

100 Million Young People: A Wise Investment

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Abstract:

Forty percent of Middle East and North Africa countries' populations are below the age of 15. These young people could be the region's fuel for strong economies and a vibrant future. Yet, educational systems are unable to make the region's youth more employable. Governments, development practitioners, and businesses should invest in young people's skills and experience to help prepare them for the job market and to contribute positively to their communities.

This paper discusses several innovative pilot approaches used by the United States Agency for International Development to develop the skills of youth in the Middle East and North Africa, especially those from marginalized areas. It uses original youth polling and focus group data as well as excerpts from an employer survey to provide some context for these programming approaches.

The body of the paper focuses on the approaches themselves, including building practical skills for the workplace and life, offering opportunities for service learning and entrepreneurship, and highlighting positive role models and mentors. This section is designed to encourage discussion among municipal officials, development practitioners, and other donors.

The authors also used qualitative interview data to do an interim assessment of these programs' impact to date, highlighting both areas for improvement and areas of success. According to participants, some of the most valued aspects of the programs are self-discovery techniques, communications and organizational skills, networking, and sources of motivation.

In conclusion, the authors highlight lessons learned and suggest several areas of consideration when designing programs to address the needs of the region's vast youth population.

Introduction:

Since 1970, the population of the region has jumped from 127 million to over 300 million. Forty percent are below the age of 15.¹ These young people could be the region's fuel for strong economies and a vibrant future. Yet the demographic bulge also strains resources, taxing education, health, and other systems.

Young people are entrants into a job market bridled by persistent unemployment and stagnation. While economic growth overall and direct foreign investment in the region have been trending upward, that has not been matched by job creation, leaving millions of young people unemployed. The World Bank estimates that the Middle East and North Africa region needs to develop over 100 million jobs before 2020.

Struggling educational systems have left many of the unemployed unemployable. Above all else, employers in the region cite the absence of 'soft skills,' such as initiative, communications, and work ethics in the labor pool.

The tremendous resources young people could bring to the economy and the region must not go to waste. Governments, development practitioners, and businesses should invest in young people's skills and experience to help prepare them for the job market and to contribute positively to their communities.

This paper discusses several pilot approaches used by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to develop the skills of youth in the Middle East and North Africa, especially those from marginalized areas. It uses original youth polling and focus group data as well as excerpts from an employer survey to provide some context for these programming approaches. The body of the paper focuses on the elements of the programs that are most likely to be of interest to municipal officials, development practitioners, and other donors. It also provides a summary of the impact of these programs to date based on a random survey of the participants. In conclusion, the authors suggest several areas of consideration when designing programs to address the needs of the region's vast youth population.

Background

Low Quality Education Exacerbates Unemployment

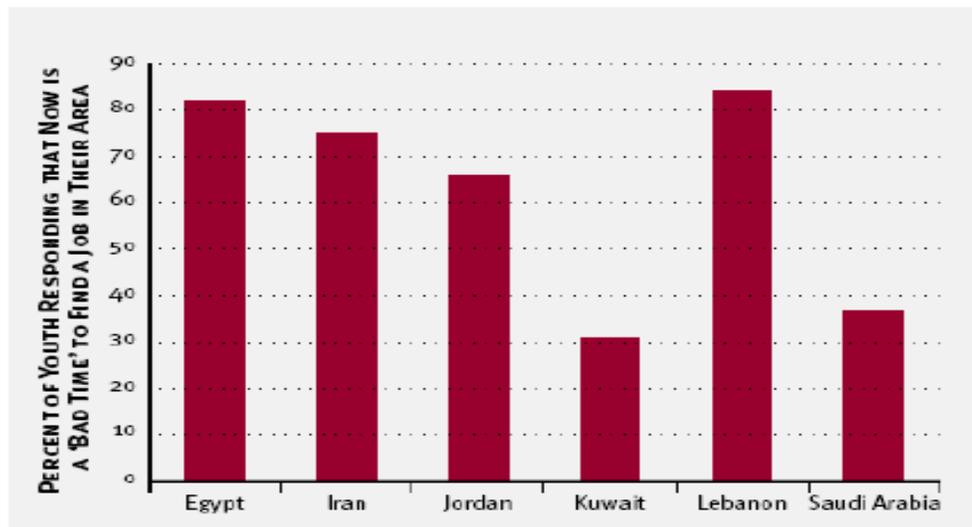
A high quality education that gives students practical and marketable skills is a critical element in preparing young people to succeed in the workplace and in life. A quality education begins with knowledgeable, effective, and motivated teachers. It uses a curriculum with specific knowledge and skills pertinent to the environment as well as the more general knowledge and skills that students will need to deal with new challenges created by economic and social change.² This is the type of education most countries seek to provide, and few regions invest more in the education of their young than the Middle East.

In fact, over the past two decades, the region has significantly expanded access to education and realized high universal enrollment rates.³ This generation of young people is better educated than their parents, and the gap between the sexes in terms of enrollment rates is narrowing. However, in most countries in the region, although access has increased, the quality of education remains low. Improved education levels have not led to greater economic opportunities. Instruction techniques at all levels of the education system remain dependent on outdated methodologies that do not give enough attention to cultivating critical and independent thinking and problem solving skills.⁴ Graduates of schools and universities alike leave unprepared for the increasingly competitive job market.

Competitive economies require a labor force that can learn advanced and changing concepts of science and technology, law and governance, and business. To be competitive, workers must be able to learn on a continuous basis. Young people ought to be acquiring these skills in secondary schools, youth and workforce development programs, community colleges, and universities. Without sound conceptual and technical skills, youth in developing countries will not be as productive and as innovative as they could be.⁵

Lack of opportunities leads to disillusionment and marginalization of large segments of society who could otherwise be major drivers of growth and progress. In a 2006/2007 Gallup Poll "Middle East Youth: Jobs, Life & Future Outlook," young people are torn between optimism and anxiety. Most believe they will be better off in five years, although there are great divisions between countries. However, the majority also perceive few job opportunities for them in the city or area in which they live.⁶

Percent of Youth Who Believe Now is a Bad Time to Find a Job in Their Area



Data from Gallup World Poll 2006/2007. Source: Ahmed Younis, "Arab Youth Between Hope and Disillusionment: Toward a New U.S. Strategy in the Middle East," (presented at the Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, November 8, 2008).

Employers Seek Practical and Soft Skills

Youth unemployment in the Middle East is 25 percent, compared to the world average of 14 percent. Statistics show that the most affected are first-time job seekers, mostly between 15 and 24 years of age, who make up more than 50 percent of the unemployed in the region.⁷

In a 2005 survey of employers conducted by USAID and the International Youth Foundation, representatives of companies in Morocco answered questions about their expectations from youth regarding education and employment.⁸ Many listed the weak performance of state-run education and training as the main issue affecting young people's skills and employability. These companies require competent youth who meet the demands of international quality standards in order to enable their companies be competitive in the global market. The firms reported the lack of skills among youth as a major constraint on business growth and noted two types of skills most needed: life skills and technical skills.

The life skills sought included the ability to communicate, leadership, organization, self-confidence, self-discipline, and respect for commitments, such as working hours and deadlines. The technical skills needed and found lacking included writing, quality assurance, strategic thinking, foreign languages, and negotiation skills.

The participants in the research believe that young people need to begin learning life skills at an early age in order to absorb them fully for the workplace. They also suggested that practical training and techniques to teach young people self-motivation were important in preparing young people to be competitive in the job market.

Around the world, workforce development experts argue that the private sector must play a role in preparing the workforce, including partnering with educators to develop appropriate curricula, internships, and other practical work experiences. However, when companies in the Morocco survey were asked what stopped them from contributing to youth skills development, they listed the following hindrances:⁹

- Investment in education and training is difficult to quantify in terms of return on investment;
- Investing in education and training is a long-term commitment that requires large amounts of funding;
- The contribution of one company remains an isolated initiative with limited impact if it is not coupled with governmental support; and
- Companies are often hesitant to work with the government and the public sector.

These concerns raise the question of how educators, municipal leaders, and other decision-makers can reach out to businesses and demonstrate how an investment in youth development can positively affect their bottom lines.

Entrepreneurial Skills and Social Capital Are Also Valuable

But the focus should not be only on workforce development. Programs should also seek to empower young people as entrepreneurs and as contributors to their communities. Worldwide, young people make up roughly 15-20 percent of microfinance borrowers.¹⁰ Entrepreneurship is not a panacea, but with the state of the region's job market, instilling entrepreneurial skills and ideas can be part of the solution. Successful youth entrepreneurship programs tend to rely on partnerships with organizations that specialize in microfinance. It is unlikely entrepreneurship will enable young people to be breadwinners immediately, but simple savings and financial literacy program components can provide important business and financial lessons that will serve young people well in any work or life endeavor. Service learning can also be a powerful way to develop social capital. It engages young people and encourages them to play positive roles in their communities while they learn practical skills that will help them throughout their lives.¹¹

SURVEY OF YOUTH IN THE REGION

In late 2007, USAID conducted a survey of 3,500 young people and organized 72 focus groups in seven countries in the Middle East and North Africa.¹² The goal was to explore young people's most pressing concerns, their habits, and their sources of support. The young people surveyed were in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

The Region's Young People Worry about Jobs and their Communities

Despite the potential value of entrepreneurial skills, few of the young people surveyed are interested in setting up their own businesses (only 1 percent), preferring instead to enter existing professions. Given a choice of professions, young people listed being a teacher, accountant, engineer, or manager as their top choices. Of those already working, many were teachers, accountants, secretaries, and shop owners, but few were engineers or doctors.

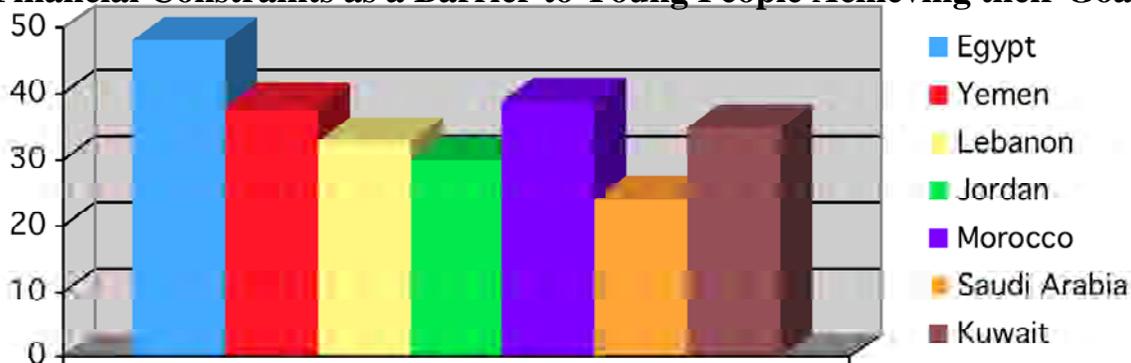
Young people in the region cite unemployment as one of the biggest problems facing them. Many see immigrating to another country as one solution. This is particularly true of Egyptians, who are the most willing to travel for work or to increase their quality of life. Similarly, Lebanese would rather travel to a place in the Arab world for work (37 percent) than for pleasure (25 percent).

For all those surveyed, community concerns rank above national, Arab, or global concerns. This fact represents an opportunity for municipalities and others interested in engaging youth in the local job market or community activities. Sadly, many of these young people feel marginalized in their own countries. This percentage is highest for Lebanese youth (63 percent), but percentages for Egypt (52 percent) and Yemen (45 percent) are also high. Saudis and Kuwaitis, on the other hand, are least likely to feel marginalized.

Technology plays an increasing role in the lives of young people in the region. This is particularly true for Kuwaiti and Lebanese youth, more than 50 percent of whom say the internet is an important part of their daily lives. In fact, only 14 percent of Lebanese youth do not have access to the internet. Saudi youth are close behind, while more than half of Egyptian and Yemeni youth still do not have access to the internet. Around the region, males show greater usage of the internet by at least 10 percent, spending most of their time seeking information and chatting. The growing use of technology could expand the types of programs considered for youth and perhaps lower the cost of providing them.

Arab youth cite family and social constraints (36 percent) as one of the biggest barriers to them doing what they want in their lives. They ranked these constraints above insufficient qualifications. However, financial constraints ranked above all (38 percent). Not surprisingly, apart from Kuwait, family and social constraints are of greater concern for young women than for young men. Again, these findings have some implications for programs that seek to provide skills and opportunities for young people.

Financial Constraints as a Barrier to Young People Achieving their Goals



Percentage of young people surveyed who listed financial constraints as one of the biggest barriers to their achieving their goals. (USAID, “Youth in the MENA Region Survey”, 2008.)

Innovative Approaches to Investing in Youth

Countries and regions that have globally competitive workforces with a rich mixture of skills and a supportive economic environment are able to add value to and benefit from the free flow of capital, information and technology that characterize the global economy.¹³ A globally competitive workforce refers to those who acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and

behaviors to continually adapt to the ever-changing and escalating labor market requirements.¹⁴ Those lacking the necessary skills are destined to fall further behind. Therefore, USAID supports a wide variety of training, workforce development, higher education, and exchange programs that strengthen young people's capacities in the developing world.

In trying to meet the employment and social needs of young people in the MENA region specifically, USAID has invested in several innovative pilot programs. These programs are still relatively new, so complete and formal evaluations have not yet been conducted. However, anecdotal evidence and surveys of the participants indicate that many elements of these programs are on track in meeting the needs of young people, employers, and communities in the region. This paper shares those elements in hopes of generating discussion among decision-makers and practitioners about how to strengthen such programs. Toward that end, the authors outline programs that seek to do the following:

- Build young people's skills, with an emphasis on leadership, to enable them to begin or expand their professional and community contributions;
- Offer opportunities for entrepreneurship and leadership to give young people a start in society and the workplace; and
- Provide young people with inspiring role models and networks that demonstrate positive and practical ways to contribute to their society and economy.

This paper does not focus on the national systems and services such as education and health care that are a critical part of investing in young people. These are vital areas where much emphasis is already being placed. The authors acknowledge that there is more work to do in these areas. Yet, they are beyond the scope of this paper. Here the focus is on innovative approaches to developing young people's skills that are replicable at local level and national levels in formal and informal settings.

Building Skills

Per USAID's research cited above, young people in the region care first and foremost about their communities. It is from these communities and their families that they derive their sense of identity. For the many young people who feel isolated or marginalized, that sense of identity is vital. For these reasons, USAID bases many of its regional skill development programs in community service activities. In that way, programs can take advantage of service learning opportunities.

First, programs that provide skills and opportunities ask young people to identify their own dreams and goals. Then they look at assets, including personal, community, and collective. Financial resources are not readily available and are difficult to access, particularly for young people with little to no professional history. As they noted in USAID's survey, young people see the lack of financial assets as the biggest barrier to their achievements. Thus, helping young people recognize the assets they already have, including volunteers, talents, community spaces, etc., is central to successful programs. As one young Egyptian participant said, "We learned it is not important for you to have the money. What is important is that you have the passion. I guess we had the passion. It was an important lesson for us."

From there, USAID's regional programs move on to motivating and mobilizing self and others. Initiative, displayed in both civic and professional settings, is a defining characteristic of success. It is highly sought after by employers. Without it, few programs can be started and even fewer succeed. Building local and regional peer networks helps reinforce the need to take initiative and provide encouragement for new and growing activities and businesses.

While some aspects of knowledge development are specific to the purpose or job at hand, there are many aspects that are useful in almost any setting. These include volunteer or staff recruitment and organization; personal and collective goal setting; and basic financial and project management. As another program participant said, “youth just want to know the how and the where.” USAID’s programs focus on these cross-cutting skills, demonstrating how they can be tailored to personal, professional, and community needs.

These types of skill-building programs are most effective when they have a concrete application. Classroom lectures or even experiential workshops can only have a limited impact if young people do not put what they have learned to use fairly quickly. Grounding this type of training in on-going activities in schools, youth clubs, or groups with some incentives or follow-up support is important. In measuring the impact of such activities, it is how young people have used the training that is most important, not the numbers trained. For instance, USAID’s goal in its regional leadership activities is to have 60 percent of its participants start or expand community or professional activities with what they have learned.

Throughout, USAID emphasizes leadership. The skills taught are not dominated by concepts of authority, decision-making, power, and prestige. Instead they focus on inclusion and empowerment where everyone has a role to play and everyone leads from a different place. Recognizing leadership at all levels resonates with young people, who often feel left out of the decisions that affect their lives. It encourages them to take a role in the areas they care about or are talented in and to build the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed there.

This model re-conceptualizes leadership as a process of inclusion, empowerment and mobilization, rather than characteristics associated with an individual. It provides young people with the powerful potential of positively engaging marginalized groups as stakeholders in their community development programs. Over the long term, this process can reduce alienation and inspire hope. Mobilizing and empowering individuals to play different leadership roles also enables them to develop their own potential, find hidden capabilities and hitherto unrecognized talents, and gain respect and positive recognition from their peers and adults in their communities. This approach builds skills on multiple levels, preparing young people for roles in their communities, workplaces, and public service.

Offering Opportunities

Those best placed to identify local needs are members of the community. Therefore in one program, USAID provides grants to support extraordinary people with creative solutions to local challenges. These social innovators or entrepreneurs exhibit high potential for creating social and economic changes in their countries. USAID provides funding to enable them to continue their work and enhances their efforts by connecting them to other civil society, business, and government leaders.

This approach recognizes the indigenous expertise of those already working in the area. It supplements their efforts with financial resources and connections, but it also helps them strengthen their communications skills to promote their work and gain additional resources, volunteers, and supporters.

The selected social innovators are entrepreneurial, creative, and have a track record of significant accomplishment in creating positive change in their respective communities. Their activities range from economic, social, and sustainable development, to health, education, and human rights. USAID’s goal is to contribute to their sustainability, not only through resources

and public relations, but also through improved project management and financial planning skills.

Individual development plans are another aspect of sustainability. These plans look both at the organization's capacity and at the social change they want to create. The progress on these plans is an important part of monitoring the program's performance.

The success of this grants program is such that USAID has incorporated aspects of it into its other leadership program and will continue to do so in the future. These aspects include providing grant funding and communications and promotional skills. USAID's early regional leadership and skill-building programs did not offer any grant funding. However, recognizing the incentive and opportunities even a small pool of funding provides, USAID has included these resources in more of its youth programs.

While few young people in the region expressed interest in owning their own business in USAID's regional youth survey, entrepreneurial skills are one way to address the region's unemployment challenge. To date, USAID has not focused extensively on micro-enterprise opportunities in its regional programs. It has included these opportunities as a subset of its community service approaches. In the future, USAID may look at what other support would make sense to encourage emerging private entrepreneurs.

Highlighting Role Models

In building skills and opportunities, it is imperative to understand the psychological importance of offering hope and a belief in possibilities. For many young people who are disillusioned by what they see as a lack of opportunities and a web of social and other constraints, successful role models and seeing the potential for success are critical. USAID's regional programs do this by strengthening emerging young leaders, highlighting role models in local and national media, and building regional networks for peer support and learning.

USAID profiles young community leaders in newspapers, youth magazines, the internet, and on the radio. It provides media training to social entrepreneurs to enable them to promote their work. In doing so, these entrepreneurs and young leaders become role models for other young people in the region. In one of its programs, USAID asks for peer nominations to determine who should be profiled. This helps build the regional network as young people reach out to each other, and the recognition provides an additional incentive for young leaders to continue their work.

Regional forums, virtual as well as physical, enable participants to work together on common problems. They encourage the sharing of ideas and strategies and provide support in the face of challenges or setbacks. They also expand the influence of peer leaders and successful program models.

Impact On Participants: A Qualitative Review

In assessing the impact to date and defining future program needs, USAID used a series of participant interviews. The highlights of this research are summarized below.

Self-Discovery

Many believed their goals for change or for themselves remained consistent throughout their participation in the program, but the activities expanded the breadth of their goals and their hopes for achieving them. They said that the activities also changed their mindset, allowing them to believe in themselves and their ability to create change. Others said they were ready to take on increased responsibilities because they were now able to see the bigger picture.

Communications Skills

As seen from respondents' feedback, participants have significantly developed their communications skills. They noted that networking training has improved their ability to reach out and promote their activities. This is important in considering the sustainability of programs as it expands the pool of potential investors and resources.

Participants listed English language training as an important element in increasing their potential to secure high quality employment. They also cited communications skills workshops, such as facilitation and presentation workshops, as an important factor in their success. One participant said the workshops helped her improve her presentation approach to be more interactive, lively, and engaging, enabling her to adopt the principles of experiential learning.

Another participant also stressed the importance of communications skills in helping him be a better team member and create better teams, something valued by employers. In another program, an Omani woman echoed that sentiment, discussing how she had become better at communicating with people of different backgrounds and with different ideas.

Networking

Networking was mentioned repeatedly by participants, all of whom use physical and virtual forums to discuss professional and academic topics and build their skills. While most of these networks encompass only the Middle East and North Africa region, some expand to the global development, philanthropic, and corporate community. For one regional network, a Palestinian participant noted how important it had been to her to learn about other Arabs, "what they think, who they are, what they are like." She was surprised by the diversity as well as the similarities in viewpoints and dreams and described it as one of the most important parts of her learning experience.

In the survey, participants confirmed that networking with more experienced professionals and entrepreneurs made them more confident that they could create positive change in their communities. The regional and international networks also created a venue for experience sharing, through which young entrepreneurs and future leaders could learn new training modules, technical expertise, and innovative ways for marketing themselves, their activities, or products. A participant talked about how she learned "new techniques in organic farming, which [she] then transmitted to other female farmers in the village."

For participants who were already engaged in economic or social entrepreneurial activities, networking also gave them an opportunity to create a working group formed of other young people and the opportunity to recruit volunteers for their activities. In one program, a young Jordanian with expertise in internet youth centers provided technical assistance to a Yemeni who wanted to set up a similar organization for marginalized youth in her city. Some also discussed how the power of networking helped them create more outreach and publicity for their activities.

Inspiration and Motivation

One of the programs' main goals is that the successful participants will be able to become models for others, thereby creating a multiplier effect in their societies and later in the region. By demonstrating the meaningful impact of individual efforts, programs can encourage more active citizen participation.

Respondents in the survey said that the programs gave them passion for development and motivated them to gain skills to benefit their societies and inspire others. Through the interactive approach of the programs, participants argue a spirit of volunteerism is spread among them as well as other members of their communities. An Egyptian participant said she learned the importance of "helping people help themselves." Another participant said she had learned that she "was responsible for making change in her community." The psychological and mental support participants receive through mentoring, workshops, and training sessions also motivates them to be more confident of their abilities, making it easier for them to be more actively involved in their societies.

Organization Skills

Participants in the survey felt that the programs provided them with the needed organization skills for effective group management. They helped them sharpen their financial planning and project management skills. It also improved their evaluation skills as they sought to create and measure the growth of their projects and their impact. One young Palestinian woman said the experience of being thrust into a new situation and asked to perform new skills (in this instance, database management) taught her the importance of "learning anything anywhere." This type of attitude and initiative is what USAID hopes to encourage.

A Jordanian participant said that through an \$8,000 grant, she managed to renovate a small school in her village, create awards for the teachers to improve their competitiveness, offer more workshops to farmers, and publish a booklet to support females in her community run their households.

A Moroccan woman expressed her enthusiasm for the event planning and problem solving experience she had gained in managing volunteers for a large community event. "Encouraging them to stay committed was one of the toughest parts," she said. She believes the experience will help her with her own volunteer activities and eventually at work.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Based on the experiences outlined in this paper, the authors would like to highlight some lessons-learned:

- 1) Financial resources – while it is clear from participants' responses that identifying existing assets is critical, many participants also cited the need for some financial resources. Based on these experiences, USAID has integrated some micro-level grant funding into some of its youth development programs. These grants are designed to start or expand community or entrepreneurial activities, which otherwise would face serious challenges.
- 2) Measuring outcomes – for monitoring and evaluation purposes, capturing outcome or impact data (instead of just output data such as number of those trained) from the outset is critical.
- 3) Alumni support – mobilizing, tracking, and supporting alumni of programs also needs to be considered during the planning stages. It is important to formulate clear ideas of how to

build and maintain alumni networks and activities in order to sustain the impact of the initial investment.

- 4) Participants' certification – gaining certification is an important part of the region's culture of excellence. Certificates help participants gain recognition for their training from potential employers and educators as well as offer better opportunities to find employment. Where appropriate, this is an element that could be explored more fully.

Finally, the experiences shared in this paper offer insights for municipalities and others engaged in youth programs on elements to consider in designing youth development programs:

- 1) Community-based skills development – grounding skills training in community or other activities where participants can apply their new knowledge fairly immediately is important for sustained learning and skill acquisition. It also enables young people to explore other roles for themselves alongside family and professional responsibilities. In an uncertain job market, community involvement also provides constructive places for young people to contribute and expand their skills and passions.
- 2) Incorporating communications and networking – the ability to promote one's skills and activities, either through the media or through networking, expands the resources and supporters available. Publicizing a project's accomplishments as well as its potential enables social or business entrepreneurs to expand their markets and visibility, as well as leverage additional resources.
- 3) Building opportunities and positive expectations – young people need positive role models and the ability to believe in their own potential and capacity to enact change. Showcasing young people's successes and demonstrating the impact they can have with only the resources immediately available is a powerful incentive to get involved. This is an element of youth development that should not be ignored as it speaks directly to those who might be disenfranchised. It also harnesses the power of already active young people, who are far better able to reach out to their peers than government or even civil society leaders.
- 4) Identifying resources – as noted at length earlier in this paper, teaching young people how to identify available resources, including volunteers, local talent, community spaces, and other potential support will help them succeed in a number of areas. It will strengthen their initiative, combat the oft-cited financial barriers, and teach them to be entrepreneurial and problem-solvers in all situations. In addition, offering some grant or loan resources can be a powerful incentive for strong performance. These are perhaps best reserved for those who have already demonstrated the ability to achieve some impact on their own.

The authors' views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

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