

# Achieving social justice through a demographic-driven initiative: Responding to the unique needs of youth, women and refugees

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## Introduction

The Arab World is currently experiencing a period of extensive socioeconomic change, unprecedented since the revolutions and wars of independence over half a century ago. Of particular concern is the matter of social justice, which has been a challenge for Arab states over the past decades.

The wave of conflict and unrest that has dominated the region in the past decade is both a symptom and a cause of insufficient efforts to prioritize social justice as a development aim. However, to focus on violent conflict and disruptive unrest as the primary issue in achieving social justice would be insufficient. The world of work is changing. Economists assert that we are living in a 'Fourth Industrial Revolution,' defined by a "fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital and biological spheres" (WEF, 2016). The rise of both has transformed the world of work with profound consequences felt across the globe. Distressingly, the Arab states appear posed to reap the worst results of this transformation. Low and unskilled workers in the industrial and agriculture sectors will find their livelihoods eliminated by encroaching mechanization. In contrast, the select individuals with technological skills appear poised to reap the greatest economic benefits, a change that will further stratify social groups, deepen inequality and exacerbate social tensions and the potential for unrest (ILO, 2016a).

In the Arab World, the significant issues of underemployment, unemployment and un-employability must underpin any developmental or reform efforts that are grounded on achieving social justice for these groups. The eroding livelihoods and potential employment paths of these individuals, coupled with unrepresentative political institutions and powerless civil society organizations constitute a grave threat to the stability of the broader region. On the other side, governments risk halting the pace of mechanization and digitization at their own peril, many Arab states exhibit low levels of connectivity to global value chains (GVCs) and critical innovation (ILO, 2016a). Rentier economic systems are frequent in the Arab world. In addition, the economies of Gulf States are largely dependent on oil production, while others show signs and varying levels of fragility and are largely dependent on international and regional aid and defined by the export of raw and low value-added products and human resources. Failure to adopt the recent technological innovations will consign the Arab states to further economic isolation. Only sustained reform to regional economies can resolve this dilemma and chart a path that prevents vulnerable workers from exclusion from the economy, while encouraging technological integration and the development of modern, competitive economies.

# Conceptual Backdrop

In the absence of an internally or regionally-agreed definition, social justice includes components such as equitable and fair distribution of wealth and social resources, equal access to protection and opportunity, devotion of resources by the state to all its citizens and residents and inclusion of constituents in the decision-making process. It is a vital foundation for the fostering of economic development, social unity and political legitimacy. In contrast, the absence and disregard for social justice can be a driver of social disengagement, citizen frustration and instability with profound risks for the future of governments and states. The recent upheavals of the past decade and the chaos and destruction ushered stands as a stark reminder of the consequences of ignoring social justice in development (UNDP, 2016).

In this context, it should be recalled that the ILO was founded on the premise that universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is grounded upon social justice. In the present context of globalization and accelerating change, global efforts in this regard need to be focused on the following overarching policy directions: 1. Rights at work; 2. Promoting decent job creation; 3. Promoting social dialogue; 4. Extending social protection (ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, 2008).

Graph1: Social Justice and the World of Work



# Vulnerability and Decent Work

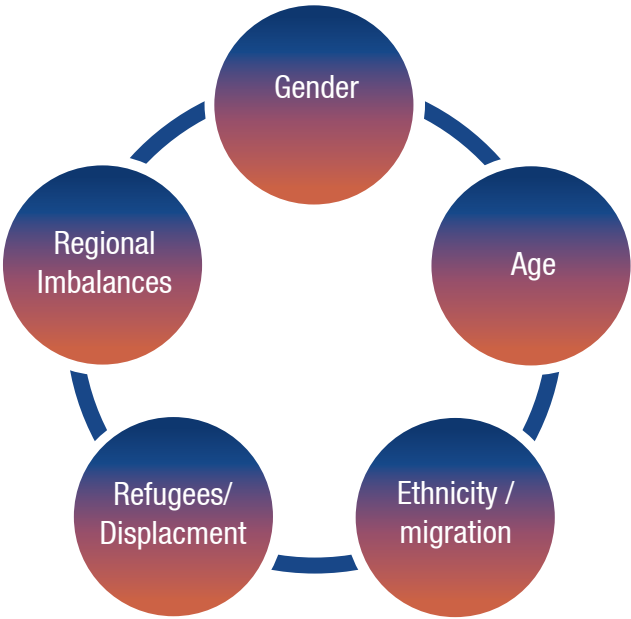
Vulnerable employment is comprised of workers on the economic fringe, individuals with few benefits and protections, susceptible to market shocks and without a means to express their voice. Vulnerable employment currently constitutes 18 per cent of the workforce in the Arab States (ILO, 2016a). This rate is precariously high and efforts to reduce it are not being sufficiently adopted or considered by the proper stakeholders. For example, many states have failed to ratify critical ILO conventions related to labour rights and protection, including the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948 (No. 87) and the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98). At the same time, while a number of states have for instance ratified the Employment Policy Convention, 1964 (No. 122), Most have ratified the Labour Inspection Convention, 1947 (No. 81), and all have ratified the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182). Ratification by itself is insufficient; especially when the workers with the most to benefit are not aware of the rights protected or cannot exercise them. Inspection, monitoring and enforcement are critical to ensure that these rights are being protected as dictated in the respective conventions. In many states where governments' efforts to promote labour right are insufficient, the ILO and civil society groups have a critical role to play in incentivizing and ensuring that signatory states uphold their obligations.

Inability to adjust to the technological changes inherent in the future of work will likely contribute to increased vulnerability and, by extension, socioeconomic inequality. In the past years, academics and experts have debated whether the Fourth Industrial Revolution will create jobs or eliminate them. The current consensus asserts that both will happen: certain jobs will be lost, while others will be gained. However, this will not be a 1:1 exchange. Rather, it is expected that mechanization and other advances in computers and machinery will eliminate scores of jobs previously held by unskilled and low-skilled workers, while adding fewer in managerial and high-skilled positions related to maintenance of the mechanized and technological workforce (ILO, 2016a). Those whose jobs are at risk are already vulnerable.

The low rates of participation in the formal sector, in part, hide the high percentage of informality which is prevalent in most Arab economies rendering workforce/population rates falsely low and non-indicative of the full situation of labour participation. Vulnerability is, however, a particularly acute threat for workers in the informal sector, who are often denied unionization, collective bargaining, retirement pensions, maternity leave and other basic protections that support their economic and personal welfare. Vulnerability is linked to informality which in turns dampens economic growth. On average, earnings in the informal economy are low, while costs and risks are high, making it difficult for working poor to work their way out of poverty. Because they lack protection, rights, and representation, informal workers often remain trapped in poverty. The highest rates of informality are in the agricultural sector. In the Arab States, women workers were about 1.4 times more likely to be in vulnerable forms of work, and they experienced a slower reduction in vulnerable employment than men (ILO, 2016a).

In general, economic vulnerability is compounded by other forms of exclusion and marginalization. They are all derived from a number of factors that are interlinked and form a vicious cycle that is multi-dimensional. In the Arab World, the following factors are pivotal in any analysis of the situation of social justice: gender, age, region, ethnicity, migration and refugee status (Graph 2).

Graph 2: Vulnerability and Social Justice:  
Vicious Cycle of Exclusion and Marginalisation



## Youth and Social Justice

The future of youth as productive, engaged and innovative members of the world of work and society has become increasingly imperilled in the past years. Unemployment, low quality and low paying jobs, irrelevant education and perceptions of marginalization are omnipresent factors in the lives of the majority of Arab youth and threaten to transform “constructive forces serving development,” into “a potent source of protracted social instability” (UNDP, 2016). The trends for the next decade appear ominous. The ILO estimates the rate of GDP growth for 2015-2020 to be 3.8 per cent, almost a full point lower than 2010-2015 (4.7 per cent). Labour productivity growth is anticipated to be sluggish, growing at a discouraging rate of 1.5 per cent (ILO, 2016a). Against a backdrop of declining economic performance and rising inequality, the ability of the Arab States to create a sufficient number of good jobs for the burgeoning youth population appears tenuous.

### Box 1: Youth Labour Force Participation Lowest; Unemployment Highest

The youth unemployment rate in the region is the highest in the world. Over 28 per cent of all economically active 15-24 year-olds are unable to find jobs, more than twice the global average. The youth unemployment rate in the region is almost four times higher than the rate for adults, suggesting that youth face unique barriers to finding jobs, above and beyond general labour market forces faced by youth and adult workers alike.

At the same time, only 30 per cent of 15-24 year-olds in the Arab states, and 13 per cent of Arab female youth, are in the labour force, the lowest labour force participation rates in the world (ILO, 2016d).

The high rate of unemployment is the most perilous issue related to Arab youth. Currently, over 28 per cent of youth are designated as unemployed, a figure that acquires increasingly stark significance when accounting for low entry of women into the workforce and the high amount of youth who opt to continue their education. Perhaps the most illustrative figure is the not in education, employment or training (NEET) rate, an effective proxy for measuring inactivity among youth. The NEET rate is high in Jordan (25 per cent) and Saudi Arabia (18.4 per cent) and in Yemen, the NEET rate reaches 48 per cent for all youth and 73 per cent among female youth (ILO, 2016a). Sustained disengagement from the work force poses a significant threat to the development of an economy predicated on decent work and the stability of states. Extended unemployment means youth are less likely to develop practical skills, which consigns them to low and unskilled labour in the future, and are more likely to develop low self-esteem, which can lead to discouragement and permanent disengagement from the labour market, and frustration with the status quo, a catalyst for social unrest.

A common theme among youth who can find work is the prevalence of underemployment and mismatches. The two factors can be defined as youth settling for jobs that are either (i) outside their specialization or (ii) beneath their skill level (W4Y, 2016). Common factors lie at the root of both, specifically an absence of decent jobs, employers who are sceptical of youth competencies and an imbalance in economic sectors. The absence of good jobs relates to the scarcity of employment opportunities available for youth. Despite a low ratio employment-to-population ratio in the region, Arab economies continue to face obstacles in the creation of decent employment opportunities.

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#### Box 2: Informality is correlated with social injustice

Youth challenges in the labour market are not only quantitative, but also qualitative where youth jobs are mostly precarious and vulnerable by way of example:

- Around one in ten employed youth in Iraq and Occupied Palestinian Territory are under-employed, i.e., have jobs that offer them fewer hours than they would like to or are willing to work, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “hidden unemployment”.
- Less than one-third of employed youth in Iraq and one-fifth of employed youth in Yemen enjoy jobs in the formal sector. In both countries, female youth are particularly disadvantaged in this regard. Formality is higher for Jordan youth, but even there two of every five youth must settle for more precarious jobs in the informal sector.
- Only one-fifth of employed Iraqi youth, and even lower shares of employed youth in Occupied Palestinian Territory and Yemen, enjoy written contracts. The situation in this regard is much better in Jordan, where 59 per cent of all employed youth have a written contract. A written contract, in turn, is generally associated with more job stability and legal protections and access to non-wage benefits such as pensions and health care (ILO, 2016d).

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Scepticism of employers relates to the poor skill development system inherent in Arab education systems, which is defined by an overemphasis on technical skills and an absence of attention devoted to vocational and interpersonal competencies (W4Y, 2016). Education in the Arab world is mistakenly oriented towards public sector employment, the skills of which are often not transferrable to the private sector, which demands innovation (ILO, 2016a). As a result, youth graduates find themselves in low demand in their field of specialization and are often reduced to working outside their field in an effort to find employment.



The imbalance of economic sectors relates to the common dominance of the public sector over the private and the service sector over the industrial and manufacturing sector. In the Arab states, the bloated nature of the public sector can be attributable to several factors. In most countries of the Arab Region, employment in the public sector is used as a tool to secure basic livelihoods for nationals. Other states have used the public sector as a sponge for graduates of tertiary education, many of who would not be able to find a professional job (World Bank, 2012). As a result, the public sector has not only grown to a cumbersome size, but is now viewed as a destination for many young job seekers who are attracted to its guaranteed income and secure employment. This desire is particularly strong among female youth, concerned with the provision of maternity leave and childcare policies, since these are often lacking in the private sector (W4Y, 2016). The disproportional growth of the service sector is another perilous development as it limits the ability of Arab states to integrate into global value chains (GVCs) or develop economies that are drivers of economic growth. As a result of comparatively low emphasis on technological innovation and value-added products, the region is also a net importer of technology. This is reflective of the limited role of the manufacturing, industrial and ICT sectors in the Arab states, which instead are dominated by the service sector. An over large service sector inhibits the development of a skilled workforce and an expanding economy, which, in turn, reduces employment opportunities.

The dire need to create decent work for youth is magnified by the changing demographic circumstances of young Arab men and women. Out of the 20 countries that saw the greatest increase in the mean years of schooling from 1980-2010, eight were Arab states (UNDP, 2013). However, these increases in educational achievement were not matched by opportunity in the labour market and “the turmoil in several countries [...] is a reminder that people, especially the young, who are better educated and healthier than previous generations, put a high premium on meaningful employment, on exercising a voice in affairs that influence their lives, and on being treated with respect” (UNDP, 2013). These circumstances continue to define contemporary Arab society and if governments and employers continue to fail in their efforts to provide decent work “the consequences are likely to include rising civil unrest” (UNDP, 2013).

Closely related to the challenges facing youth is the challenge of child labour. The ILO terms these two challenges as the (Twin Challenges in the Arab States).

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### Box 3: Child Labour

The number of children trapped in child labour remains high in many of the Arab States while at the same time young people across the region are faced with high levels of unemployment and a dearth of quality jobs. Many of the Arab children in child labour must also log very long working hours each week, increasing their exposure to workplace hazards and reducing their time for other activities. The adverse impact of child labour on children’s education in the Arab States and therefore on their future prospects: children in employment are much less likely to attend school than their non-working peers, underscoring the barrier that child labour poses to the goals of universal basic education in the Arab region; those child labourers that do manage to attend school lag behind their non-working counterparts in terms of grade progression – an indication in part of poorer school performance (ILO, 2016d).

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# Women and Social Justice

Across the Arab states women remain underrepresented, marginalized and outright excluded. Three out of four Arab women remain outside of the labour force, albeit many are involved in the informal labour force. Young women entering the labor market are disadvantaged in comparison to their male peers. Of female youth actively seeking work, 49 per cent are unemployed in the Middle East, almost twice the male youth unemployment rate at 26 per cent (ILOSTAT, 2016).

Gender equality and female integration in the workforce remains a serious priority. According to the gender gap index, no Arab state ranks higher than 100 and, since 2011, ten states have regressed. Kuwait and the UAE performed best within the region, they only ranked 117 and 119 respectively on the international scale in 2015 (ILO, 2016a). By 2030, it is estimated that greater gender equity in the workforce could increase the GDP of Arab states between 7.3 and 11.4 per cent (ILO, 2016b). However, if the economic potential of women remains untapped, female workers will remain an excluded and exploited class and the economic fortunes of Arab states will remain shackled.

In all critical elements of decent work, protection and opportunity, women face de jure and de facto discrimination. Regarding the former, no state has ratified the Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183) guaranteeing appropriate maternity leave policies, or the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) regulating the employment of domestic workers, who are predominantly female (ILO, 2016a). Not only have Arab states failed to ensure women's rights in the world of work, but many have deliberately placed barriers to advancement and equality. Every state has a minimum of 10 legal statutes that codify differences between men and women in the workforce. This, however, does not automatically lead to lower labour force participation. Female labour force participation in the Arab States reached an average of 24 per cent in 2015, compared to a World average of 50 per cent.

Gender equality and women's rights in the world of work are further impeded and threatened by de facto consequences. This includes a remarkably low employment rate among the women in many Arab states, often the result of limited opportunities in the workforce, social and cultural impediments, limited educational opportunities in some countries, mismatch between education and needed market skills which inhibits opportunities after matriculation and a reluctance among employers to hire females for certain jobs. As a result, female participation in the labour force is limited in terms of sector and position. Regarding the former, women are concentrated in the service and agriculture sector, with few working in sectors such as manufacturing, construction or technology (ILO, 2016a). Regarding the latter, women also face structural obstacles to promotion to senior-level positions. The region has the lowest rate of female managers, with the Occupied Palestinian Territory (15 per cent) having the highest, followed by Qatar (12 per cent) and the UAE (10 per cent) (ILO, 2016b). Women also remain underrepresented in unions, syndicates and similar bodies, limiting their ability to benefit from collective bargaining or integrate their concerns into the strategy of organized labour. Among women who are present, few have achieved positions above basic membership, such as leadership or participation in decision-making bodies. The Arab Trade Union Women's Network has advocated for a 30 per cent quota in union membership, though such calls appear to have fallen on deaf ears (ILO, 2016b).

An issue that is felt particularly acutely among females is the nature of informal work. Official employment statistics, reporting low rates of female participation in the labour force, render invisible the large amount of females who work in the informal sector, often in domestic work, agriculture and family businesses. These activities have high potential for hazardous work and exploitation and, by nature of their informal character, deny women their basic principles and rights. Female workers are not covered by national policies governing maternity leave and do not have access to social security or pension plans. The latter is particularly distressing for female-headed households who cannot count on a source of income outside of their own labour (ILO, 2016b).

## Discrimination based on Origin and Heritage

Much of the conflict in the Arab States is perceived to be derived from the discrimination and marginalisation of specific groups based on region, origin, sect or ethnicity. In some cases, regional discrimination is correlated with ethnic and sectarian discrimination. Many groups continue to suffer from institutional, legal and cultural discrimination. While some reform to ensure justice based on these factors, the work to achieve equal rights is continuing. Only equal rights for all citizens will guarantee a sustained social and political peace.

## Migrant Labour and Social Justice

*In this paper, the term 'migrant worker' is used in accordance with international norms, in particular, Article 2 of the International Convention on the Protection of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990), which defines a 'migrant worker' as a 'person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national'. It is important to note that governments in the Middle East tend to prefer to use the term 'temporary contract labourers' or 'temporary expatriate workers'.*

Temporary contract labour or migrant work continues to be a common practice in the Arab states. Migrant workers are often low or unskilled and are commonly recruited for work in menial occupations, such as construction or agriculture, raising the risk of hazardous and vulnerable work. In 2015, it was estimated that roughly 18 million migrant workers resided in the Arab states, the majority coming from Asia (ILO, 2016a). In the Gulf States, migrant workers constitute 95 per cent of workers in the construction and domestic sectors. Providing the exact numbers of migrants remains difficult, in regard to both origin and destination countries, because of irregular migration and overstays. Irregular migration is often made possible thanks to unscrupulous recruiters and other intermediaries, with some even resorting to human smuggling and trafficking, rendering many migrant workers “invisible,” and more vulnerable to abuse. In fact, 600,000 migrants are estimated to have been victims of forced trafficking (ILO, 2013). An irregular immigration status renders migrant workers “invisible,” and more vulnerable to abuse.



Significant shortfalls exist in the efforts of Arab states to ensure social justice in migrant work, though certain progress has been made. Deficiencies are particularly stark in the regulatory framework. No Arab state has ratified the Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97) or the Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143). Regarding protection of migrants and their families, no state has ratified the Private Employment Agencies Convention, 1997 (No. 181) or the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189). These conventions provide the crucial regulatory framework necessary for attaining social justice and represent first steps to be taken by the ILO (ILO, 2016a).

Labour relations between employers and migrant workers across the Middle East are governed by the 'kafala' sponsorship system – an all-encompassing collection of laws, administrative regulations, norms and customary practices. Under kafala, a migrant worker's immigration and residency status is tied to an individual sponsor (kafeel) throughout the contract period in such a way that the migrant worker cannot typically enter the country, resign from a job, transfer employment, nor (in some country cases) leave the country without first obtaining explicit permission from the employer. This creates an imbalance between the rights and abilities of workers and employers to terminate an employment relationship, and be mobile on the labour market in the respective country. The Bali Declaration, adopted by ILO constituents in December 2016, offers a hopeful way forward in that constituents agreed to enhance labour migration policies that (amongst others) “redress employer-worker relationships that impede workers’ freedom of movement, their right to terminate employment or change employers, taking into account any contractual obligations that may apply, and their right to return freely to their countries of origin.”

Other positive efforts that have been observed among Arab states in relation to migrant work include efforts at curbing exploitation by recruitment agencies and the charging of fees from migrant workers. Some of the most positive developments are related to the adoption of mutual recognition agreements (MRAs), bilateral labour agreements (BLAs) and memoranda of understanding (MoUs). These compacts represent formal agreements between states, pertaining to the exchange of labour and offering of work, through a legal framework that ensures basic protections and decent work. However, certain deficiencies remain. First, some MRAs only cover a small portion of jobs and are often limited by the divide in technological education between states recruiting labour and states supplying labour. Second, BLAs and MoUs are often gender-blind and fail to provide specific provisions for the protection of female labourers a glaring omission as females are more likely to be abused than males. Other agreements also fail to grant migrant labourers the same rights as nationals, depriving them of basic components of decent work. Overall, studies have shown that MRAs, BLAs and MoUs are most effective in protecting rights and guaranteeing decent work in countries where robust regulatory frameworks already exist (ILO, 2016a).

## Refugees and Social Justice

Perhaps no people are as threatened in the contemporary Arab World as refugees and the internally displaced. Disconnected from support networks and services and, in the case of refugees, without the benefits of citizenship in their host countries, these individuals face particular challenges in attaining social justice and finding decent work. Refugees often require permits to work in host countries, leading to a rise in informal employment and child labour, localized largely in hazardous sectors. In Lebanon, 92 per cent of economically active Syrian refugees were working in the informal sector, along with 99 per cent in Jordan. Further, in Lebanon 8 per cent of refugee boys aged 10-14 were working, along with 3 per cent of those aged 9-15 in Jordan (EC, 2016). Central to understanding the issue of decent work for refugees is the gendered dimension of displacement. Among Syrians, the rate of women displaced by conflict exceeds that of men. Female refugees face increasing difficulty in finding employment and those that do are concentrated almost exclusively in informal activities. Further, female refugees are often mothers with children, meaning many refugee households are female-headed and creates a need for additional social and healthcare services within the labour market. In Jordan, 600,000 refugees visited hospitals in 2015 and in Lebanon, 70 per cent of refugee families reported having a child needing care (EC, 2016).

Syrian refugees already face significant hurdles as a result of their demographic circumstances. It is estimated that 20 per cent of refugees in Jordan and Lebanon aged 25-64 have not completed primary school and only 10 per cent have completed secondary school (EC, 2016). The low skills base characterizing large parts of the refugee population, coupled with the circumstances of displacement, means many are denied access to decent work and abused by employers. In both Lebanon and Jordan, refugees were found to work longer hours for less money than their non-Syrian counterparts. As a result, the majority of Syrian refugee households are poor, especially those headed by women, with many relying on assistance from UNHCR and other sources (EC, 2016). Moreover, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon still face specific issues, including legal restrictions regarding access to work and social security benefits (UNHCR, 2016). Internally displaced people (IDPs) suffer from higher rates of unemployment and violations in the workplace. For example, since October 2013, internal fighting between the armed groups displaced more than 20,000, in addition to the 42,000 displaced in previous conflicts (UNICEF, 2014).

# Recommendations

In the context of the Arab States, social justice requires a participatory approach where all citizens and residents participate in the development process and benefit from its fruits. Such approach must be based on human rights and equal access to development and work opportunities. Integrated properly into a strategy of genuine reform, promote buy-in and coordination among all stakeholders and establish a solid foundation for a future economy. There is no evidence that the political turmoil in the region is leading to a changing course of the policy direction concerning social justice. There is fear of increasing injustice and/or reverse discrimination in some cases. This will only prolong conflict and most of all will not allow for a real renaissance, based on social justice and equal citizenry, leading the Arab States out of the current deadlock.

## 1. Prioritize the Development of Independent and Empowered Enforcement Mechanisms:

Evidence exists to prove that ratification of international conventions alone and their integration into national strategies and institutions is insufficient in ensuring decent work. Oftentimes these measures do not reach their intended beneficiaries as a result of insufficiently developed or independent monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. These bodies are vital in determining that employers and governments are meeting their obligations under ratified protocols and developing strategies and recommendations to address failures. Existing bodies can suffer from ignorance of the legal and economic implications of conventions, insufficient resources to conduct robust monitoring, or insufficient independence from powerful government institutions. To counter these problems and develop effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, the ILO, representatives of the government member states, unions and employers should develop these monitoring and enforcement mechanisms which must:

- (1) Have clear mandates of which labour issues should be investigated (e.g., women's rights, child labour, etc.);
- (2) Have timeframes for monitoring set in advance (e.g. every quarter, year, etc.);
- (3) Be independent from other government bodies;
- (4) Be integrated into national strategies and policies.

## 2. Encourage Member States to Integrate Statistics on the Informal Sector and Develop Targeted Policies:

The informal sector is frequently disregarded in the labour statistics of Arab states. The nebulous and diffuse nature of informal work often inhibits comprehensive study by state institutions. As a result, the needs and priorities of the informal sector are often absent from national planning, strategy and policy, depriving workers of a vital avenue for protection of their rights and attaining of decent work. This threat is particularly acute for female and child labourers. A new initiative should be encouraged and developed in all member states agree on a definition of informality and to begin the collection of statistics and study of the informal sector, leading to new initiatives on planning and policy. As informal labourers and firms are frequently sceptical of the intentions of state institutions, non-governmental and private bodies can perform data collection and similar activities, which constitutes a valuable opportunity for tri-partisan and coordination between key actors in society and the world of work.

**3. Encourage Member States to Collect Sex-Disaggregated Data, Promote Employment for Women, and Ratify Convention Pertaining to Gender Equality:** Efforts to improve access to decent work cannot be conducted in a gender-blind manner. Mainstreaming gender in development planning is indeed highly needed. When compared to their male counterparts, female workers face both unique challenges and entrenched inequality, necessitating targeted strategies and interventions at the governmental and non-governmental level. Critical to the success of any endeavours is accurate information and a rights-based regulatory framework. Related to the former, it is vital to strengthen national data collection mechanisms in member States, to ensure that data collected on the labour market can reflect the different circumstances of males and females. Capacity building efforts to boost data collection abilities and the understanding of collectors are an effective step available to the ILO. This will help in benchmarking the current status of women's employment and allow for measurements in progress over time. Ratification of conventions with relevance to gender equality may help to ensure that policies, strategies and interventions are conducted in a rights-based manner and under a legal aegis. The most critical conventions to ratify in this regard include the Maternity Protection Convention, the Equal Remuneration Convention, the Discrimination (employment and Occupation) Convention, the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, the Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention and the Domestic Workers Convention. This should be accompanied with the right enforcement mechanism to ensure actual application of these interventions.

**4. Empower and Support Regional Bodies and Governments to Pursue a Regional Labour Exchange Initiative:** Economic exchanges among the Arab states consist primarily of products and goods. The exchange of services and labour is less frequent, despite innate advantages of such a transaction. States in the Levant have an excess supply of young labour that is well suited for the economic demands of wealthier Gulf States in the construction, industrial and domestic sectors. Despite an advantageous fit, labour exchange is often done in an ad-hoc fashion and handled by private employers and recruiters in the absence of a broader strategy or initiative. Many destination states, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and others have experience with MRAs, BLAs, MoUs and other protocols governing labour migration. A new initiative should be encouraged that prompts these states to look inward, within the region, and coordinate with states to supply labour in a legal fashion. Implemented successfully such an initiative could relieve the pressure of unemployed youth on fragile states, satisfy the economic demands of wealthier recipient states, provide decent work to young men and women and, through legal frameworks, ensure that fundamental principles and rights are protected. The first step should be the design of a regional strategy, drawing on the regional influence of the ILO ROAS, Arab League, Arab Trade Union Confederation, representatives of member states, civil society actors, unions and other participants in a tripartite approach.

**5. Commission a Region-Wide Analysis of Labour Demand and Labour Supply:** One of the challenges to the creation of a regional strategy for labour exchange is the technological divide that exists between countries. Indicators of technological literacy, such as Internet penetration, vary distinctly among developed and developing countries. This limits the possibility for successful integration of migrant labourers in non-menial, moderately skilled work and deters recruiting countries. To prepare a strategy for labour exchange it is critical to understand the circumstances of the supply and demand side of the world of work. An ideal means of conducting such an assessment would be through a (i) gap analysis and (ii) skill forecasting. A gap analysis should assess the competencies and skills offered by prospective labour, measured against the demands of employers and recipient

countries. While the gap analysis measures present circumstances, skill forecasting should anticipate the future. A successful iteration of such a tool will assess what changes are likely to occur in the world of work, caused by factors such as demographic changes or the integration of technology. A gap analysis and skill forecasting serve as an effective means to develop a comprehensive understanding of regional circumstances and prepare a strategy that accounts for and capitalizes from such knowledge.

#### 6. Identify and Support Academic Reforms to Prioritize Relevant Education:

A major determinant in the creation of a skilled workforce is the education and training of workers. Currently, several reforms are needed across education in the Arab states. This includes the creation of mechanisms to assist in the transition of graduates to the labour market, the transformation of tertiary education curricula to a private sector orientation, the curbing of drop-out rates, a sustained effort to boost the image and options of vocational education and the opening of 'non-traditional' fields of study for female students. While the magnitude of necessary reforms may appear daunting, it also offers a hidden opportunity, specifically the chance to develop regional coordination, including region-wide standards and curricula. In support of greater labour market integration and the exchange of workers, unified or complementary standards in education can facilitate migration and regional cooperation. It can eliminate fears of a technological divide and ease the burdens of a permit system. Such reforms should be identified, strategized and supported in a tri-partite manner, drawing on the respective inputs, perspectives and resources of governmental ministries, educators and their unions, labour unions, the ILO and related stakeholders.



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