



MIDDLE EAST EDUCATION, RESEARCH, AND TRAINING SUPPORT (MEERS) SECONDARY SCHOOL TRANSITIONS STUDY

STUDY OVERVIEW

The secondary school transitions study was commissioned by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Middle East Bureau and Missions throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in August of 2021 to investigate what has been done and what is yet needed to prepare secondary school aged youth to transition into the workforce and/or continuing education. The study examined national career guidance efforts and interventions that aim to prepare youth with the necessary skills, knowledge, and resources to successfully transition into work or further education. The study included snapshots (briefs) of each of the 11 MENA countries a final study report. Lessons learned and recommendations for future USAID technical programming are presented to guide future efforts to support secondary school aged youth in the region.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study examined four primary questions.



What secondary school-level interventions **support youth acquisition of knowledge** about their academic, technical education, and career/livelihood options? What demographic profiles of youth (including gender and disability) have **access** to these services?



How do interventions attempt to **assist in their acquisition of the necessary skills and abilities** to enable successful transitions? Are there lessons learned or examples of programming that are perceived to be most effective, and in what conditions?



In what ways does the variety of **stakeholders involved in secondary school level interventions support efforts to prepare youth** for transitions? What are the perceived outcomes and benefits of this support? What models of community stakeholder engagement are perceived to be most effective?



For interventions that have been either scaled to a national level or sustained past the original period of funding: What are the characteristics of these interventions?



LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SECONDARY LEVEL TECHNICAL PROGRAMMING

The study drew conclusions that lead to the following lessons learned and related implications for secondary level technical programming. These are reported below, clustered within overarching themes that merit further consideration in programming for secondary school aged youth in the MENA region.



RQ1 LESSONS LEARNED & IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

THEME I – CAREER GUIDANCE

In comparison to best practices for national career guidance, young people in the MENA region are unlikely to be receiving high quality career guidance services at the secondary level. Some promising short- and medium-term interventions that include career guidance operate across the region, and generally target upper secondary-aged and older youth.

Those reached by programming are perceived to receive efficient and high-quality career information, services, and guidance, but it often comes too late to affect education courses or career decisions. Notable gaps between MENA countries' career guidance efforts and global best practice in career guidance were identified as outlined below, along with implications for improving these weaknesses through future programming:

There is no agreement across the MENA region on the aims and objectives of career guidance. National Ministries of Education (MOEs) and USAID should collaborate to bring together committees that include national and local stakeholders to discuss and align on the aims and objectives of career guidance.

Career guidance is often delivered too late to impact career choice. National MOEs, USAID, and national and local stakeholders should collaboratively develop a plan to identify appropriate timelines for career guidance interventions. These should fit global best practices and begin at an early stage before examination results limit career choices.

There is a need to embed career guidance in education policies and as part of established institutions and processes. National MOEs, USAID, and national and community stakeholders—including the private sector—should be involved in the design and delivery of technical assistance programs to foster “ownership” and generate a wider understanding of career guidance.

There are sizable gaps in measuring outcomes from career guidance. USAID should support national MOEs to determine measurements criteria (after setting goals and objectives) that relate to global best practices for career guidance.

THEME 2 – INCLUDING MARGINALIZED YOUTH

A wide variety of demographic profiles of youth, including female youth and youth with disabilities, all have access to some interventions. However, **while many programs specifically target female participants, engaged at-risk (refugee, conflict affected, and internally displaced) youth, or design programs for youth with disabilities, most programming tends to under-enroll marginalized youth.** By examining programs that did target marginalized youth, the study found that:



Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs), local organizations supporting gender equity, and those representing refugee, conflict affected, internally displaced and other categories of youth are critical to marginalized youths' access to programming that meets their needs. Implementers should be required to include local groups serving marginalized populations at all stages of the USAID program cycle.

Laws and policies for students and workers with disabilities commonly exist but are not always applied. USAID could support awareness and advocacy campaigns, often organized by DPOs, to increase the likelihood that policies meet the needs of people with disabilities and are implemented as intended.

Inclusive and accessible programming is often an add-on, rather than a foundational aspect of curriculum design. USAID implementing partners that design curricula should ensure that activities adhere to USAID's Universal Design for Learning approach and that special considerations be made for targeted youth with disabilities.

Out-of-school youth and at-risk youth can benefit from accelerated learning or parallel (non-formal) learning programs. USAID could support accelerated and parallel learning through programs targeted at specific categories of youth, however, access to remedial academic support would likely benefit many (if not all) categories of youth.

Contextualized understanding of barriers is key. USAID should conduct gender and social inclusion (GESI) analyses and use findings in design planning. Results should be revisited regularly and not considered static.



RQ2 LESSONS LEARNED & IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

THEME 3 – SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Given the many different interventions targeting secondary school-aged youth across the region, programs consider a variety of skills and abilities as critical to youth’s transitions. Examined through the Positive Youth Development (PYD) lens, the study found that **program models that were perceived as effective demonstrate skill development, encourage positive self-identity and advocacy, provide opportunities for youth to lead, and are implemented in spaces where youth feel safe to test and learn.** “Model” interventions were described as exemplary in one of the four PYD domains; however, these are not to be considered in isolation. Programs that operate across domains are most effective. Moreover, fitting models to the context impacts how assets, agency, contribution, and an enabling environment are received: There is not one model that is best practice across the entire region. The study found that programs should:

Build skills in combination with preparing youth for the multiple pathways they are likely to encounter. USAID should support programs that respond to educational and skills gaps in the educational systems and prepare youth to apply for transitional steps or experiences—such as training or job opportunities.

Develop skills related to self-identity and advocacy to give youth the necessary tools/skills to advocate for pathways that are important to them, even in the face of pressure from society and their families. Implementers designing curriculum should ensure that skills development includes advocacy and opportunities for youth to learn about, and act on, their values, beliefs, and interests.

Place youth in leadership positions to set them up to take on further leadership and decision-making roles in their future transitions. Implementers designing curriculum should incorporate more learning-by-doing concepts, which are essential to ensure youth can contribute and lead.

Promote safe opportunities for work-based learning and for community programming. USAID should ensure that interventions are conducted in safe (intellectually and physically) and accessible spaces to support young people’s ability to explore through trial and error and expression of self.



RQ3 LESSONS LEARNED & IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

THEME 4 – STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Engaging diverse stakeholders required varied approaches with implications for future programming:

Local organizations including community-based organizations (CBOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a critical role in connecting the labor market with the transition process at secondary school and for out-of-school youth. USAID should allocate resources to identify and build local organizations’ capacity from the start of new projects.

Private sector stakeholders can support efforts to prepare youth for transitions. The gap between the private sector and education is a space where USAID can support local intermediary organizations to play an important connection role.

Parents are critical to students’ and youth’s successful transition. Implementers that design programs should engage parents throughout the secondary education years. USAID implementers should consider leveraging the three ways of engaging parents identified in interventions (engagement, training, roles in schools).

Programs often superficially include youth in program decision-making, rather than leveraging youth as valued stakeholders. To engage youth as stakeholders, USAID should require implementers to have greater levels of partnership with youth-serving (and youth-led) organizations.

Engaging teachers and the school community is critical, especially for secondary school youth. Programs should work with teachers and administrators when designing and implementing career guidance and other programming, as the school community influences student perceptions.

Collaboration with government stakeholders is essential to improving successful transitions. USAID, implementing partners, and governments should meet to candidly discuss options for collaboration from the design stage.



RQ4 LESSONS LEARNED & IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

THEME 5 – SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALING

Two key lessons with implications for fostering sustainability and scale are as follows:

Scale up and sustainability actions are commonly introduced at the last stage of an intervention. USAID should ensure that in future programming, scaling up and sustainability strategies are embedded in the design *and* implemented from the start.

Most interventions are time-bound, which reduces the likelihood of sustainability and scale. USAID should endeavor to design programs that have sustainability and scalability as the main goal—fewer one-off programs or pilots and more sustained “flagship” models (within which piloting may be used).

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

The study was conducted in three phases from August 2021-July 2022. **Phase I** included an initial desk review and study design report. **Phase II** further developed the desk review and included remote key informant interviews (KIIs) with USAID Mission staff across the MENA region. A total of 23 KIIs were conducted with a total of 30 respondents in Phase II. The first two phases resulted in the production of 11 country briefs. The Study Team identified a total of 76 (48 non-USAID and 28 USAID) interventions and reviewed related program documentation. The Study Team reviewed the 76 interventions with available project documents using an analytic matrix based on the research questions. **Phase III** consisted of a second round of remote KIIs with those who designed or managed non-USAID programs in the region. In Phase III, the Study Team conducted an additional 22 KIIs with a total of 30 respondents. Following this, the Study Team created a codebook based on the key themes that arose in interviews, coded and analyzed all KII notes from Phase II and III using Dedoose qualitative software, and triangulated the key themes from KIIs with desk review findings to produce the final study report.



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

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