place concurrently in youth's environment at school, home and in the community to provide them with better alternatives and ideas and a strong sense of agency.

⁴ Siobhan McEvoy-Levy, 'Youth' in Roger McGinty (ed.), "Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding," Taylor and Francis, 2013, p. 296.

⁵ Jo Boyden, Gillian Mann, "Children's Risk, Resilience, and Coping in Extreme Situations." In Michael Ungar (ed.), "Handbook for Working with Children and Youth: Pathways to Resilience across cultures and contexts." CA: Thousand Oaks, p. 6.