

PROMOTING YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN YEMEN

FINDINGS AND STRATEGIES





In 2013, Yemen's youth sit at the forefront of a new revolution. With young people comprising 75 percent of the population, they face the responsibility to transform their economy and improve the prosperity of their country. Through the events of the Arab Spring, young Yemenis demonstrated eagerness for positive change and for their voices to be heard. These same young males and females are now poised for real change, particularly with regards to employment: how to earn a living for themselves and their families. Yemen's youth are ready for an economic revolution to build a better future and evolve into the country they peacefully stood for in January 2011.

However, while momentum and feelings of empowerment from the Arab Spring remain, young people in Yemen face extreme challenges

in improving their economic situation. A crushing youth unemployment rate sits at 35 percent, corruption in both private and public sectors is rampant, and many youth feel they have little or no options for securing a steady job. Political instability and ongoing violence further cripple an already weak economic environment. The unemployment crisis in Yemen will not be resolved in a year or likely within the next five years; however, through market-based programming, young people in targeted areas can make strides to improve their economic situation.

BACKGROUND FIGURES

- Yemen is the poorest country in the Arab world
- 62 years is the average life expectancy
- 76 percent of population resides in rural areas
- 75 percent of population is under the age of 25
- Ranked 154 (of 187) on Human Development Index
- 42 percent of population live on less than \$2 per day



METHODOLOGY & APPROACH

Mercy Corps completed a brief youth assessment in Yemen from November 14 – 20 in Sana'a, Aden, and Taiz to create a snapshot of economic realities and identify opportunities for future programming. The assessment was conducted through qualitative methods in order to gain preliminary information on potential

livelihoods programming for young people. Four youth Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held (two in Taiz, two in Aden) as well as a series of key informant interviews with local organizations and partners. As time and scope were limited, this assessment has highlighted areas that need further study and confirmed the need for a greater labor market assessment.

SUMMARY Findings Of Preliminary Assessment

Some of the main assessment findings and key issues affecting youth are included below. It is important to note that these views reflect those of urban, educated youth only.¹

Finding #1 - The experience trap *"Why will no one give us a chance?" – Female, Aden*

Like many other countries suffering from few jobs and high youth unemployment, young people believe they are caught in the "experience trap." Across all FGDs, youth mentioned that employers are looking for practical experience. However, young people don't have any experience because employers are unwilling to take a chance on them. Therefore, youth feel helpless in entering the labor market to find that initial entry point. Youth across all FGDs also shared that their local high schools and universities do not provide any opportunities for practical courses or instruction.

Finding #2 - Education without knowledge

"We have an education but we don't have knowledge." – Female, Aden
Many young people mentioned that all of their education is theoretical and therefore not useful in the job market. Furthermore, youth vehemently feel that university curricula is outdated and that their instructors are not passionate nor experienced themselves. "Learning by memory" was commonly mentioned. One youth in Taiz mentioned that

the "output" of the education does not satisfy the job market. Many of the individuals in the FGDs shared that they did not choose a major or specialization that they believed would help them to earn money in the job market. Rather they are forced to choose a course of study based on parents' wishes or due to a limited number of available seats/slots.

Young people believe the skills most desired by employers are English language and computer literacy. Financial management and marketing skills were also mentioned as important. According to young people, these skills are not taught or further refined at their schools and universities.

Finding #3 - Lack of adult mentors and positive role models

"We are the leaders ourselves." – Female, Taiz
Overwhelmingly, young people also expressed dissatisfaction with their professors and teachers. Youth in FGDs feel that their professors are not passionate and often not qualified or lack experience themselves. Furthermore, young people do not feel that their professors are role models. Across all FGDs, youth said that their teachers would not support them in finding jobs and would not take any extra effort in order to give advice or

guidance. Beyond immediate family and their peers, young people shared that they do not have many adult, positive role models in their lives. Most youth indicated that they do not have career mentors or adults whom they can ask professional advice.

Finding #4 - Ubiquitous Wasta *"Wasta is like a vitamin. Without it, you are sick." – Male, Aden*

Wasta, or corruption by use of favoritism, was mentioned frequently throughout the FGDs during discussions on every topic – education, private sector, public sector, and general community life. Young people feel that wasta permeates much of everyday life and everyday decisions in Yemen. Even if youth study hard and work hard, young Yemenis feel that it is who you know that determines your life's future. "Buying jobs" was also mentioned. For this reason, many youth feel hopeless. Some youth question whether or not studying and getting a degree is of any use.

Young people shared that wasta impacts all forms of employment – from simple, manual labor to some of the country's most prestigious positions. For example, connections are equally important for obtaining a job as a driver as they are for a

high-level government position. Nepotism also influences educational paths for youth because most universities in Yemen have a limited number of slots for a specific area of study. For example, one young woman from in our FGD wished to study medicine, but she was unable to secure a spot as many were reserved for friends and relatives of the university's administration.

Finding #5 - Mixed Identity

"Youth are sad. But the revolution has shown that we can do anything." – Female, Taiz

In FGDs, youth expressed feelings of pride and importance over their role in the revolution. While many believed that their demographic was always powerful, they now feel that their importance is known throughout the greater community. Young people still feel momentum and energy from the events of the Arab Spring, but they also feel manipulated and frustrated by empty promises of their government and political parties. Youth mentioned feeling powerful as often as they mentioned feeling frustrated and without hope. One male in Taiz commented, "Youth have energy, but they have nothing to use their energy for."

On the topic of employment, young people



(males and females alike) expressed great worry and frustration. Some youth felt that there are jobs available, but that there are too many candidates for each available position. Furthermore, *wasta* dictates who receives the position. As one youth said, life happens in "slow motion." Young people want to work towards personal and professional success but believe their opportunities are severely limited.

Finding #6 - Gender Divide

"It is easier to be a girl." – Male, Taiz

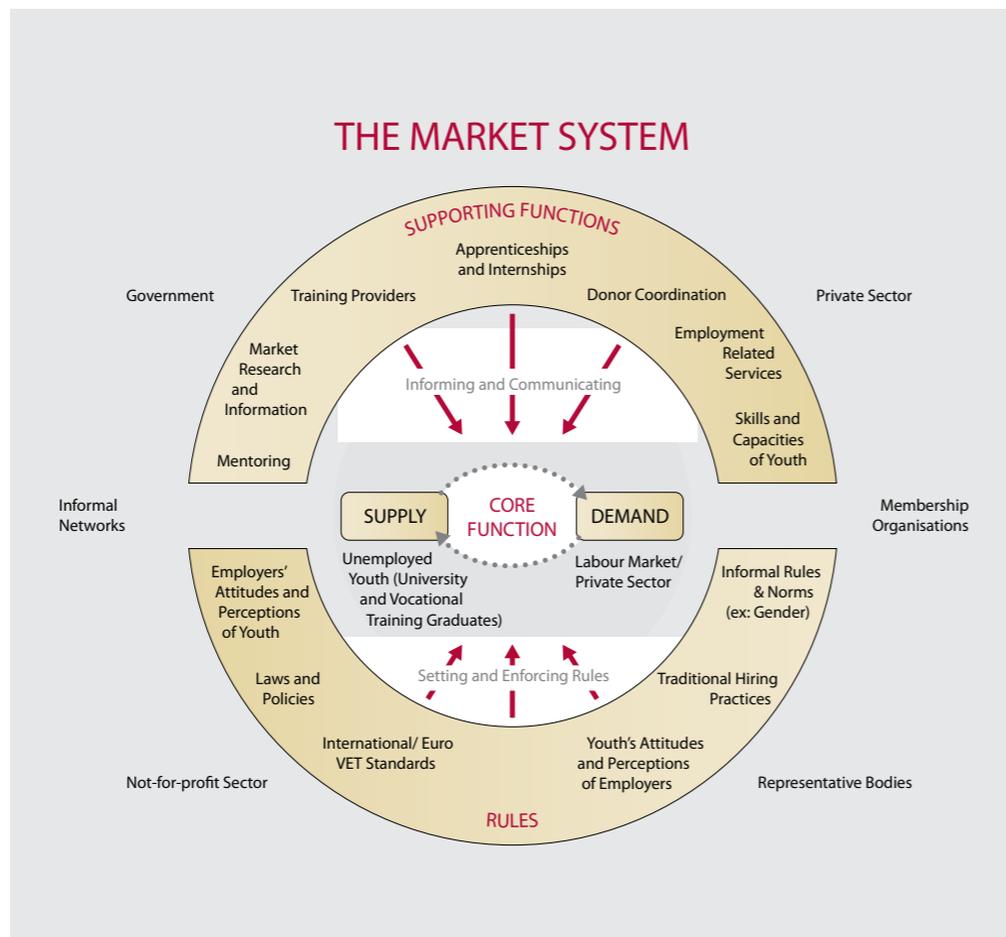
Many young men and some young women expressed that it is easier for females to find jobs. They explained that young females will accept a low salary and are more willing to accept lower status positions.

While some women felt that females had an advantage in finding work, others felt that their limitations were much more extreme. Some young women shared that banks and similar institutions insisted that female employees show their full face, which is against their religious beliefs and traditions of wearing a niqab in public. Additionally, young women believe there are many jobs which are not deemed culturally appropriate for women, like drivers, manual labor, etc. Finally, women

have more limitations in terms of mobility and transportation. For example, young women who live in Lahj believe they are unable to apply for jobs in Aden as it is unsafe for them to commute daily.

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF YOUTH WITHIN THE LARGER MARKET SYSTEM

Young job seekers in Yemen are participating in a much larger market system with multiple stakeholders, rules, and supporting functions. It is impossible to understand how to improve the situation for young people without first understanding the impact of supporting functions (such as access to market information, transportation, mentoring, etc.) and formal and informal rules (gender and cultural norms, etc.) Mercy Corps employs a systems approach and therefore understands that to improve the economic situation of youth, we must first understand constraints and barriers which impact efficiency in the entire system. The sustainability of our programs is dependent upon the ways in which we work with youth but more importantly how we catalyze the entire market system to function more effectively and efficiently beyond the completion of our programs.



CORE PRINCIPLES OF YOUTH EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY IN YEMEN

Mercy Corps Yemen's youth employment programming will promote and recommends other development actors to consider:

Principle #1

A Market-Driven Approach

Yemen is the poorest country in the Middle East and saw major price shocks, including food, water, and fuel, to its already weak economy during the Arab Spring. Also, since 90% of Yemen's food is imported, the country is volatile to global price increases. As political uncertainty remains, Yemen's markets will likely continue to be volatile. Mercy Corps is cognizant of the fact that these labor markets are constantly changing. Furthermore, we understand that the economic situation is intrinsically tied to the complex issues of governance and stability in Yemen.

For these reasons, a key element of our employment strategy and of any economic program will be continuously understanding local labor market supply and demand. This will be done through iterative market assessments and analyses, as well as links to other programs doing similar market research. When possible, market analyses will

employ a youth-led approach. Mercy Corps recommends fostering a shared learning approach so that current market information can be easily accessed by participating youth and NGO and government programs, and have a greater benefit to the targeted governorates.

This thinking largely builds upon the Making Markets Work for the Poor (M4P)¹ approach to economic development. The M4P approach is characterized by a focus on acknowledging that the poor are participants in market systems, understanding their role as producers, consumers and laborers in these complex systems, and facilitating systemic change by identifying and leveraging capacities and incentives of market players to address underlying causes of market system dysfunction. The aim of M4P is to address income poverty by improving the core market relationships and transactions, supporting functions, and rules/ regulations of a market system to improve access and terms of access

of the poor. Instead of asking, "what problems do poor youth have and how can we solve them?" M4P will push us to explore, "why isn't the system itself providing solutions and how can we address the constraints that are preventing it from doing so?"

This facilitative approach will enhance the sustainability of our interventions through youth programs. Mercy Corps is leading on the application of market development principles in challenging environments, working in partnership with the Springfield Centre for Business in Development.

Principle #2

A youth-led approach

Through four informal FGDs in both Taiz and Aden, the assessment explored perceptions of young people. Throughout each discussion, young people shared a keen eagerness to participate in leadership opportunities. They believe that they have proven leadership abilities via the events of the Arab Spring and

are now interested in additional opportunities to prove their mettle.

A key observation from the FGDs was that most youth could not identify or list key growth sectors or profitable job opportunities in their labor markets. Therefore, Mercy Corps recommends facilitating a youth-led process where young people could lead market assessments to a) determine employment opportunities b) provide leadership roles for youth c) build technical and soft skills of youth (market research, communication skills, etc.) and d) facilitate valuable interactions with potential employers.

Principle #3 Matching skills with opportunities

A core principal of our youth employment programming will be to match skills-building and learning with real opportunities for youth to apply what they have learned. Building skills without opportunities for economic engagement breeds frustration among youth, a criticism of numerous youth programs across the Middle East and globally. Therefore, our suggested employment interventions will be thoughtfully integrated with other program activities and then matched with real, meaningful economic opportunities

within the specific markets of each targeted governorate. For example, we will not train or encourage youth to gain skills in carpentry, unless we know there is a clear demand for this work. Additionally, we will only encourage entrepreneurship initiatives if we also understand the larger ecosystem for youth self-employment – process and ease of registering businesses, accessing loans, etc.

Principle #4 Understanding of interconnectedness of economic-governance-conflict issues

Yemen's deep-rooted poverty, changing political landscape, complex proximity to the African coast, extreme food and water scarcity issues, and growing youth population give the country a unique economic and political context, unlike any other in the Middle East.

Youth and unemployment issues are inextricably tied to complex issues in governance and the changing political situation. Furthermore, the somewhat constant threat of violence and extremism in some areas of Yemen greatly hinders economic growth and private sector development. Therefore, any youth economic programming must take into consideration

the rapidly changing nexus between economic growth, governance, and conflict.

Principle #5 Facilitation of links for Mercy Corps beneficiaries and existing programs

Mercy Corps is not alone in promoting youth engagement in Yemen. Other international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), local organizations, and government programs are also working with youth in order to improve young people's opportunities for making a smooth transition to adulthood. Therefore, when possible, we should develop strategic links to other programs. For example, if another INGO is seeking to strengthen targeted value chains across Yemen, Mercy Corps may be able to link youth from our programs into appropriate entry points along that value chain.





RECOMMENDED EMPLOYMENT STRATEGIES

The following recommendations are listed in no particular order and focus solely on youth employment. Before embarking on dedicated youth entrepreneurship initiatives in Yemen, a rigorous examination of the enabling environment and larger ecosystem would be necessary.

Strategy #1 **Engage the private sector**

An employment program that only focuses on the supply side will fail. Skill building is of no use unless it is linked to actual economic opportunities. Therefore, NGOs cannot

engage only youth, but we must also work strategically with potential short and long-term employers. Therefore, we will work with youth but will simultaneously work with local businesses so that there are identified concrete opportunities for the young people in our programs.

We must consider the private sector as a stakeholder of regular engagement and on-going dialogue, inclusion in the strategic planning process. This include private sector actors at all levels, including medium sized and lead firms even outside the geographic

target area but with potential interest in the target market. Agencies such as the Mothabron Institute and SMEPs (Aden) can enable technical assistance to small businesses so that that job creation happens simultaneously with youth entering the labor market.

In turn, non-governmental organizations can strengthen the private sector via activities such as assessing their needs and identifying market dysfunctions, sharing information on market trends, determining strategies for business expansion and diversification (which may include increasing access to microfinance institutions), and linking them with appropriately skilled workers, etc.

Strategy #2 **Expand online job listings to diverse sectors and to larger population**

Youth mentioned that they were aware of available jobs through online job sites, particularly Yemen HR (yemenhr.com), Yemen CV Network (yemencv.net), and Zidney (zidney.net). While youth are aware of these sites, it is worth noting that not all youth have access to internet, each site lists a small number of available positions, and some only operate in English. Furthermore, many of the job listings are focused on work in the NGO/ NGO sector. In targeted areas, organizations or the Yemeni government could work with these existing portals to diversify and expand listed available jobs.

Strategy #3 **Map the market on a continual basis via youth-led labor market assessments**

The first step to any employment initiative is understanding current demands and openings in that labor market. As Yemen's economy is relatively unstable and susceptible to shocks due to the evolving political situation, our programs should routinely assess and reassess market happenings. Young people are craving leadership positions, as well as concrete, practical

professional experience. Engaging young people in mapping the market serves multiple purposes to increase their skills, promote leadership, and ultimately collect information to inform future activities.

Strategy #4 **Facilitate internships and on-the-job opportunities**

As youth are desperately seeking forms of practical experience, future youth programming should consider creating internships. Under a USAID-funded Engaging Youth for a Stable Yemen (EYSY) program, Mercy Corps facilitated 345 internships, while 69 resulted in full or part time positions (46 full-time, 23 part-time). Twenty of the youth currently not employed have decided to continue as volunteers, 56 of them plan on carrying on with their studies. All 345 youth gained valuable on-the-job experience and are now able to demonstrate previous work on their CVs.

Scaling-up these activities represents “quick wins” because there is a present and clear need for these internships from youth's perspectives. It is an important strategy to build trust between private sector, youth, and NGOs.

At present, Mercy Corps internship model covers almost all costs for internship activities. Moving forward, employers should be expected to contribute to interns' stipends or assist with associated costs (transportation, etc.), even if minimal. These businesses must invest in youth as employees from the onset. The end goal of every internship should be to secure full-time work and this expectation should be clear to youth and employers from the beginning of the partnership. If necessary, NGO staff or mentors can work with youth to make this messaging clear throughout the duration of their internships.

Strategy #5 **Strengthen career guidance within universities**

Organizations should follow a facilitative approach and work with existing market structures. Across FGDs, young people shared that there are little or no resources focused on career guidance within universities. Students feel that what they are learning in school is often completely disconnected from the job market. They graduate without professional mentors and with little or no guidance on how to enter the labor market. With a focus on sustainability, NGOs may have a unique opportunity to work with professors or

administration within universities to ensure that students have some guidance on available jobs, interview techniques, building a CV, etc.

NGOs would facilitate the strengthening or development of these activities by training relevant university staff or ensuring all schools have an Office of Career Services or similar department.

Via EYSY, Mercy Corps has experience in developing mentoring and job readiness workshops and curricula. In EYSY, fifty youth were invited to attend an “EYSY Business Development Workshop” with businessmen from Aden who spoke about the importance of a strong business community in Yemen’s future, marketing in small business growth, and the role of entrepreneurs in developing countries.

During the workshop, youth talked about building a strong business base in Yemen to contribute to national unity and local cooperation. In addition, the participants received mentoring to develop plans to expand their original businesses. These activities could be expanded to universities or other similar workforce preparation institutions.

Strategy #6 **Promote wasta awareness campaigns**

Wasta and nepotism are deeply ingrained in Yemeni culture and cannot be changed or influenced in the near future or via short-term donor-funded programs. However, although the issue is vast and complex, it can and should be addressed as it is top-of-mind for many youth. Awareness campaigns at universities and career centers can acknowledge the issue and create a dialogue. If young people and top business leaders worked together to develop this campaign, it could be an effective trust-building activity. The campaign could use mobile technology to share the campaign messages. Via these activities, NGOs could also operate as an information hub to educators and employers, sharing tools, tips, and resource manuals via appropriate dissemination channels.

Strategy #7 **Promote youth friendly spaces**

Young people need spaces to communicate with one another, share ideas on searching for work, and talk about the great transitions they face as the move from adolescence to adulthood. Youth expressed an interest in youth-friendly internet cafes of job centers where they could interact with one another



and share tips on interviewing, applying for jobs, etc. NGOs should look to partner with existing schools, cafés, or community centers to promote youth-friendly hours of business or dedicated youth days where young people can collaborate on issues and work with peer mentors.

Strategy #9 **Scale up or expand existing programs**

NGOs can identify existing local, successful programs where we may be able to add value through capacity building or other measures. For example, Employment for Education’s (EFE) Workplace Success program has been successful but on a small scale. Donors and other NGOs may collaborate with existing programs, like EFE as one example, to scale-up in geographic areas and communities where they are not working but where we have an existing relationship and presence.

Strategy #10 **Developed tailored initiatives for young women**

It is clear that young women in Yemen face unique challenges in their transition to adulthood and in their pursuit of economic opportunities. Therefore, NGOs should not propose identical activities and initiatives

for young men and young women. The employment barriers that face a young man in Taiz are likely quite different than those that face a female youth in Lahj. NGOs should tailor activities according to specific gender needs of each location.

Suggested activities may include working with the private sector to ensure equal salary and safe and appropriate working conditions for young women, both in internships and in full-time work. These activities may include ensuring that young women do not face transportation dangers in moving from home to work. Additionally, we may work to influence community perceptions and attitudes on culturally accepted forms of employment for men and women. For example, a young female in Taiz expressed interest in being a pharmacist but believed society would not accept a female in this position. NGOs may do this work through awareness campaign or by embedding sound gender practices in universities and job support institutes (such as Mothabron Institute, etc.)

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