



Middle East Youth Initiative

Interview with Radwan Wetti
Business Experience Program Manager, SHABAB Project
Syria Trust for Development
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The Middle East Youth Initiative (MEYI): How was the SHABAB Project started and what were the main challenges that the Syria Trust was hoping to address in establishing the project?

Radwan Wetti: The SHABAB Project was started about three years ago through one of its programs, it is called the “Business Awareness” program to address the need for youth to be aware of business trends and skills and the need to establish a generation able to meet the increasing demands in the labor market. The project is based on partnerships with the business sector. It was challenging to get them on board to support the program first, and then the whole project and all its programs, not only financially, but through their time, experience, and knowledge. But, by now, we can say that we accomplished this, as the private sector is considered one of our main partners. The challenges that the project was supposed to meet was to equip Syrian youth with new skills and abilities to emerge in the Syrian market as it is changing.

MEYI: What types of training programs do you have?

Wetti: We have the “Business Awareness” program, which is a two-day program where we take volunteers from the business sector, either business owners or executives to public schools where they hold two-day workshops with the students. They tell them about the different trends in business and different skills such as marketing, sales, P.R. [public relations], and other workshops on key skills such as communication skills, presentation skills, etc.

Another program is the “Business Experience” program, which is a one week program. We take students during the summer and midterm vacation to private sector companies from different industries, where they can see business with their own eyes and they can help employees with their daily work. By the end of the week they can present their critique and their suggestions to the company.

The other program is the “Know About Business” program, which was developed in partnership and in cooperation with the ILO [International Labour Organization]. Now, we are celebrating the inclusion of the program in the national curricula for vocational schools, intermediate institutes, and public universities.

Other than that we have actual products: documentaries and educational videos that we broadcast on TV. They are about writing a CV and how to conduct a job interview.

MEYI: What, in your opinion, has been the most successful or the most exciting program you have been a part of, either at the SHABAB Project or in your work with other associations in Syria and with youth in Syria?



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Wetti: Personally, I believe in the SHABAB Project, therefore I consider it the most successful project targeting youth. Now, talking about the SHABAB Project's programs, it is hard to identify one successful program as most of them have proved successful... I would have to say the "Know About Business" program, since it was included in national curricula ...The program equips youth with the essential skills and tools to start their *own* businesses for the whole year. It consists of one hundred training hours demonstrated in a new way, not in the classical way that they teach in public schools.

MEYI: What is a typical SHABAB Project participant like? Where do they come from? Are they from the cities or do you have some rural participants, are they university educated? What is their level of education?

Wetti: Usually, in the SHABAB programs and initiatives we target participants in schools, universities, and institutes, and that applies for almost all SHABAB Project programs except for the new Business Clinic that we will launch on the 9th of November, less than two weeks from now. This clinic will receive youth regardless of their background as long as they need counseling on their careers, or they need to write their CV, or they need to be prepared for an interview. We can prep them for it, maybe conduct a dummy interview with them so they can go to the interview completely aware of what they are going to face and what they are going to be asked. In most SHABAB Project programs, the participants are between the ages of 15 and 29, but they each fall under different programs.

MEYI: What types of jobs are participants looking for? Do you find more of your program participants are entering the private sector because you have these strong partnerships with the private sector, or are a majority of them still looking for public sector jobs?

Wetti: Well, it is hard to tell now because it has been only three years, and many of our beneficiaries have not entered the labor market yet. But, from surveys as we conduct on each beneficiary that we deal with, most of them change their perspective on the private sector, and this is one of our objectives at the SHABAB Project. In theory, they say that they want to go back to private sector jobs or even establish their own businesses. A few of them still believe in public sector jobs, as they still have the image of security and sustainability.

MEYI: You said the SHABAB Project was founded three years ago, correct?

Wetti: Almost three years, right.

MEYI: About how many participants have you trained over this time period?

Wetti: Up to today we have trained 17,000 direct beneficiaries through the seven programs, and we have reached over 1 million through our educational CD documentaries. We have successful stories to talk about that we know of, and of course there are many that were inspired through other beneficiaries or through viewing the educational CD documentaries.

MEYI: So that includes the program that has become a part of the national curriculum?



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Wetti: Well, the statistics on that program will appear tomorrow actually because today we were conducting our survey. We expect that our programs have now reached over 40,000 direct beneficiaries: meaning about 20,000 to 25,000 of them are from the “Know About Business” program, which is in the national curricula, and the others are through our other programs.

MEYI: As you know, our research at the Middle East Youth Initiative is focused on how outcomes for young people are interconnected throughout different markets. So from school to work, and again in accessing housing, credit, being able to marry and form a family, we basically argue that a young person is most likely to be successful when all of these markets are aligned in their favor. Obviously you are doing very important work in training young people, in giving them the skills they need to have productive careers, and in building their soft knowledge skills, but how do you see this work fitting into the bigger picture, do you see any other changes or developments taking place in Syria that will help maximize the effects of your programs? Are there any other institutional, social, or economic changes that can take place that can really help young people make this full transition successfully?

Wetti: The environment in Syria is changing regardless of whether the pace is fast enough or not. With the new educational opportunities and new job opportunities, especially in the private sector of course, some new private programs and the new NGO’s that are working in favor of youth support. All these changes are in favor of youth inclusion, and successful, smooth transitions from childhood to adulthood, from school to work. Nevertheless, certain changes will strengthen our impact, maybe from changes in national curricula, believing more in youth in terms of credit, maybe facing the housing problem that faces the youth, which is one of the most important concerns for a young person in Syria.

MEYI: How would you define entrepreneurship, and why is it important to foster among young people?

Wetti: Entrepreneurship in my point of view is finding a need in the market and discovering new ways of combining resources in a manner that can bring the entrepreneur income. I see it this way, it is not about repeating what your father did or copying what other people do: unfortunately some do that. For me, I think it is very important to encourage entrepreneurship in Syria since it is very rich with [inaudible] among its creative and enthusiastic youth. It would be such a waste of time and resources not to make youth of such potential – that is, of course, if the Syrian youth are willing – to enter the world’s markets and face the new challenges.

MEYI: How would you define corporate social responsibility, and how can its tools be applied to improve outcomes for young people as well.

Wetti: For a Syrian company, corporate social responsibility would be aligning the company’s activities with the social, economic, and environmental expectations of the stakeholders, of course in each case they are the majority (inaudible) of youth. In my experience in the youth support sector, corporate and private sector companies always understood their role as in the form of financial sponsorship or support for the different youth-oriented activities. Only lately



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the private sector realized that financial aid or support is not the only way. Other ways would be through providing volunteer mentoring for young entrepreneurs or opening the doors for interns and young visitors, as they do in our program, the “Business Experience” program, to understand the different industries better so they can make an informed decision when it comes to choosing their future careers, for example.

MEYI: And are you having success in pushing forward this understanding of CSR, not just with the private sector partners you are working with, but do you think throughout Syria you are making progress in this area?

Wetti: I believe so. For example – the closest example to me that I am working with – more companies now are targeting their programs to host students. In the beginning, the program was trying to *convince* companies to host students or open their doors. Now, I receive almost daily offers [from the business sector] to have students in their companies or sometimes they come up with new suggestions that we did not even think of as they strive to support youth. So the concept is already in place, and youth are benefiting from a big share of CSR in Syria.

MEYI: To follow up on this notion of “good,” stable jobs in the public sector versus “bad,” unstable jobs in the private sector: does obtaining a secure, long-term public sector job still serve to define a young Syrian’s social standing or their place in society?

Wetti: A high percentage of Syrian youth believe that the public sector is the employer of choice for job security and sustainability. Nevertheless, some of the young men and women in Syria are starting to see the glamour of the private sector, and the various benefits...whether it be financial to start with, maybe other skills they can gain, or the image they can get working for a corporation. But still, some of them are public sector oriented. We are making some progress, but it is a cultural issue, especially [since] the private sector did not take shape until a decade ago. Before that, it was only small companies and offices working. But now they are understanding more and finding it a bit more appealing than the public sector.

MEYI: I understand that in Syria, as elsewhere in the region, there is a real difference between the formal private sector and informal jobs. Do you find that the private sector is becoming more formalized within Syria’s institutional environment?

Wetti: Yes, I believe it is, because new laws are in place for labor, some taxing issues were solved in the public sector. Institutions are understanding the importance of the private sector more and more, and understanding the need to have new laws in favor of the private sector because it’s leading Syria into the next century and shaping the face of Syria and the economy of Syria. I believe many companies are trying to take the formal shape, and not to be in the “shadow” economy.

MEYI: Could you talk about how the transition to adulthood and to employment differs between young women and young men. Maybe you can draw from some experiences with young women beneficiaries of the SHABAB Project?



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Wetti: In the SHABAB Project, we equally deal with both men and women, therefore I can say that I understand a little bit about females through schools or the “Business Experience” program, and visitors who call us or visit our office asking for support and knowledge. I believe in the last decade, the differences between young men and women were a bit bigger, now the gap is getting smaller, especially when we talk about urban Syria rather than rural Syria. In general, in the past it was expected only for men to pursue a university degree or join the workforce. A woman’s role revolved only around the house and the household or, in the best case, obtaining a job in the public sector. Today it is expected equally from both men and women to pursue higher education degrees and a career, and even expected to share with their spouses in the household, spending on the house, or supporting the elders. As you can see there is an increasing number of business women in Syria, with many NGOs actively supporting business women, in particular.

MEYI: So, in particular, the NGOs are absorbing a lot of young women into the workforce?

Wetti: Yes, we can say that. Of course the law treats men and women equally when it comes to business and every other aspect, maybe unlike some other countries. But, there already NGOs that support women in business through training, networking activities, and other forms of support.

MEYI: I understand the First Lady has taken some leadership on this issue as well.

Wetti: Yes, the First Lady supported, and continues to support, NGOs active in the field of women and through the Syria Trust for Development, which the SHABAB Project is a part of. There is a project called FIRDOS, the Fund for Integrated Rural Development of Syria. We have programs tailored for rural woman, like village business incubators to help village women to start their small businesses from their homes, from their village, rather than the role in agriculture that they always used to take.

MEYI: Do you have any impressions that you can share on the global economic crisis, and how this is impacting young people in Syria. What are they saying, how are they responding, are they responding, and what are the general views “on the street,” so to speak?

Wetti: Unfortunately, many of the Syrian youth did not understand the crisis very well, but those who did, some of them are concerned, they are afraid of a global depression, maybe. But their fear is limited since our economy did not “shake” like most of the other economies due to some decisions that were taken two years ago from the crisis that played a major role to make the effects(?) smaller on the Syrian economy. But, the problem is that the media did not explain exactly what the crisis is all about and the impact of the crisis on different economies: either in the Middle East, the world, or in general.

I don’t believe that they are panicking, but they are concerned.