

Empowering Jordan's Seventy Percent

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More than half of the world's population is under the age of 30. With their vision and limitless passion, the world's young people represent a great asset and a potential force for change. Yet a sizable youth population can be both an opportunity and a challenge for any country. The ability of young people to contribute economically, socially and politically can accelerate development, improve economies, pull countries out of poverty, and lead to greater stability. If countries cannot meet the basic needs of their young people, however, they risk impeding peace, progress and prosperity.

USAID recently issued its first Youth in Development Policy to address these realities. USAID has been conducting programming focused on youth for more than two decades in forty countries, and has learned that youth issues are complex and cross cutting. The transition from childhood to adulthood spans ten to twenty years, and is not a linear process. Youth make transitions at different times and face different challenges depending on a variety of factors, including their age, gender, socioeconomic and political context, and culture. An effective policy must therefore treat young people as individuals in different stages of development yet also comprehensively address the different factors that impact their lives.

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In Jordan, where I am Mission Director, youth make up approximately 70 percent of the country's rapidly growing population and face high rates of unemployment. The success of this generation is critical to Jordan's future, and we have therefore developed policies that seek to improve young Jordanians' lives and their prospects comprehensively.

To help young people find jobs we are working with the government, private and nonprofit sectors. We partner with

Jordan's Department of Labor to create spaces throughout the country for youth to seek career counseling, search for jobs, meet private sector representatives and receive life skills and technical training. We work with the private sector to ensure that the training youth receive is relevant to the job market. For example, we coordinate with Jordan's tourism industry to teach youth hospitality skills and offer graduates employment in the tourism and hospitality field. USAID has worked with Jordan's community-based organizations to help expand their scope beyond the delivery of basic services to the poor to include income-generating activities like gyms, computer centers and cooperative kitchens that serve and employ youth. Now, young people have the opportunity to learn skills with these organizations that they can bring to the job market.

Helping young Jordanians find work is only part of the story, however. Equally important is helping them to develop leadership skills, critical thinking and an understanding of the world around them. Involvement with these community-based organizations can bring families together around issues or activities and open channels of communication between young people and their parents. As youth participate in volunteer opportunities and forums that promote civic engagement they also learn about issues that affect their communities. USAID provides opportunities like parliamentary fellowship programs, local election observation and on-campus discussion groups that provide space for student debates and interactive exercises on the principles of democracy and politics. In these programs, university students learn to effectively take part in the country's political development. As a result, community-based organizations and youth committees in universities have become natural advocates for youth at the grassroots and policy levels, while training a new generation of leaders for employment and civic activism.

Jordan's young people, like their peers around the world, are a great potential resource for the country's development. As we implement USAID's new policy, our biggest challenge will be to ensure that we see young people as the complex individuals that they are, and create opportunities that take into account their different experiences and needs so we can unleash this remarkable potential. **Y**