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# Understanding Syrian & Jordanian Youth Transitions from Education to Employment

An introduction to the local context in Amman,  
Jordan

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## Executive Summary

Syrian and Jordanian youth in Jordan are experiencing challenges with regards to their access to education, their employment, and the transitions between the two. Amidst rising costs, economic fragility, and political uncertainty, youth in the country are rendered increasingly vulnerable. Despite international and local efforts to provide youth with access to education and employment opportunities, and bridge the transitions between the two, there are several challenges youth continue to experience in the country that hinder their personal and professional growth. These challenges include a weak transportation infrastructure, barriers to female entry to education and the workforce, and youth's social and cultural expectations towards their employment.

This paper seeks to provide a brief overview of the education, employment, and transitional landscapes Syrian & Jordanian youth experience in Amman, the capital of Jordan, in particular, building upon existing academic literature and non-governmental publications, as well as fieldwork conducted in July & August of 2019. This paper explores the current circumstances related to youth's education and employment in Jordan, and discusses some challenges in linking both phases.

This paper also introduces several recommendations for research & action that can inform future applied research and discussions of education and employment policy and practice in Jordan and in the region. First, advocacy to work to increase minimum wage for citizens and non-citizens in Jordan is crucial in light of rising costs of living. Second, exploring the possibility of opening professions to Syrians in Jordan is crucial, given the increasingly protracted nature of this conflict – drawing attention to the opportunity of opening up teaching jobs to Syrians. Third, it advocates for a market-based approach to designing training, education, & employment programs to graduate youth with in-demand qualifications. Lastly, this paper highlights the importance of further research and a focus on knowledge translation to operationalize research into policy response, donor action, and organizational programming.

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## Introduction

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has experienced several influxes of refugees that have shaped and continue to shape internal dynamics and policy. Shortly after its independence from Britain in 1946 and declaration as the Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan, the country received its first large influx of refugees from Palestine in 1948, and later again in 1967. However, Jordan is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention of 1951, nor is it a signatory to its 1967 Protocol. Thus, the main legal framework for working with refugees is a 1998 Memorandum of Understanding signed between Jordan and UNHCR.

With the most recent influxes of refugees to Jordan, the local population increased from 7.1 million in 2010 to over 10 million in 2019, making Jordan the second-largest refugee-hosting country in the world (World Bank Data 2019; UNHCR 2019). With this rapid population growth, the country is under undoubted strain to provide resources and accommodate locals and refugees alike into its economy and society. Of the refugee populations in Jordan, a majority are Syrian: there are more than 1,364,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan, 670,000 of whom are registered and 126,000 of whom currently live in camps (Jordan Response Plan Humanitarian Relief Coordination Unit 2019). There are smaller refugee populations in the country from Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, and other countries. Additionally, and perhaps most significantly in the country's history, there is a large Palestinian population in Jordan living across the country in cities, camps, and other urban settlements that exercise varying degrees of rights and freedoms based on their legal statuses. The Jordanian population is young: UNICEF reported that over 63% of the Jordanian population is under the age of 30 (UNICEF, n.d.). More than 19% of registered Syrian refugees in Jordan are between the ages of 15 - 24 (Al-Hawandeh & El-Ghali 2017). While this can be seen as an opportunity for change in the country led by youth for youth, it has also placed drastic strain on the Jordanian government to provide access to education and employment for this large and growing demographic. This strain has been met with policy innovation and cooperation through the Jordan Compact, Jordan Response Plans, and the government's ongoing cooperation with international and local stakeholders to ensure provision of basic services and resources for communities across the country.

This working paper provides a background and foundation to understand the trajectories of youth in Amman, the Jordanian capital, from education to employment. The paper provides an introduction to the present situation in Amman to ensure local and refugee youths' access to education & employment, working on and with Syrian and Jordanian youth. The paper builds on academic literature, NGO publications, and fieldwork in Amman to introduce the topic and highlight its significance. This paper also draws upon information gathered through several semi-structured interviews conducted in Amman between July and August 2019 with INGO representatives, community-based organizations, local researchers, and youth in Amman to gain a deeper insight into the lives, challenges, trajectories, and aspirations of local youth navigating the complex spaces of and transitions between education & employment. This paper adopts an intersectional and feminist lens highlighting different socio-demographic characteristics together to understand how different youth are able to access education and employment in various ways, and the implications of access or lack of access on their lives and livelihoods. Lastly, this working paper seeks to identify research questions that need to be asked for future research and policy advocacy in Jordan and in the region, based on preliminary research, interviews, findings, and a mapping of the range of actors involved in education & employment in Amman. I highlight the initial themes that have emerged for future research in greater detail in the following sections.

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## 1. Education & Employment in Amman

### 1.1. Introduction to Education & Employment

In light of Jordan's economic fragility and mounting financial pressures, the Syrian refugee crisis places undoubted additional strain on the nation's already limited resources, services, and even jobs. This strain impacts local and Syrian youths' access to education & employment and endangers their livelihoods and future trajectories as they seek employment. Refugees and local populations are rendered vulnerable to higher prices, lower wages, and precarious working and living situations, which struck upon neoliberal transformation since the early 2000s and continues to grow. International responses, agreements, and programs attempted to address the refugee crisis situation in Jordan to varying degrees of success since the start of the conflict in Syria.

For Jordan, response by local and international communities towards Palestinian and Iraqi refugee crises taught the country lessons that it carried forward when responding to the Syrian crisis since its onset. As a result, many programs since the onset of the crisis have attempted to address the education and employment gaps refugees are susceptible to experiencing in situations of protracted exile, even attempting to coordinate across sectors, donors, agencies, and communities. Notably, in February 2016, the Jordan Compact was signed at the London Conference hosted by the governments of the United Kingdom, Kuwait, and Norway, as well as the UN. The Jordanian government presented the compact as an opportunity to transform the Syrian crisis into an opportunity for national development, shifting towards developmental programs in education, economic growth, and job creation for Jordanians and Syrian refugees through different approaches such trade arrangements with the EU (ODI 2018). Additionally, the conference resulted in pledges for upwards of \$40 billion in loans and \$12 billion in grants for development and humanitarian response in the region according to a 2018 report by ODI. Several follow-up conferences took place afterwards, such as the Brussels Conference, to reaffirm international commitment in funding for Syrian refugees and host communities. Since 2014, nearly all operations pertaining to Syrian refugees in Jordan are governed, monitored, and approved through the Ministry of Planning and Internal Cooperation and their Jordan Response Plans, which have been discussed in more detail by Culbertson *et al.* (2016) and others. The Jordan Response Plan is published biennially and identifies several overarching strategic objectives for action – an innovative approach to highlight key areas of need for programming, and coordinate the efforts of international, local, and grassroots organizations. These plans are have been designed as developmental plans to benefit citizens and refugees alike, turning the crisis into an opportunity for local development (Lenner & Turner 2019).

The following two sections will provide an overview on the current situation of education and employment in the country, with a focus on its capital Amman, drawing from the work of the Jordan Response Plan, as well as the organizations and projects it oversees. Each section will also highlight some challenges the sectors have been experiencing.

## 1.2. Education

Given the majority youth population in the country, as well as the influx of approximately one million Syrian refugees in recent years, the Jordanian government has had to substantially increase government spending on education. The government spent US 1.628 billion in operating expenditures on education in 2018 alone (World Bank 2019), however it continues to struggle to meet demands for public education. While non-Jordanians are obliged to pay for primary and secondary schooling in either the public or private sectors, the Ministry of Education now provides this formal education for Syrian refugee children for free. The Jordan Response Plan (2019) reported that the education sector has made significant progress to accommodate more Syrian refugees into schools. Of the 233,000 school-aged Syrian refugees (between the ages of 5 - 17), 134,121 students were enrolled in public schools and 29,300 children who were not in school were able to seek certified non-formal education, kindergarten, or other learning services (Jordan Response Plan 2019: 7). Despite this achievement, approximately 73,000 Syrian students are left out of certified or formal education. Students with disabilities, those in rural areas, or those who are particularly vulnerable due to their age, gender, religion, or social identity are excluded and marginalized further.

In order to accommodate larger volumes of students in public schools, Jordan adopted double-shift schooling, operating both a morning and an afternoon shift in hundreds of public schools across the country. However, schools continue to be overcrowded, especially in Amman and Irbid, and the quality of the education students receive in the double-shift system is compromised. In an interview with Dr. Oroub El Abed, a researcher on the From Education to Employment research project studying the trajectories of youth from education to employment, she critiques the double-shift school system, drawing from accounts in qualitative interviews with youth in Amman. She explained that the system is discriminatory and does not follow through with promises of social inclusion from the Jordan Response Plan, most notably due to the fact that Jordanian students attend school in the morning and Syrians attend in the afternoons – reinforcing segregation between Jordanian and Syrian students. Additionally, El Abed explains that Jordanian teacher fatigue in afternoon shifts is a major concern, preventing Syrian students from learning at the same pace as their Jordanian peers. El Abed questions why the doors were not opened for Syrian teachers

in Jordan to teach Syrian students, an approach that was adopted by UNRWA with the onset of the Palestinian refugee crisis in Jordan which resulted in high-quality education and high-performing schools within the UNRWA system.

Many Syrian youth and children affected by the crisis had their access to education interrupted. For many, this interruption is ongoing. A working paper by the Economic Research Forum entitled *Education Interrupted: Enrollment, attainment, and dropout of Syrian refugees in Jordan* (2018) explores this issue and explains that while enrollment rates among Syrian refugees in Jordan had recovered to a certain extent as of 2016, the quality of this education is in question notably due to the double shift system and the inaccessibility of resources in the public schooling system. While existing research has determined that Syrian children in Jordan have poorer learning outcomes compared to their Jordanian counterparts, many questions remain unanswered. Data on regular school attendance is not widely available or age-segregated, meaning that relevant policy and programming are challenging to design, and the true gaps in Syrian children's school attendance are unknown. Several known barriers relate to children and youths' low school attendance, including bureaucracy in registration, violence at school, transportation challenges, and the need to seek illegal employment to financially support their families. Further research should be directed towards understanding such challenges in depth and finding solutions to address them in the short and long run, using relevant and detailed data.

For youth whose education was interrupted, informal education programs (or catch-up programs) are key. Often funded and managed by independent charities, NGOs, and private donors, these programs are important for refugees to provide literacy skills but also as safe spaces for education and social development. One notable example are UNICEF's Makani centres, located in several cities across Jordan. Given the high demand for and importance of such catch-up programs, youth have stepped in with initiatives and community-based programs that seek to provide non-formal and informal education in a variety of fields. Hikaya Center is one such organization. Formally established in 2013 by youth working in development, the organization focuses on training community members in different fields such as human resources development, media and communications, leadership and management, and even entrepreneurship. Obaida, one of the founders of the center and initiative, explained that youth often have to forgo their education to



enter the workforce and support their families, thus, they are unable to attend school or even non-formal or informal education programs to continue their education and learning. He finds that initiatives and spaces such as Hikaya Center have the potential to keep youth off the streets and in fulfilling and productive programs that allow them to learn new skills and access necessary psychosocial support in partnership with other NGOs and stakeholders.

Last in the education journey is higher education, which has undoubtedly proven challenging for Syrians in Jordan. Accessing higher education in the first place can prove challenging financially and logistically: scholarships are sparse and competitive, and limited transportation to and from universities can deter students. Youth (Syrians and Jordanians) who do complete higher education experience barriers to entering the workforce, especially Syrians whose employment is restricted to medium-to-low-skill sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and agriculture. Highly educated Syrian youth are pushed to seek resettlement in order to find further education or careers that could more closely suit their qualifications and degrees – especially those who were encouraged or funded to enter IT or tech-related programs who will be unable to seek employment in their sectors upon graduation due to work permit restrictions and slower job markets (Pascucci 2019).

Interviews in the field, including with Niveen Bataineh from WUSC Jordan, have identified one possible opportunity for education: vocational training. Given high market demand for vocational work, establishing programs for youth to learn a trade and enter that job market can better accommodate the needs of the Jordanian economy within a market-based and demand-driven approach to education. Bataineh explained that the vocational sector in Jordan is highly decentralized and uncoordinated, which is one important and urgent avenue for research, development, and action in the coming years. It also warrants policy attention to ameliorate the status of graduates of such vocational centers in order to secure their social protection, like those in any other profession, and determine their minimum wages and benefits.

Despite double-shift schools and increased spending on education (both formally and informally), more than 73,000 Syrian children and undoubtedly many Jordanian children are out of school. Initiatives to boost enrollment and address attendance are crucial – in line with the Convention of

the Rights of the Child that mandates access to education for all. Going forward, the Jordanian government continues to work under the Jordan Response Plan and with countless organizations to address the education gap for Syrian refugees and vulnerable children and youth. However, it is clear that the nation has a long road ahead to ensure universal access to quality primary and secondary education, after which a reassessment of higher and vocational education within a market-driven approach is crucial.

### **1.3. Employment**

Youth unemployment rates in the Middle East and North Africa region are high – especially in Jordan. According to an OECD Development Centre publication titled *Youth Well-being: Policy Review of Jordan* (2018), the unemployment rate in Jordan among youth is twice the global average, and is especially high among university graduates. Most recent data by the Jordanian Department of Statistics shows that the official unemployment rate reached 19.2% during the second quarter of 2019, an increase from previous quarters (Department of Statistics 2019). The unemployment rate is especially high among university degree holders (bachelors or higher) – 30.1% for males and 84.7% for females (Department of Statistics 2019). In 2019, 41.4% of youth ages 15 - 24 in Jordan were unemployed (Department of Statistics 2019). UNICEF reported that 39% of Jordanian youth between the ages of 15 - 29 are not in education, employment, or training - a striking figure that urges attention, research, and policy (UNICEF 2019).

The Jordan Compact was established to support Syrian refugees' access to employment, citing a need to “enable refugees, previously subject to regulatory barriers to labour markets, access to jobs” (Betts *et al.* 2017: 10). Under this agreement, Jordan heavily reduced the price of a work permit (from JOD 700 to JOD 10) specifically for low-skilled work in agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and specific service industries. In return, Jordan would receive better funding and support to host refugees. This approach also allowed Jordan to move closer towards a manufacturing economy, one of the country's economic goals for the future, through the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs).

As of December 2019, UNHCR reported that only approximately 175,000 Syrian refugees were issued work permits that were registered through the Ministry of Labour. According to Lenner & Turner (2019), obtaining a work permit is not a straightforward process and has deterred employees and employers. In addition to this, the SEZs did not prove to be as successful as academics, donors, and governments had anticipated. Low wages provided to workers in the SEZs are unfeasible and discouraging for workers, especially for higher-skilled Syrians in Jordan, primarily due to the high costs of living and the time and money spent on transportation to and from the SEZs. Furthermore, a report published by Fafo (2019) suggested that few Syrian refugees had heard of the SEZs in the first place. Other reasons for the limited success of SEZs could include long working hours, which do not allow employees to seek additional work to supplement their low incomes (Betts *et al.* 2017). Also, attracting multinational corporations to the SEZs has been a challenge. Research and development into the ways the SEZs could become more attractive to corporations and workers alike is one necessary intervention in strengthening the labour market.

As of June 2019, only 6,760 of work permits were issued to Syrian women. The majority of work permits were registered for agricultural or construction work (two of the few sectors open for Syrians to seek employment) – sectors that are largely unattractive or unavailable to women to seek employment. Most work permits were issued in these sectors (and in more urban areas) rather than in manufacturing and the SEZs, an indication of Syrian attitudes towards working in these zones (Betts *et al.* 2017: 11). However, the unemployment rate among Syrians remains high. For women, it is highest in Mafraq (66%) and lowest in the camps (29%), whereas for men, it is highest in Mafraq (32%) and lowest in Amman, the capital (16%) (Fafo 2019). The majority of Syrians who are not in employment cited not being able to find a job in their area as the primary reason, while the second most common reason for not being in employment was that the working conditions were unacceptable – an area that requires further research and policy attention in line with the ILO's employment standards (Fafo 2019). Many who are unable to find employment in the formal sector resort to the informal sector, where precarious employment and working conditions are more common, leaving them increasingly vulnerable.

A study by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2015) looked into the growth of the informal sector, and how vulnerable Syrians, Jordanians, and other refugees or migrants are

working low-wage, low-skilled jobs with few labour rights. The entrance of other immigrant communities to the workforce, such as Egyptians in urban centres and Sri Lankan or Indian migrants in factories, continues to drive down wages in a growing informal labour market, and poses tensions within the tightening labour market. Agencies hope that issuing work permits can formalize previously informal work, which could improve working conditions for locals and refugees alike and ensure that they attain their labour rights. However, Betts *et al.* (2017: 11) warn that “better enforcement of the regulations could help, but it should not be so heavy handed that it deters employers and Syrians from the formalization process altogether.”

Another key part of addressing unemployment is addressing the mismatch between opportunities and skills in the market. Niveen Bataineh, Country Director of WUSC in Jordan, explained that local youth are struggling because training programs available to them do not serve market demands and hence do not provide youth with skills relevant to the present job market. The demand for workers who are high-skilled is significantly lower than the number of graduates in such a field (OECD Development Centre 2018). More recently, there is a high demand for medium-to-low-skill jobs in Jordan, but such careers are less desirable to youth, especially those with university degrees, and vacancies are thus often filled by foreign workers instead. Bataineh explained that there should be a larger push for vocational training in the country to suit this market demand, starting with a greater coordination of vocational training services provided in the public and private sector.

Youth in Jordan are increasingly aware of this mismatch between degrees and job vacancies. One youth-led initiative called ‘Eye on the Future’ is seeking to address this mismatch by working with secondary school students to help them select their university major with all the information they would need to make an informed decision using a market-based approach. In an interview with one of the founders, Malek, he explained that the initiative provides students with information on what their educational options are and guidance on where their interests and capabilities lie, while taking a market-driven approach to address issues such as unemployment due to a surplus of university graduates in a specific sector. Additionally, another aspect addressed by Eye on the Future targets the socio-cultural barriers that prevent youth from entering such a sector, notably the culture of shame surrounding medium-to-low-skill labour, explained later in this paper.

Alternatively, in a bid to incorporate more youth including refugee youth into the economy, INGOs and local actors have pushed for micro-entrepreneurship and start-up formation to combat rising unemployment. This is echoed by a strong governmental push towards entrepreneurship, specifically designed in order to reduce unemployment (OECD Development Centre 2018). Encouraging small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) is central to Jordan's 2025 vision and youth are at the core of this vision. However, fieldwork in July and August 2019 suggested that youth often end up as self-employed out of necessity not out of conviction or entrepreneurial drive. Samar Muhareb, CEO of Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD), explained that this push for entrepreneurship could be costly without reward. She explains that the discourse surrounding entrepreneurship as an easy option for youth is misleading especially since many are unable to navigate the legal requirements of setting up small businesses in the country. In addition to these complex procedures of registering businesses, there is a high financial burden for registering and renewing business licenses, as well as municipality and health or labour department inspections. Muhareb explained that while international organizations are promoting home-based and small businesses to create temporary income for refugees in light of local legislation that prohibit employment otherwise, these businesses cannot be sustainable in light of the political, and especially economic, climate. She also sees the vocational industry as more feasible for the meantime - a comment echoed by other key informants regarding the trajectories for employment in the current Jordanian economy.

In a July 2019 interview, a Syrian refugee youth working part-time at a non-profit in Amman explained that many youth leave the camps to seek better education and employment opportunities in larger cities, only to find that the circumstances are much more challenging than they appear. Many of his peers, including those who have graduated from universities in Jordan, want to leave the country to pursue further higher education and find better career opportunities elsewhere. His own livelihood is also at stake: he found that wages are too low for most trades and cannot cover basic costs of living, and he has had to work in the informal sector in order to bypass work permit restrictions that would not have allowed him to seek employment in his sector as a software engineer. While he had an overall positive outlook towards his own future, he expressed that many of his peers have struggled to adjust to the restrictions in both education and employment in the country and have endured severe negative mental health outcomes. Youth who are able to seek

employment are discouraged by long working hours, low wages, and sub-optimal working conditions. Those who cannot seek employment face economic and social uncertainty and further precarity amidst ongoing economic, social, and political fragility in the country.

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## 2. Between Education & Employment

Anecdotally, an academic researcher in Amman explained that many organizations working on education or employment do not examine the bridge between the two domains. This disconnect is reflected in literature and policy programming as well. She explained that while organizations provide students with scholarships, those organizations provide little support for the students after their scholarships have ended and degrees have been completed. There are few to no frameworks among NGOs in Jordan to link education and employment. While NGOs often cater to Syrian youth who choose to return to Syria, or those who ultimately aim to seek refuge elsewhere, there is a large group of Syrian youth who choose to stay in Jordan but are unable to find employment with all their certificates and qualifications and are neglected in NGO service programs. Similarly, Jordanian youth who have graduated from local (or international) institutions struggle to find employment in their sectors. Based on earlier discussion of scholarly and non-scholarly publications, and interviews with informants from the public and private sectors in Jordan, there are several challenges identified that impede youth transitions from education to employment.

### 2.1. Transportation

The lack of accessible and convenient transportation in Amman or across Jordan is one factor that has deterred many youth from seeking education or employment. A report published by ILO & IFC (2017: 48) critiques how the Jordan Response Plan's overlooks the role of transportation in their response to the Syrian crisis, stating that "planned development, maintenance, and expansion of new investments, services, and infrastructure is sacrificed to pay for the mitigation of the impact of the crisis." Roads around Irbid, Mafraq, and Zarqa governorates in the north all require expansion and maintenance, as the increased strain on public transportation infrastructure and roads impacts both Syrians' and Jordanians' livelihoods and mobilities.

Bataineh identified that transportation has only recently become a local priority. The Mayor of Amman launched the Amman Bus system in July 2019: operating more than 130 new busses across 55 destinations in Amman. The Rapid Bus Transit system, announced years prior, seems to still be in progress with completion dates set for the end of 2020 according to some reports (Roya News 2019). While the lack of a transportation infrastructure in the capital but also across the country is a major issue for mobility, security on transportation is another critical issue. Bataineh explained that safe transportation programs should be a priority as well, as operators and controllers on busses have no codes of conduct. She adds that while a code of conduct was developed as per a donor mandate, it was never enforced or implemented by the Ministry of Transport. This is especially a concern for women who do not feel safe on public transportation and experience a heightened restriction on their mobility for fear of harassment.

Lack of transportation infrastructure across major hubs in the country especially proved challenging with the SEZs. Research suggests that this lack of transportation infrastructure even contributed to the failure of SEZs and other manufacturing industries open to Syrian refugees in particular, who preferred to take up jobs in agriculture or construction due to the lack of available transportation to factories and other sites. While working and living in a dorm onsite at a factory or industrial city might be feasible for a single labourer from Sri Lanka, for instance, it is unfeasible and largely unacceptable for Syrians in Jordan who often live with their families and need to commute to and from factory sites daily (Betts *et al.* 2017: 11; Lockhart 2018). Syrian refugees are willing to commute and travel to work but are unable to find affordable and reliable means for this transportation (Lockhart 2018). At the moment, fewer than 6% of employed Syrians have access to a transportation subsidy in addition to their employment (Faf0 2019). Such a subsidy can be central to improving their livelihoods given the higher amount of disposable income made available saving up costs of transportation. Additionally, it could encourage more Syrians to pursue careers in manufacturing sectors. A survey conducted by Faf0 (2019: 132) mentions that a considerable number of Syrian refugees living across the country would accept a job in an SEZ if they were provided free and organized transportation.

Ehaab, a young Syrian refugee and entrepreneur in Amman, explained that his education to employment trajectory was interrupted several times due to challenges in transportation

infrastructure and the implications on his livelihood and his business. In an interview conducted in July 2019, Ehaab explained that he often had to decline educational and training opportunities across the country due to limitations in his mobility, especially between major cities and to university campuses. Lacking transportation infrastructures had an impact on his business: he was unable to host as many workshops as he had hoped due to being unable to easily transport a projector and other necessary equipment, as he is unable to own a car or have a driving license. Such day-to-day mobility issues had an impact on his goals and his ability to realize them.

While adding a subsidy for transportation could incur larger costs on INGOs and employers, it is one opportunity that will support Syrians as well as Jordanians to enter the workforce and especially rejuvenate the manufacturing sector. Several INGOs including Mercy Corps, Danish Refugee Council, and the International Labour Organization have already identified transportation subsidies or allowances as one potential area to incorporate into livelihoods and employment programming. Education for Employment provides a transportation refund for workshop and training participants which has helped their attendance rates, however, investment in infrastructure, transportation safety, and affordability of public transport are necessary to allow youth to reach their education & employment aspirations.

## **2.2. Youth Expectations**

The issue of expectations in education and employment is complex and multi-pronged, and it warrants extensive review and exploration from the perspectives of both the employee and the employer. Dr. Musa Shtewi, former director of the Center for Strategic Studies in Jordan, explained that youth have expectations that they are largely unable to satisfy in the workforce, which could deter them from finding employment altogether. Often, youth expect high pay and benefits from entry-level jobs. Many youths have not had any work or internship experience throughout their university years, and fail to anticipate what the job market can offer them. An OECD Development Centre report explains that most students who graduate from colleges or universities aspire for and expect a career in the public sector or government, but few are able to find employment in this sector. The public sector is desirable due to “its historical importance and combination of characteristics valued by young workers, such as formality, stability, social



security and high wages” however, some of these expectations are largely misperceptions (OECD Development Centre 2018: 79).

In recent years, the public sector has reduced its share as one of the larger employers in the economy, and the private sector has not stepped in to fill that role either. In relation to Dr. Shtewi’s comments, the majority of Jordanian students (82.1%) would like to work as professionals but only 30% do, with a higher proportion working in service jobs (OECD Development Centre 2018: 79.). These employment prestige perceptions relate to the strong culture of shame that surrounds certain occupations. Research by Iqbal Marie (2008) suggests that the culture of shame in Jordan deters youth from entering certain professions or from pursuing certain degrees for reasons such as the nature of the work (including whether it is in an office, a construction site, a factory, etc.), the gendering of the labour (if it is a role traditionally ascribed to women or men), and the educational level required for the job. Marie argues that this culture of shame is largely shaped by religious, cultural, social, and economic expectations and attitudes towards employment. According to Marie’s study, occupations such as engineering, architecture, and project manager are highly desired and desirable, whereas the majority of vocational trades, such as painting and carpentry, are least desirable. It is important to note that such vocational trades are not only undesirable, they are also lower-paying. Dr. Shtewi added that as certain sectors in the economy grow increasingly informal, and are occupied by Syrian and Egyptian migrants, Jordanians are put off from entering such professions even more due to the compounded social taboos of working in a vocational trade and working alongside immigrants or refugees in ‘lower-caste’ jobs.

Critically, both Dr. Shtewi and Bataineh explain how youth are uninterested in vocational or service work due to the low social and economic status attributed to this form of employment in the country. However, there is actually a growing demand for vocational and service sector work in Jordan as well as a demand for medium-to-low-skilled labour – which is largely fulfilled by foreign workers in Jordan instead (OECD Development Centre 2018). Several interviews with key informants in Amman identified that it is imperative for INGOs and CBOs to only provide skills trainings and scholarships for Syrian refugees and youth in Jordan in fields that are more desirable and demanded by the market, specifically on vocational training and labour which is increasingly in demand across the country. Education for Employment also works on making vocational work

more desirable to youth by making it especially appealing for youth whose education was interrupted or youth who chose to drop out as a pathway for them to re-enter the workforce. Market-driven approaches to youth education and employment (and the career matching process in between) could positively impact youth in inspiring a trajectory and aspiration that is both realistic and attainable to maintain a safe and comfortable livelihood in the country. While many Syrian youth eventually choose to leave Jordan to seek resettlement elsewhere, and many Syrian youth decide to return to Syria, it is important for NGOs to remain cognisant of the fact that there are thousands of Syrian youth who choose to stay in Jordan but are unable to seek employment with the qualifications with which they have been equipped by NGOs.

### **2.3. Women's Education & Employment**

Gender discrimination in Jordan continues to impact the lives and livelihoods of women and girls. Research by the King Hussein Foundation's Information and Research Centre, in their *Gender Discrimination in Jordan* (2019) highlights barriers women experience in Jordan related to education, religion, social norms, and even discrimination inherent in the law. World Bank Group's 2019 publication *Measuring Social Norms About Female Labor Force Participation in Jordan* also sheds light on the barriers women face when seeking employment. Female workforce participation in Jordan is among the lowest in the region, according to a report by the World Bank (2018). Bataineh explained that there are strong cultural and social norms that often prevent women from entering the workforce. Unemployment for women continues to be a serious issue. However, in light of rising costs of living in the country, many women are seeking to enter (or re-enter) the workforce due to economic need. A report by RAND (2014) explained that women, especially those in traditional and conservative families, face barriers with regards to continuing their postsecondary education, which can in the future interrupt their employment trajectories and opportunities. One female interviewee cited in the report explained how her parents considered both the social and financial aspects of their daughter attending a co-ed university and expressed a strong intolerance to that idea. The report highlighted some attitudes of young men towards female education and employment, with some citing that the additional income in the household is beneficial, while others expressed that they prefer to have a spouse dedicated to the house and other domestic duties.

Many of the factors that impact refugee youths' entry to the workforce disproportionately impact women. For example, while transportation distances and costs are a barrier to entry, women are marginalized further due to their traditional status as caregivers who cannot afford to be away from their households for too long during the day. Additionally, it is difficult for women from conservative households to commute long distances (using often unreliable or unsafe transportation) as many are not offered that freedom. While many Syrian women express their desire to work or seek employment, the majority prefer to work close to their homes due to the convenience and security. Furthermore, Syrian women fear harassment including in the workplace or on their commute, and refuse to seek employment due to the lack of safe or female-only spaces. Many women reported finding it unacceptable for women and men to work together. As a result, Syrian refugee women prefer to work in the informal sector due to the flexibility to change jobs and employers and still seek employment within their community (Amjad *et al.*, 2017).

Another main challenge to women's employment is the lack of available childcare facilities. This is especially a problem in SEZs where Syrian and Jordanian women alike are discouraged from seeking employment due to the lack of available childcare facilities. Many women are primary caregivers in their households and cannot afford to seek employment that interferes with their duties in the home (Amjad *et al.*, 2017). WUSC, for instance, is currently working with the National Council for Family Affairs in Jordan to establish daycare and nursery programs with several private employers including hospitals in order to encourage women to seek employment with the convenience of having childcare provided. However, this is a necessity that continues to be unavailable to women in Amman and across Jordan.

Within INGO and CBO programming, there is a shift towards encouraging women to participate in home-based businesses since it is seen to be both more suitable and more desirable for Syrian women, according to the report published by the ILO & IFC titled *Examining Barriers to Workforce Inclusion of Syrian Refugees in Jordan* (2017). The report explains this desire could be motivated by the lack of available convenient transportation and a desire to work closer to home. This could also be motivated by a desire to be economically independent given cultural and social restrictions or norms to female employment outside the household. For example, one Syrian woman interviewed explained that since she arrived in Jordan without her husband, she cannot

leave her children at home and as a result decided to start a home-based business. This type of work is more likely to be informal, especially among women in rural communities, who describe this work as “convenient, rewarding, more stable, and safer” (p. 54). The question of home-based businesses and entrepreneurship is an ongoing one that requires more immediate research and attention given the novelty of this option, the risks associated with entrepreneurship in this economy, and the presentation of entrepreneurship as a solution to combat youth unemployment.

An abundance of research literature highlights the challenges women in Jordan experience to entering the workforce for the reasons highlighted above, as well as others including socio-cultural barriers and misogyny, including works published by the World Bank, the Center for International Development at Harvard University, and UN Women. However, translating this research into policy recommendations and programming has been difficult, especially since many of the challenges preventing women from seeking employment are rooted in socio-cultural and religious habits and beliefs.

## **2.4. Coordination Challenges & Policy Disconnect**

The research team on *From Education to Employment* studying trajectories of youth from education to employment, led by Dr. El Abed, conducted a mapping of all institutions and initiatives in Amman working on education, employment, or both. This exercise revealed no shortage of actors, funding, and programming on education and employment. More than 300 initiatives and institutions working in Amman alone have been identified – all of which specifically target youth or are youth-led themselves. Despite such actors’ work, challenges in education to employment transitions persist and have worsened among youth. Research by Culbertson and colleagues for RAND Corporation identified coordination as a major barrier within the refugee response regime in Jordan:

While the UN system and international NGOs coordinate with one another extensively, coordination links are much weaker with the governments and local NGOs. This creates a “wall” between international aid providers on one side and government and local NGOs on the other ... the international NGO community did not spend enough effort to include and build capacity of local entities. There is almost no coordination with faith-based groups or with the refugees themselves. According to interviews, the response has yet to transition to truly involving national civil society (2016: 55).

Fragmented communication and coordination across governmental agencies, international organizations, and grassroots organizations has proven challenging: doubling efforts in some areas, leaving other areas completely neglected and underserved. The report explained that despite heightened efforts to coordinate, including using the Jordan Response Plan, programs are often uncoordinated alongside government priorities and programming by international organizations seldom considers refugee representation and voice. Additionally, cooperation between international organizations and local grassroots organizations or civil society groups in Jordan has proven challenging: grievances aired by civil society groups at a one-day seminar in Amman show that international organizations receive the bulk of the funding, but delegate civil society actors on the ground to facilitate much of the work without supporting them adequately or helping build their capacity to carry out their work. Asymmetrical relationships between large international organizations and smaller local civil society groups that work more closely in the field make coordination and cooperation challenging and unsustainable.

Coordination and communication has proven challenging even within agencies themselves. A researcher in Amman explained that one organization she worked with has not been able to successfully bridge programming between their education & livelihoods sectors, often due to the fact that aid is earmarked for certain projects. As a result, it is challenging to provide services in areas that would be more continuous, sustainable, or could foster a greater sense of coordination across the education and employment trajectory. Following this, another critique echoed by several interviewees in Amman is the fact that programming is often irrelevant to the local needs and dynamics in the country. One critique of current employment policy and programming is the focus on entrepreneurship, especially in STEM-related fields, as opposed to a focus on vocational training, which reflects the market's demand for low-to-medium-skilled labour in vocational trades. This is especially troubling given that upon completing such STEM-related programs, Syrians will not be able to enter the workforce with their certificates & qualifications due to labour market restrictions on Syrian refugees, and the limited availability of jobs in this sector in the first place. For instance, while the education department of an NGO would provide youth skills training on STEM-related fields, the livelihoods department would refer them to low-skilled and low-paid occupations that do not match the training they received from the same institution. One researcher

explained that an NGO she interviewed would rather provide training to refugees and local youth on skills that might not support their employment chances rather than not provide any training at all, given the limitations in the scope and topic of programming they are allowed to deliver in the first place.

Given the countless number of agencies, programs, and institutions that run services for refugees and local communities, increased communication driven by local needs and data is critical. The report by RAND explained that at present, information does not flow as freely to refugees and vulnerable communities as it should, meaning that they often see aid as confusing and are unable to obtain information from NGOs and government service providers.

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### 3. Conclusions

While faced with uncertain and insecure futures, youth in Jordan exhibit a resilience and adaptability that is unmatched. However, it is clear that research and advocacy into bridging the education & employment transitions of youth in Jordan is critical to improve their lives and livelihoods in the future. Many of the local Jordanian and Syrian youth are educated (many with university degrees), however, unemployment in Jordan continues to rise. It is imperative to recognize that this is a multi-pronged issue: it is economic, social, and political. The intersections of these frameworks warrant further exploration and revision.

Throughout the duration of this research project I have identified several areas for future action and research, four of which I will briefly discuss below. Given the continuity LERRN provides and the potential for more participatory and collaborative research on a broader scale, research produced in subsequent years will undoubtedly shed light on new, interesting, and complex dynamics bringing forward the voices and experiences of refugee youth and local youth together in Jordan and in the region.

#### **3.1. Advocacy – starting with an increase in minimum wage**

Several reports have identified that approximately one third of Jordanians live below the poverty line. At the moment, the minimum wage in Jordan is set at JOD 220 for citizens and JOD 150 for

non-citizens (Faf0 2019), both of which put individuals below the poverty line. It is clear that many youth who do not accept to work for JOD 300 – 350 in entry level jobs do so out of economic need or desperation: such wages simply are not enough to sustain their own basic livelihoods let alone provide for their families too. There is no shortage of research both academically and from INGOs regarding the high costs of living in Jordan, struggles to make ends meet, and increase in debt among individuals. UNHCR reported that up to 82% of Syrian households are in some level of debt (UNHCR 2018). Further research into policy and advocacy surrounding an increase in minimum wage should be an important component of INGO livelihood programming.

### **3.2. Opening more professions to Syrians in Jordan**

Countless professions remain closed to Syrians in Jordan, and more professions continue to be made unavailable. In addition to this, obtaining a work permit for available professions is too complicated a process that it deters both employees and employers. It is important to research and advocate for a wider inclusion of Syrians in the workforce by opening more professions to Syrians and by facilitating steps to attain a work permit in the first place. One notable example is to open the teaching profession up to Syrians with qualifications or past experience. Dr. El Abed explains that opening the teaching profession to Syrians has benefits for both teachers and students. For teachers, it is an opportunity for them to find employment and an income. For students, it could improve the quality of the education itself by addressing teacher fatigue for staff obliged to teach in double-shift schools. Overall, it could ease pressures off the Jordanian public education sector as well. Research can begin to address the policy ramifications of opening up professions to Syrians, where current opportunities lie, and where their employment transitions could be better facilitated in the years to come.

### **3.3. Market-based approaches to training, education, and employment**

A report published by Mercy Corps and WANA Institute in Jordan proposes a community-based approach to job-matching since many Syrians and Jordanians prefer to seek employment through their personal networks as opposed to through NGOs or online (2018). Such an approach could even mitigate transportation challenges since individuals would be able to seek out education or employment opportunities within their community. Other NGOs such as Education for

Employment focus on market-based approached by conducting extensive market analyses and planning training and workshop opportunities accordingly. It is clear that such approaches to NGO programming will be critical to graduating youth with in-demand qualifications for employment.

### **3.4. Further Research and Research to Policy Translation**

This research paper introduced and identified several key areas for research and evaluation for subsequent LERRN projects and cohorts. For instance, the paper questions the push towards self-employment, the availability of market-based approaches to education and employment programming, and the socio-cultural barriers youth experience due to the intersections of their gender, class, and nationality. Also, there are countless organizations and initiatives led by youth for youth that seek to bridge the gaps between education and employment. Identifying and exploring their role more in depth within Jordanian civil society is crucial to understanding community-based responses to the global refugee regime. The paper then touches upon the exclusion of youth in education and employment, but further research is necessary to explore the depth of youth exclusion from Jordanian society and the ramifications exclusion has had on youth trajectories and aspirations – taking an intersectional approach to look at class, geographical location, gender, age, and cultural or educational backgrounds. Given the increasingly protracted nature of the Syrian crisis, political and economic instability, and the shift from humanitarian to developmental aid in the country, research should continue to explore and operationalize policy and action to improve youth lives and livelihoods and assist them in realizing their aspirations. These circumstances raise an important consideration: policy disconnect and research to policy translation. There has been no shortage of research on the refugee regime and international and local responses to it in Jordan (and across the Middle East). However, much of this research has not been operationalized into policy response, donor action, and organizational programming. Identifying barriers to such knowledge translation efforts and creating research content that is easy to deliver to policy actors and stakeholders is a crucial next step for research to improve programming in education, employment, and beyond.



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