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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## COMMUNITY, SCHOOL-BASED, AND EMBEDDED YOUTH PROGRAMS IN THE MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA REGION

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This desk review was commissioned by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Middle East Bureau through the Middle East Education Research, Training, and Support (MEERS) activity. MEERS is a four-year, \$5 million activity that supports education research, data analysis, and capacity building in the region. This desk review provides an overview of best practices and identifies quality tools and resources for implementing, sustaining, and scaling community, school-based, and embedded youth programs more effectively in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The findings in this report are based on a limited review of three types of youth programs, related available literature and project documents, and interviews with project staff, implementers, and donors of these types of activities in the MENA region. The three types of youth programming examined include:

- **Community-based youth programs** with dedicated spaces structured for youth-focused activities that are not located in schools or provided by the school system;
- **School-based youth programs** implemented in or via partnerships with schools or the school system; and
- **Embedded youth programs** or youth “spaces within spaces” that serve members of the wider community but dedicate a portion of space and/or resources for youth programming.

These types of programs were specifically examined to see what best practices can be gleaned from their design and effectiveness, as well as their ability to sustain and scale up activities.

***According to the available evidence, the primary conclusions of this review are as follows:***

**The MENA region is a particular youth context and yet is also very diverse.** The region is diverse in terms of cultural, social, economic, and political conditions, and thus should not be treated as a monolith. This report does not generalize about the region as a result, but rather presents a spectrum of instances across the region where specific types of youth programming were successful in one or more ways.

**Considerable research and evidence gathering in the MENA region is needed.** While there are many types of youth programming throughout the region, there remains little guidance on effectively designing, sustaining, and growing successful community, school-based, and embedded youth programs. There are few practical tools for those serving youth in the MENA region.

**Successful community, school-based, and embedded youth programs in the MENA region have safe, accessible spaces for participants and actively engage community members—**including parents, families, and community leaders, as well as government, private sector companies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The space type and location, as well as the level of community engagement, should be flexible depending on the youth population targeted. For example, programs serving girls may seek an indoor space for privacy and dedicate additional time and resources for talking with parents to address safety or other concerns, as well as the provision of childcare. Programs that serve refugee youth must be prepared to address their specific vulnerabilities such as trauma or social and economic marginalization.

**Effective and sustainable community, school-based, and embedded youth programs in the MENA region employ a combination of well trained, full-time staff along with youth interns and community volunteers.** The programs reviewed use traditional staffing structures with managers, program officers, and financial and administrative staff. These paid staff are often complemented by trained volunteers. Staffing presents a key opportunity to engage young people as trainers, coaches, or interns.

**Successful community, school-based, and embedded youth programs in the MENA region used a formal curriculum to structure their programming but also remained flexible to the particular needs of their participants.** The programs reviewed for this desk study—which do not

reflect all programs in the region—primarily address workforce development, violence prevention, and community engagement. Fast changing conditions (economic, political, social) require these types of youth programs to be continuously nimble and responsive to participants’ needs to remain relevant, while adopting and adapting a formal curriculum that reflects the youth competencies central to each program mission.

**Partnerships are critical to sustainability.** Government, private sector, and local institutions such as universities often provide long-term management and operational support. Sustained programs reviewed have strong connections at the community level—with parents, families, community leaders, etc.—that help to ensure ongoing demand for and support of community, school-based, and embedded youth programs. However, the benefits of these relationships must also be balanced with potential risks; local conflicts make accepting funding from some sources socially or politically fraught.

**Sustained community, school-based, and embedded youth programs in the MENA region meaningfully involved youth in decision making and planned for sustainability from the beginning regarding cost and capacity building.** In the programs reviewed, lasting programs integrated the views and needs of youth into the design phase so that they are reflected in the mission and programming. Additionally, ensuring operational and management costs were not prohibitive to long-term community ownership was vital. For example, investment in high-cost facilities that cannot be locally maintained may be detrimental to sustainability. Another key activity was transitioning responsibility to local actors from an early stage and providing organizational capacity building to ensure that local stakeholders are equipped to take on program operations.

**Scaled-up community, school-based, and embedded youth programs in the MENA region identified one of three approaches—expansion, collaboration, or replication—and planned accordingly starting at the design phase.** Many of the same sources of support for sustainability can also be drawn on for scaling, but these must be managed and budgeted for independently. In the programs reviewed, expanding within a community required different types of engagement with government, private sector, and community leaders; for example, community leaders can be recruited to serve on a Board while government officials need to be visited and lobbied in the capital. The private sector provided sponsorships and in-kind support. Local resources were drawn on for sustainability more often, but less so for scaling because communities are more likely to invest in their own areas rather than elsewhere. Strong leadership and trained staff are vital for building networks.

**To both sustain and scale community, school-based, and embedded youth programs in the MENA region, strong monitoring and evaluation systems are necessary to ensure quality and increase the likelihood of attracting interested investors.** Successful programs reviewed have monitoring systems with well-defined indicators and methods for tracking them, as well as independent evaluations and studies of the program’s theory of change in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of an approach or model.

**Sustainable and scalable community, school-based, and embedded youth programs have multi-year, unrestricted funding for management and operations.** Many of the best practices identified in the programs reviewed (e.g., setting up traditional staffing and management structures, staff training, cultivating partnerships, etc.) require investment in staff salaries and overhead. In addition, the most sustainable programs have a long-term funding horizon, which allows for planning and implementing sustainability strategies.

These findings present a starting point for a conversation among community, school-based, and embedded youth programming practitioners, implementers, and donors in the MENA region in order to learn from existing experience and practice, fill in knowledge gaps, and envision the future of this type of youth development programming in the region.

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