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Corporate report

FCDO response to ICAI recommendations on UK aid's approach to youth employment in the Middle East and North Africa

Published 19 August 2021

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The Government welcomes the review by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact of HMG-led work on support for youth employment in the Middle East and North Africa since 2015. We are grateful for its recommendations. Independent scrutiny is important to ensure that our policy and programming deliver maximum impact and value for money.

As the Independent Commission for Aid Impact acknowledges, the FCDO does not implement dedicated development programmes explicitly focused on job creation for young people in the region. Rather the FCDO implements a number of programmes that do include elements specifically on youth employment, but this is not the primary purpose. This is an important distinction as it has made it challenging for the review to be able to interrogate questions such as “is the overall approach coherent?”. Over recent years the FCDO has been developing a longer-term focus on social protection and economic development, to support the economic stability of countries in the region. Through this enabling approach - supporting economic reforms across the region - the FCDO is committed to boosting job opportunities for young people in the Middle East and North Africa.

While the focus of the review was youth employment, we refer to our broader approach on economic development in this response, recognising that the two are interlinked. We look at how the report's recommendations could enhance this macro approach to economic reform in the region, alongside wider FCDO objectives on youth employment in other geographic areas.

Recommendation 1

Employment-related programmes should articulate clearly how they expect to contribute to job creation and economic development or address fragility, and ensure that these outcomes are monitored and evaluated.

Response: agree

The FCDO has recently developed a Jobs Measurement Framework (JMF). This tool will be used by programme teams to inform more consistent and robust approaches to job creation metrics across the FCDO's global portfolio.

The JMF provides a framework for establishing testable causal chains, provides guidance on how to understand labour market impacts and the metrics that can assess the degree to which desired outputs and outcomes are achieved. A critical objective of the JMF is to enable programme teams to assess not only the number of jobs created but equally their quality (according to international labour standards).

The first version of the JMF was completed in February 2021, which is currently being rolled out and included in the design of new programmes. We expect the JMF to be further developed and refined over time.

Recommendation 2

When promoting employment through economic reform, FCDO should undertake complementary interventions to tackle the specific barriers to employment faced by target groups.

Response: partially agree

As acknowledged in ICAI's report, the FCDO does not have an explicit focus on youth employment in the Middle East and North Africa region. Research has shown that youth unemployment is a manifestation of wider unemployment and economic instability. Our approach in MENA therefore focuses on tackling wider issues and specifically economic reforms, with a view to improving economic stability, which will foster an environment for job creation. While economic reforms require time to be implemented, in Jordan for example, complementary interventions to tackle specific barriers to employment were considered and are currently being implemented in several areas. These include training for home-based businesses and upskilling following reforms to allow registration and licensing for Jordanians and Refugees.

We acknowledge that, subject to future spending priorities, any new programmes developed alongside this approach could offer a greater chance of tackling specific issues such as youth employment.

Recommendation 3

Employment-related programmes should be shaped by gender and social inclusion analysis, including of cultural barriers to the employment of women.

Response: agree

We agree that cultural barriers are a key factor affecting access to employment, notably for women. Within the Middle East and North Africa our public/private partnerships and public sector development work aims to make space for job creation for everyone, including youth, and our economic development approach aims to increase overall job availability, which will positively impact both women and men. For example, the 'training and inclusion' component within the Jordan Compact Economic Opportunities Programme incorporates some attention to skills development for youth, women and refugees.

We acknowledge the need for consistent attention to gender and social inclusion analysis as a key element of programme design and for related challenges to be addressed during project implementation. We have already looked at addressing this in our current programmes, for example in Jordan we are aiming to get more women into IT jobs, and we have restructured other economic reform targets to strengthen the focus on female employment.

Recommendation 4

FCDO should routinely consult with the young people expected to benefit from its MENA programmes and use the feedback to shape programme design and implementation.

Response: partially agree

The FCDO is committed to engaging with young people on development issues, including as beneficiaries of our programmes.

In the run up to the 2019 UK-hosted Jordan Conference, which focused on supporting investment, growth and job creation in Jordan, we helped organise a series of national youth dialogues, the findings of which fed into the Conference. Youth delegates participated comprehensively across panel sessions at the Conference and key messages on youth development were integrated into the Conference conclusions communications. The FCDO has also held follow up dialogues with youth organisations and the Government of Jordan.

In addition, the FCDO has helped to organise and then speak at Wilton Park conferences on youth, held in Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. Following these conferences, a 'Friends of Youth Employment' group was formed and has met periodically.

Beyond action in the Middle East and North Africa region, the UK-funded World Bank Solutions for Youth Employment initiative has developed a guidance note on How to Include Youth Voice in Youth Employment Programmes (https://www.s4ye.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/How%20To%20Note%20Issue%201_How%20To%20Include%20Youth%20Voice%20In%20Youth%20Employment%20Programs_EN_0.pdf), drawing on lessons from the UK-supported Mexico Youth Labour Market Inclusion project by the World Bank.

This guidance focuses on how engagement with youth early in the design of a new project can contribute to the project's overall objectives and looks at how effective communication strategies facilitate youth engagement in project activities throughout the lifecycle of a programme.

Recommendation 5

FCDO should strengthen its in-country partnerships with multilateral organisations by ensuring consistent strategic-level engagement.

Response: partially agree

The FCDO takes multiple steps to ensure that in-country partnerships with multilateral organisations are as effective as possible, and continuously attempts to identify opportunities for greater collaboration. Across our portfolio, engagement with multilateral organisations is country-led, covering a wide range of meetings at various levels. This coordination with multilateral partners focuses on collaborative priority setting for our programmes, making use of UK civil servants embedded within these organisations and UK Missions around the world, who work closely with such partners on a daily basis.

We acknowledge the need to continue to pursue the highest standards of engagement and deployment of FCDO technical expertise in support of programme objectives wherever possible and in line with a proportional approach across portfolios. The FCDO aims to provide sufficient technical capacity to all our partners and engage clearly on programme priorities and objectives, to ensure our interventions deliver the greatest impact for intended beneficiaries.

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