



Middle East Youth Initiative

Youth in Focus: Findings from the 2010 Egypt Human Development Report

Editor's Note: On June 27, 2010, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) released the 2010 Egypt Human Development Report (EHDR) entitled "[Youth in Egypt: Building our Future.](#)" On the occasion of the release of the EHDR, Mary Kraetsch spoke with Heba Handoussa, lead author of the EHDR, about the report's goals and main findings.

Middle East Youth Initiative (MEYI): What are the main objectives of the 2009/2010 Egypt Human Development Report (EHDR)? Is there a particular reason that you, as lead author, and the UNDP decided to examine youth development issues in Egypt at this time?

Heba Handoussa: In consultation with others, I had proposed the theme of youth because I am keenly aware of the critical situation whereby youth unemployment is creating social problems; it is not only employment that matters, but the quality of jobs, which has also been declining. The most affected group in this regard is young women. According to Ragui Assaad, one of the key contributing authors of the EHDR [and nonresident senior fellow at Brookings], the level of unemployment for young men and young women has declined somewhat. However, the participation rate of young women in the labor market has declined significantly, and for the first time in a decade has gone below 20 percent. Moreover, unemployment levels have increased for university graduates, both men and women, which is a recent phenomenon. This can be partly explained by the youth bulge and partly by the mismatch between the acquisition of skills and the demands of the labor market. In the report, we concluded that Egypt's youth can be a critical force for development if the right conditions are put in place for an inclusive society where youth are given the opportunity to find decent work and engage productively in their communities.

MEYI: What are the central themes covered in the report?

Handoussa: There are four central themes in the report. The first is the quality of public services, which includes education, health, housing, and information and communications technology (ICT). The second is the economic environment, including employment and the labor market, entrepreneurship, and the vocational training system. The third is the social-cultural environment, including values, poverty, and other forms of exclusion such as gender. The final is the political-institutional environment, including political participation, volunteerism, and governance.

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What is new and innovative in this report is that, for the first time in Egypt, we have prepared a Well-Being Index for youth, which has ten dimensions and 54 indicators. The goal of the Youth Well-Being Index is to raise awareness and concentrate attention on the youth segment, which has not been given the attention it deserves. The index covers the domains of education, employment, poverty, health, environment, security, leisure time, girls and women, participation in decision making, and ICT and builds off of efforts by the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood to create a Child Well-Being Index for children under the age of 18. With the assistance and analysis of various EHDR authors, youth-related data and indicators from the Survey of Young People in Egypt ([SYPE](#)), the Household Income and Expenditure Consumption Survey, and the Demographic and Health Survey were used to construct an Egypt-specific and age-specific Youth Well-Being Index. The index covers the 18-29 age group, which is the EHDR's definition of youth, and the data in the index is disaggregated by gender. We hope that the Index will be adopted by Egypt's Youth Council with an observatory that will monitor its progress on the index components on an annual basis. We also hope that more data will become available in the future so that we can incorporate data on missing indicators, such as those within the domain of human security.

MEYI: The first section seems to be a particularly unique contribution: looking at the quality of public service provision and how that affects youth, specifically. Can you elaborate a bit more on some of the most important conclusions you reached in looking at some of these sectors, such as education, for example?

Handoussa: With regards to education, the report demonstrates the absence of close linkages between vocational training providers and employers and identifies the need for a comprehensive review of curriculum content, equipment, and training of trainers. Accreditation of training centers and international branding of trainees would promote productivity, employability at home and abroad, and better prospects for those who seek further education. The education system must strive to achieve a better match between the outputs of educational institutions at all levels and the demands of the labor market. This will involve a review of the balance of enrollment across subjects, skills and disciplines, and a review of curricula to instill problem-solving skills, entrepreneurial and management capacity, and the value of self-employment. As to higher education, growing unemployment among university graduates is highly correlated with an imbalance in enrollment across different disciplines and a lack of adaptation of curricula to labor market needs.

MEYI: How were youth involved in the thinking, conceptualizing, and writing of the report?

Handoussa: The contribution of youth was solicited from the start and the report has benefited from contributions of eight young authors. They were involved in the conceptualization and the writing of the final chapter of the report, entitled "A Vision for Youth 2020," in which the young authors review all of the topics of the report and provide their ideas and



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recommendations for solutions to the challenges that youth face. The eight young authors also followed up on the results of the Survey of Young People in Egypt ([SYPE](#)) in 2009-2010 with focus group discussions with young people, especially in poor rural areas. The findings from the focus group discussions added a qualitative dimension to the survey results and contributed to the analysis of various forms of youth deprivation and the absence of youth participation in community life and politics.

MEYI: What are the main findings of the EHDR? What was the most surprising finding of the report?

Handoussa: The most striking finding of this report is the extent to which youth are excluded from political and civic participation, especially since our definition of youth for this report is 18-29, an age at which youth are legally empowered to vote and make important decisions. Equally surprising were the results of the World Values Survey, which was analyzed by the authors of the chapter on youth values in Egypt. The analysis was able to distinguish the 18-29 age group from the older generation, and it showed how conservative Egypt's youth are when compared to youth in a select set of countries with similar economic and social conditions, especially with regards to their views and opinions about parental authority, religion, and the segregation of gender roles. Further, the authors found that remnants of the socialist tradition and the old social contract still linger, with strong attitudes about the responsibility of the state for job creation and social protection.

MEYI: As we know, the problems that affect youth vary depending on gender, socioeconomic status, and geography. How does the report attempt to address youth development challenges in a comprehensive way while also analyzing the different circumstances of youth across these categories?

Handoussa: To begin with, the report has benefited from five very recent and very detailed surveys that focus on identifying differences across social categories and geographic regions, as well as gender-based sources of exclusion. For each of the many topics addressed throughout the report, some issues are challenging for all youth, such as employment, whereas others are specific to categories of youth, such as poverty and other types of deprivation. The most important deprivations that were identified relate to ownership of assets – such as mobile phones, computers and a basic education – while others refer to living conditions such as crowdedness, malnutrition, and water and sanitation.

MEYI: As you know, the Middle East Youth Initiative has recently embarked on a new research agenda focusing on social entrepreneurship. How does the report address issues of youth entrepreneurship, youth and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and youth and microfinance? What is the best way to encourage entrepreneurship among youth, given the potentially high risks of failure for new businesses?



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Handoussa: The EHDR 2010 has an entire chapter on youth entrepreneurship, which looks at the issues of an enabling business environment as well as initiatives to support young entrepreneurs, such as Business Development Services and microfinance. The chapter also reports on the latest Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) where Egypt was included for the first time, which shows that Egypt has one of the highest rates of young entrepreneurs among a group of other developed and developing countries, and this is considered very promising. What is needed is far more support for the “higher tech” end of new business development, especially support for high-tech sectors and industries like ICT from incubators and special credit lines for higher risks. Support for research and development (R&D) and technology transfer as well as high-tech services for new businesses are also needed. Egypt’s Social Fund for Development (SFD) is making progress on the franchising front, in addition to expanding its network of NGOs that deliver micro-credit.

It is also clear from our research that one obstacle to entrepreneurship in Egypt is the absence of land, and the recommendation is that the state can advance youth with solid business plans and/or records of service by providing land for their projects. This is especially true in Upper Egypt, where new roads and highways that are being built between the governorates of the South and the Red Sea, as well as roads linking the governorates, provide potential opportunities for businesses to access underutilized land for development.

MEYI: What did you find in terms of creative interventions – whether from government, the private sector, or civil society organizations – that address youth challenges and create innovative solutions? Did you identify any interesting case studies or best practices from other regions (Latin America, Asia, Africa, Europe) that could potentially be adopted to fit the Egyptian context?

Handoussa: Background research for the report provided by Halla Shafey identified some examples of how various institutions, both governmental and non-governmental, have tackled the issue of youth empowerment. These lessons come from global experience in the areas of promoting youth theater, promoting youth inventions and innovation, promoting youth entrepreneurship, and promoting access to and use of information and communication technology (ICT). These were selected based on a perceived deficit in these areas in Egypt and the importance each one represents in terms of promoting a certain dimension of youth culture.

There have been a number of youth theater programs in countries like Ghana, Bosnia Herzegovina, the United States, and the United Kingdom that have been successful in encouraging youth participation in the theater and performing arts. Youth theater programs have the potential for engaging youth in various forms of group artistic expression, which can contribute to the education of feelings, emotional and social development, and creative self-expression and self-awareness. Through performing arts, young people learn to express their



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feelings, practice teamwork, presentation, language and communication skills, experience conflict resolution, and apply leadership skills, as well as proficiency in group facilitation and coordination.

There have also been a number of programs that nurture innovation and invention among young people and encourage them to spot opportunities and apply their talents. Programs like the Malaysian Invention and Design Society (MINDS) can support young inventors, innovators, and scientists by providing a platform for them to generate, exhibit, and develop their ideas and projects. In addition, many universities around the world have traditionally played a strong role in supporting young inventors. For example, the Lemelson-MIT Program in the United States provides awards and grants to outstanding young inventors in order to encourage young people to develop sustainable new solutions to real-world problems.

A variety of training, finance, and incubation programs have been successful in supporting young entrepreneurs in starting and managing their own enterprises. For example, the Brazilian Software Export Program (SOFTTEX) was created to provide training forums and workshops for young software engineers that focus on business planning, software technology, business managements, and sales and marketing. Another example is the Chilean Seed Capital Program which finances the first stages in the development of new and innovative ventures by young entrepreneurs by providing matching grants of up to \$86,500. The grants help to finance a variety of activities, including business plan creation, enterprise registration, market studies, technical assistance, product development and marketing. Other organizations like Youth Business International (YBI) provide youth with access to credit, volunteer business mentors, and business start-up support.

MEYI: Recent research for the Middle East Youth Initiative (Assaad, Binzel and Gadallah, forthcoming) has demonstrated that overall youth unemployment rates have decreased in Egypt since 1998, however the quality of jobs has also fallen, as more young people have ended up in the informal sector. Do you think the attention to youth unemployment in Egypt and the Arab world serves to detract attention from young people who are either underemployed, suffering from low quality work, or have exited the labor market entirely (are inactive)?

Handoussa: What is true is that the informal sector in Egypt has consistently made up the largest part of jobs created over the past two decades. It is therefore vital to introduce policies that support formalization and at the same time enforce minimum wages in the private sector. One strong recommendation which appeared in the EHDR 2005 entitled “Choosing our Future: Towards a New Social Contract” and may yet be adopted is a wage subsidy in the form of a contribution to social security liabilities of the employer. This would have several positive results: The first is that it would encourage young people to work in micro and small enterprises given that they will have the same social security coverage as young people working in government and formal enterprises; the second benefit is that it would encourage employers to



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hire young people by reducing their cost of hiring; and the third is that in the long-run, the process of formalization would be encouraged, which will create a self-sustaining system of financing through taxation of micro enterprises. This potential initiative would apply to youth up to age 30, because unemployment levels for the 30+ age group have declined to a single digit level.

The question of unemployment is very serious, and yet discouraged unemployment, which is not measured, is a lot more serious, especially for girls. Entire segments of Egypt's young, educated females have either exited or never entered the labor market, in part because of very poor working conditions, including low pay, long hours, and the absence of social security. Again, self-employment and entrepreneurship seem to be the answer, especially with incentives such as second-chance education and training.

MEYI: What are the next steps for the UNDP and the report's authors in following up on this report and promoting youth-centered policies/programs?

Handoussa: It is most fortunate that by sheer coincidence, the UN Secretary General announced quite recently that 2010 is the International Year of Youth, commencing in August. As such, the UNDP supported a huge youth consultation at Cairo University in March 2010, whereby the key results of the forthcoming EHDR were communicated to over 1,500 young people from all over Egypt. A youth website (www.shabab.net.eg) was also launched where issues raised in the report appear. The website is administered by the Social Contract Center, which is itself an outcome of the 2005 Egypt Human Development Report. Part of the work program of the Social Contract Center consists of organizing programs for youth engagement in civil society and collective action. The purpose of the website is to promote the voice of youth all over Egypt.

At the March meeting, youth were asked to consider solutions with regards to their participation as adult citizens, both in terms of volunteering for national projects such as literacy training, other volunteering projects, and participation in local community decision making. Many NGOs were represented who are either youth-led or that cater to youth. This has thus initiated a process that will be built on and expand over the year. Questions in four key areas were discussed: The first relates to poverty and asked the question 'how can the more advantaged youth help poorer youth groups and what are the priority programs?'; the second question was 'how can we make self-employment a viable option for youth, what occupations/businesses are in demand, and what incentives can the state offer?'; the third asked 'what are specific ways to reduce the costs of marriage and increase access to affordable housing?' and the fourth was 'what actions at the family and school level can improve attitudes towards women and what specific actions are needed at the institutional and legislative levels?' The consultation was the start of a process of getting Egypt's young people to think about and begin organizing events in support of the Year of Youth.