

Skills for Life: Improving Employment Outcomes for Youth

Conference Report

April 7-8, 2014 – Amman, Jordan

Nearly 200 representatives of companies, ministries, educational institutions and civil society organizations from countries across the MENA region attended the *Skills for Life* conference in Amman, Jordan on April 7 and 8, 2014. Convened by the International Youth Foundation (IYF) in partnership with USAID, the World Bank, and The MasterCard Foundation, the event called on participants to reflect on the positive impact of life skills on youth employability and how best to align public and private training institutions' offerings with the needs of the labor market.



Sessions were led by experienced global and regional organizations implementing life skills programs, including Youth for the Future (Y4F) and Egypt@Work (E@W). Y4F, a joint initiative of IYF, USAID, and the Government of Jordan, has certified more than 200 Jordanian professionals to deliver life skills training, reaching over 12,000 young Jordanians since 2009. E@W, a partnership between IYF and the MasterCard Foundation, is providing training to 10,000 vulnerable youth in rural and urban Egypt to prepare them for work and entrepreneurship.

A major highlight of the conference was the release of a new guide for life skills programming developed through the World Bank's Global Partnership for Youth Employment (GPYE) in partnership with the IYF. *Strengthening Life Skills for Youth: A Practical Guide to Quality Programming* provides practical guidance for designing quality life skills programs for young people based on a set of nine Life Skills Standards of Excellence. Technical sessions, where conference participants were invited to explore the standards and discuss their relevance to participants' work, yielded lively discussions and insightful reflection. The Guide was well-received, with participants making suggestions and expressing high satisfaction with the surrounding conversations.

The following section provides a summary of main discussion highlights from the main conference sessions that took place over the two day event.

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SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

Day 1. Call to Action: *Using life skills to connect the region's educational system to market needs*

The first day of the conference explored the current trends that are shaping the role of life skills in youth productivity and employability in the region, including the opportunities, gap areas and the impact of life skills on MENA's educational systems and youth. Panels of researchers, educational leaders, regional employers, and youth emphasized the value of life skills training and pointed out current challenges that they are working to address.

In the afternoon, smaller group discussions focused on the unique perspectives of educational providers and employers. The breakout groups reconvened at the end of the day to develop a Call to Action to mainstream life skills development and connect regional educational systems to market needs. Each session is described below accompanied by key recommendations from the panelists and audience.

Regional Trends & Challenges in Life Skills: A Situational Assessment

This session explored the current trends shaping the role of life skills in youth productivity and employability in the region: opportunities, gap areas and the impact of life skills on positive transitions to adulthood, as well as the current state of play for life skills in the region.

- Across the region, life skills programs need to be more responsive to needs of key stakeholders from all sectors – government, private sector and educational providers - if they are to be successful in their outcomes.
- Employers say that young leaders and creative thinkers are hard to find, and that good soft skills, which are critical for success, are often lacking among young people. Employers are open to providing training in necessary technical skills if young people come with core life skills.
- Educational providers, such as the University of Jordan, are beginning to embed life skills into their curricula. More need to do so and they should work collaboratively with employers to ensure that skills taught are aligned with what employers are looking for.
- Programs and research efforts are measuring skills of the youth population and the effectiveness of training interventions, and assessing skills needed in different sectors around the world, in order to create benchmarks; but there is still a lot to learn. Partnerships between government, educational providers, NGOs, and bilateral organizations are very important to generate and share knowledge and turn them into useful tools. It is critical for more studies to be done to measure the impact of life skills programs to demonstrate their effectiveness and for programs to have clear evaluation protocols to identify ways to improve their design.

Breakout Session A: The Role of Educational Providers

Distinguished experts representing some of the region's leading educational and vocational training providers engaged participants in an interactive discussion on what is currently being done to promote life skills in education programs. They also discussed how employers, representing the “other side” of the equation, can help push the education agenda in the right direction.

- To better prepare young people for the workplace, educational programs should ask students to study actual challenges facing industries in their countries; and should tie in life skills to help them solve these problems.
- When combined with strong career guidance services, life skills training is even more effective in orienting youth towards their futures. Current offering across the region are weak; however, through these programs educational providers will be able to open doors to the workplace and understand employer needs.

Breakout Session B: Understanding the Employer Perspective

Many companies express concern that they are not getting graduates with the skills they need. Taking the perspective of the employer, this session explored how education systems can best equip and prepare graduates for entry level jobs, and what role employers can play to support this process.

- Some high-activity sectors such as tourism offer diverse jobs and support a number of industries. Tourism and hospitality jobs require different skill sets, so exposing young people to these skills from an early age (even primary school) is a good way to prepare them for employment later on.
- The government has a role to play in supporting the private sector's efforts to build a stronger workforce: the government can set conditions to attract foreign investors or impose service taxes to help pay workers' wages.

Call to Action: Aligning Regional Education Systems with Employer Needs

In the day's final panel, highlights and recommendations from earlier sessions were synthesized to build the platform for a Call for Action. What systems-based approaches can the region's top educational providers and employers take together to better equip young Arab graduates for today's employment environment? How can life skills support the stronger entrepreneurial mindset Arab youth need to compete in today's market, where small and medium-sized businesses are the engine of economic growth and a increasing source of employment? Reflecting on these critical issues, as well as the regional landscape for life skills highlighted in the morning sessions, participants wrapped up the first day of the conference with an eye towards Day 2's in-depth technical sessions.

- Governments should improve incentives to encourage young people to enroll in vocational training and fill the jobs which are available in their country.
- The private sector should be included as a partner in the design and implementation of life skills programs in order to target the employability gaps in a specific market.

- All stakeholders should remember to share their knowledge and results so that others can learn from their valuable experience.
- More freedoms should be given to universities and universities' heads and professors
- The Government should take the responsibility of coming up with unified PTS program to be presented to the beneficiaries though, to be classified and customized based on the different needs of the beneficiaries.

Day 2. A Framework for Implementers: *Effective practices for quality life skills programs*

Best Practices in Life Skills

Taking a practical approach to exploring the main elements of a quality life skills program, IYF presented “Strengthening Life Skills for Youth: A Practical Guide to Quality Programming,” developed by IYF with World Bank support to provide practical guidance on successful life skills interventions with young people. Facilitators shared key elements from the Guide and engaged participants in a thoughtful discussion of “what works” when designing content, program structure, and training methodology for life skills training programs. Approaches for broader impact and sustainability, including avenues for certification and accreditation and possible mechanisms to encourage standardization of life skills approaches across the region, were discussed in more depth to round out the morning’s sessions.

Topic 1: Curriculum design and adaptation

- Typically, life skills training programs are implemented in an ad hoc manner – not necessarily connected to other services or youth service providers, and usually as standalone programs outside of existing systems or structures.
- In order to meet the standards of excellence recommended in “Strengthening Life Skills for Youth,” programs need to focus on stakeholder engagement: government support, public-private partnerships, focus groups with youth, interviews with employers, and community support.
- Stakeholders have discussed the potential benefits of creating a regional framework to help standardize life skills programs and approaches. To make such a framework feasible, preliminary steps would include awareness raising among stakeholders, linking program goals with the real needs of beneficiaries, accrediting and certifying life skills programs and trainers, and nationalizing and unifying life skills programs, while leaving room for flexibility if needed.

Topic 2: Creating an environment conducive to life skills learning

- Effective life skills training requires an interactive and hands-on pedagogy which, by definition, requires participants to actively practice their new skills inside and outside the classroom. When it comes to life skills training, merely sharing information is not sufficient for youth to discuss, question, and internalize the competencies taught in order to use them in their own lives.

- Youth need time to absorb and apply each life skill, so trainings should be frequent enough for lessons to build on one another and allow a strong group dynamic to develop between youth and trainers, yet also spaced out enough so that there is time for youth to assimilate and apply the information learned. Decisions related to training schedule should not be based on existing human and financial resources, but rather on the needs of youth and effectiveness of the program.
- It is important to make sure that participants feel safe expressing themselves and trainers are able to effectively lead all interactive activities. An environment that is positive and conducive to learning includes an optimal size cohort of youth (around 15-25), a comfortable, accessible and safe classroom setting and relevant training materials ready and available for students and trainers.

Topic 3: Monitoring and evaluating life skills programs

- Participants discussed the pros and cons of various methods of evaluation such as observing changes in behavior, having trainers and youth conduct post-intervention evaluations, and conducting pre-and post-intervention tests (e.g., knowledge tests).
- Session leaders suggested standardizing the evaluations of life skills programs in the region, which was greeted with general support as well as concerns about how to collect and compile data for such an effort.
- The group thought about what indicators donors and employers might be interested in measuring to evaluate life skills programs. One workshop participant recommended observing changes in workplace habits, such as teambuilding, and to try to align this with performance evaluations.

Public Sector Models and Policy Reform: Building Quality Life Skills Programs in the Public Sector

This session looked at effective models for institutionalizing life skills in public sector systems, both at the national and municipality level, including the role of policy reform to ensure systems-based approaches and long-term sustainability. Together, the session participants developed recommendations and action steps that can be taken to government policy makers to advocate for reform.

- Vocational education should be presented as a valuable choice, not just as a minor or a backup plan for students who do not complete their academic education.
- National employability funds should be committed to help youth find jobs and follow up on their progress in the first 6 months to support better job retention rates.

Responding to Employer Needs: Sector-Specific Approaches to Life Skills

Educators and employers agree that there is a growing gap between the skills that companies expect from their entry-level employees and the skills that these young people possess. This session examined the effectiveness of sector-specific life skills models and how educators, government and businesses can work together to define the soft skills requirements for entry-level jobs in specific sectors to enhance employment outcomes for youth. Speakers from the region's leading vocational training institutes shared their experience

and specific design approaches, as well as obstacles to overcome in order to maximize training outcomes for employment.

- In Morocco, a new national education strategy, which aims to build a generation of professionals, includes a specific focus on life skills. The Ministry of Tourism has launched a new initiative to upgrade its curricula and training programs, keep its programs up to date through international partnerships, and ensure quality through a strong trainer development program.
- In Jordan, there was no comprehensive strategy for building life skills, so to establish quality assurance and fulfill the labor market's needs, "sector teams" were created in six sectors with a mandate to develop policies and strategies to overcome labor market challenges and push for their adoption. Each sector team is composed of employers, policy makers, business owners, Chamber of Commerce representatives, industries, labor associations, training providers, etc. to build a platform for dialogue and address skills gaps.
- Sector-specific life skills training is important to ensure that each industry's labor force is prepared for the demands of the job. Employers need to be involved in the design of these training programs and quality assurance and accreditation should be considered to guarantee that the programs are meeting their objectives to prepare young people for their future careers.

Life Skills and Conflict Situations: Helping Jordan's Host Communities Respond to the Needs of Vulnerable Youth through Life Skills

This session laid out the challenges and opportunities that donors and civil society face in their work with Syrian refugees in Jordanian communities, particularly in the current working environment with limited work permits available for Syrian youth. They discussed the role of life skills in empowering youth at risk as positive change agents, drawing from best practices elsewhere in the region.

- Lack of comprehensive and current data on refugees and their movement throughout Jordan is a major challenge affecting donors' efforts to design and implement programs that respond to this vulnerable population's needs.
- Given high unemployment among Jordanian youth, focusing international support on the refugee population and providing them with skills that might make them more competitive compared to their Jordanian counterparts poses a real challenge that needs to be considered in the development phase of any program.

The conference served as both a platform for learning and an urgent call to action for key regional stakeholders to work together to better equip Arab youth for today's employment environment. Throughout the panel discussions and technical sessions, the presenters and participants at the *Skills for Life* conference raised important questions and brought suggestions from their own experience. Strong attendance from all sectors across the region and the high quality of these conversations emphasized the saliency of the issue: improving employability for MENA's young people through strong cooperation and coordination in life skills

programming. Time and again, participants affirmed the value of including private sector input in the design of soft skills training programs, as well as the importance of raising awareness in society at large of the key role of life skills in workplace success.

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Abu Issa Consulting	EU Delegation
AECOM	Friedrich Naumann Foundation
Akhtaboot	German Jordan University
Al Kurdi Group	GIZ
Al Quds College	Greater Amman Municipality
Al Sanam Factory	Hashemite University
AlAman Fund	Higher Council for Youth
Al-Asalah Electromechanics (LG Electronics)	ILE/MEPI Network
Al-Balqa' Applied University	INJAZ
AlTazi Restaurant	International Finance Corporation
Americana	International Labor Organization
AMIDEAST/Jordan	International Youth Foundation
Amman Chamber of Commerce	Iskan Talal
ANETI	Islamic Development Bank
ANGEM	JCEF
Aqaba Community and Economic Development (ACED) Program	JEDCO
Arab Student Aid International - Jordan	Jordan Chamber of Industry
Arab Urban Development Institute	Jordan Education Initiative
Arabian Business Consultants for Development	Jordan Hospitality Association
ASK for Human Capacity Building	Jordan River Foundation
Automotive Technology Academy	Jordan Tractor
Chamber of Industry	Khawla Bint Al-Azwar
City and Guilds	Khreibet Al Souq
Coca Cola	King Abdullah II Fund for Development
Community Development and Continuing Education Institute West Bank	King Khalid Foundation
ConsultUS	Knowledge Horizon
ConsultUS	Laureate Education, Inc.
Dale Carnegie Training	LoYAC
Dar Abu Abdallah	Luminus
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ElEzz Heavy Equipment	Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, Jordan
E-TVET Council	Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, Morocco
E-TVET Fund	Ministry of Labour , Jordan



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Near East Foundation	The Group
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