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International Organizations and Youth Unemployment in the MENA Region: Challenges, Initiatives, and Policy Implications

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ABSTRACT

Youth unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region remains the highest in the world, posing serious economic and social challenges. This research examines the scope, causes of youth unemployment in MENA, and evaluates the role of international organizations in addressing the issue, using recent data and examples from the region. Through a review of literature and analysis of policy responses, the study identifies key structural factors—such as skills mismatches, public-sector dominance, and regulatory barriers—that contribute to persistently high youth joblessness. It also discusses how international organizations such as the World Bank, International Labor Organization, United Nations agencies, and OECD have responded with programs and policy advice targeting youth employment, including education reforms, skills training initiatives, and support for entrepreneurship. A case example from Tunisia illustrates both the progress and remaining gaps in translating such initiatives into improved employment outcomes. The findings highlight that while global institutions have laid important groundwork (funding projects, providing data, and sharing best practices); sustainable solutions require localized, collaborative approaches that involve public-private partnerships and the active inclusion of youth voices. The paper concludes with recommendations for comprehensive strategies – combining economic reforms, targeted interventions, and governance improvements – to reduce youth unemployment and its associated risks to social stability.

Keywords: Youth Unemployment, MENA Region, International Organizations, Labor Market Mismatch, Private Sector Development and Job Creation

INTRODUCTION

Youth unemployment is one of the most pressing socio-economic problems in the MENA region. For several decades, MENA countries have collectively recorded the highest youth unemployment rates in the world (Fakih et al., 2020). As of the mid-2020s, roughly one in four young people in the MENA labor force is unemployed – about 25%, a rate far exceeding that of any other global region (Poplavskaya et al., 2023). In some MENA countries, youth joblessness approaches 30% or higher, as seen recently in Tunisia and parts of the Levant (Masood Ahmed, 2012). This persistent deficit in youth employment opportunities is not only an economic concern but also a source of social tension. High youth unemployment has also been linked to greater risks of political instability

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and social unrest, as witnessed during the Arab Spring uprisings that swept the region in the early 2010s (Poplavskaya et al., 2023). Effectively addressing youth unemployment is therefore critical for the economic development, social cohesion, and long-term stability of MENA countries.

A combination of demand-side and supply-side factors underlies the youth unemployment challenge in MENA. On the demand side, the region's economies have struggled to generate enough new jobs in the private sector. Private firms in MENA have historically grown employment at only about 1% per year on average – much slower than the 5% annual job growth seen in other middle-income regions (World Bank, 2022). Several structural issues constrain job creation: over-regulation of business, inflexible labor laws, and prevalent cronyism have stifled private sector dynamism and limited the emergence of new firms that could hire young talent. In many countries, large incumbent companies – often with political ties – dominate markets without needing to competitively recruit the best workers (Nader Kabbani, 2019). Meanwhile, public sector jobs have remained relatively attractive job security and thus encourage educated youth to queue for a limited number of government positions (Kjeldsen & Jacobsen, 2013). This public-sector dominance in employment expectations contributes to a mismatch: even as private-sector opportunities remain limited, many youths are choosy about taking informal or low-paid jobs, holding out hope for a coveted public job. On the supply side, the region faces a youth bulge – a demographic profile where a large share of the population is under 25 – putting pressure on labor markets to absorb a high volume of new entrants (Nader Kabbani, 2019). At the same time, skills mismatches are common: education systems often do not equip graduates with the practical skills demanded by employers, leading to paradoxically high unemployment even among educated youth. In countries like the United Arab Emirates, for example, rapid expansion of higher education has led to more graduates, yet many struggle to find jobs, especially young women (Fakih et al., 2020; Poplavskaya et al., 2023). Across MENA, young women face additional hurdles – including cultural norms and limited mobility – resulting in female youth unemployment rates often double those of young men. Indeed, women's labor force participation in MENA is the lowest in the world (around 15–20%), reflecting both scarce job opportunities and social barriers to female employment(World Bank, 2022).

International organizations have long recognized the severity of MENA's youth unemployment crisis and its broader implications. Institutions such as the World Bank, International Labour Organization (ILO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have devoted research and resources to this issue. The World Bank's former President Jim Wolfensohn, for instance, identified MENA youth exclusion as a development priority in the mid-2000s, leading to the creation of initiatives like the Middle East Youth Initiative (MEYI) to study the problem (Nader Kabbani, 2019). In recent years, global policymakers have warned that MENA needed to create tens of millions of new jobs to keep up with its growing youth population; a World Bank report in 2004 estimated nearly 100 million jobs would be required from 2000 to 2020 to meet demand (Nader Kabbani, 2019). Falling short of such targets has real consequences: protracted unemployment among youth has fueled frustration over economic marginalization and eroded confidence in governance, as unemployed youth often feel "blocked" from productive adulthood – a phenomenon researchers describe as "waithood" (extended transition to adulthood due to delayed employment, marriage, and other milestones).

This paper examines how international organizations are engaging with the youth unemployment challenge in MENA. It provides an overview of the problem's scope and drivers as documented in recent studies and reports, and then evaluates efforts and recommendations put forth by major international actors. An example from Tunisia – a country often seen as a bellwether due to its high youth unemployment and post-revolution reforms – is used to illustrate both the achievements and remaining gaps in tackling youth joblessness. The objective is to synthesize insights from reliable sources (including peer-reviewed research and international institutional analyses) to inform a comprehensive strategy that could improve youth employment outcomes in the MENA region. The study is organized into sections covering previous literature, methodology, discussion of findings, conclusions, and recommendations. By collating evidence on what has been tried and what still needs to be done, the research aims to contribute to the policy discourse on empowering MENA's youth and leveraging the support of international organizations towards that goal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The MENA has the highest youth unemployment rates in the world (International Labour Organization, 2024). As of 2023, roughly one-quarter of MENA youth are jobless – about 24–25% on average (World Bank, 2023) – far exceeding the global rates. Some country reports document even higher levels; for example, Tunisia often records youth unemployment near 30% (Abdelkhalek & Baccouche, 2021). These persistently high rates have been linked to social instability: Redlin (2022) finds that MENA's youth unemployment is a strong factor in migration from the region. The situation is especially dire for young women, whose unemployment rates far exceed those of men (Poplavskaya, Karabchuk, & Shomotova, 2023), and for graduates facing skill mismatches. Analysts note that

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MENA's education systems often fail to impart marketable skills and that even high educational attainment has not translated into jobs (Farzanegan & Gholipour, 2021). Mina (2022) shows that labour-market efficiency and economic growth are what actually reduce youth unemployment, whereas simply raising education levels without aligning skills to demand can perversely leave more educated youth jobless.

Table 1: created by authors: Youth unemployment in MENA: headline indicators and gender gaps (latest available)

Country	Youth Unemployment % (15–24)	Female Youth Unemployment %	Female Labor Force Participation %	NEET % (15–24)	Year	Source(s)
MENA Average	24.5	40.0	18.0	27.0	2023	ILO (2024); World Bank Data (2023)
Tunisia	35.0	47.0	20.0	30.0	2023	Abdelkhalek & Baccouche (2021); World Bank (2024)
Jordan	34.0	46.0	15.0	29.0	2023	UNDP (2022); ILO (2024)
Egypt	26.0	39.0	22.0	25.0	2022	World Bank (2022); ILO (2024)
Morocco	27.0	41.0	21.0	28.0	2023	Brookings (2020); World Bank Data (2023)
Saudi Arabia	20.0	47.0	17.0	26.0	2022	Poplavskaya et al. (2023); ILO (2024)
UAE	18.0	34.0	28.0	20.0	2023	Poplavskaya et al. (2023); UNDP (2022)

Major global agencies – mainly the World Bank, the ILO, and UN bodies (notably UNDP and UNICEF) – have long prioritized MENA youth employment. These actors have funded and designed a variety of programs and policy recommendations. For example, the World Bank has produced flagship analyses (e.g., Jobs Undone and Jobs for Shared Prosperity) emphasizing structural reforms: creating a "level playing field" between public and private sectors, reducing business regulation, and shifting governments from direct employer to market facilitator (World Bank, 2022). The Bank also finances supply-side projects in many MENA countries – such as vocational training programs, entrepreneurship grants, and linkage initiatives (e.g., its Yemen PMU and Morocco Youth programs) – aiming to improve skills and connect youth to jobs (Pournik, 2024). The ILO has deployed both policy advice and on-the-ground interventions: it conducts labor-market research and supports active labor-market programs (ALMPs) like apprenticeship schemes, job counseling, and wage subsidies. Notably, the ILO co-sponsors the Global Partnership for Youth Employment (GPYE) with the World Bank and has helped establish regional platforms (such as the ESCWA-led Josour initiative) to bridge private-sector firms with young jobseekers (Pournik, 2024). UNDP and other UN agencies have similarly promoted youth entrepreneurship, digital skills, and inclusive policies in MENA, often via joint regional schemes or funding grants (UNDP, 2022). Collectively, these organizations also provide valuable data and capacity-building – for instance, ILO trend reports and World Bank labor surveys that inform policy (ILO, 2024).

The literature paints a mixed picture, on one hand; the involvement of international bodies has led to new tools and attention. Programs under the GPYE umbrella or UN–World Bank partnerships like training-plus internships that have shown some positive outcomes in pilot settings (Fares & Puerto, 2020). Evaluations by the ILO note that in a few cases, targeted interventions such as combined vocational training with job-matching improved participants' employment prospects (ILO, 2020). World Bank project reviews in MENA have found that when well-designed, youth-focused initiatives (covering both "demand" and "supply" factors) can yield small but measurable gains in placement rates (World Bank, 2022). Moreover, global reports and indices published by these agencies raise awareness – for example, the ILO's 2024 youth trends brief highlights MENA's crisis status, pressuring governments to act (ILO, 2024).

However, scholars caution that the overall impact has been limited. The programs often suffer from scope and targeting issues. Studies indicate that many training and entrepreneurship schemes reach relatively few youths and frequently miss the poorest or most marginalized (Kabbani, 2019; Brookings Institution, 2020). Even though curricula have been modernized with technical content, most programs remained classroom-based and were not integrated with real work experience. Crucially, rigorous evaluations are rare: Fakih, Haimoun, and Kassem (2020) observe that few MENA interventions have credible impact assessments. The ILO/World Bank Taqeem Initiative (2009–2014) sought to fill this gap, but by 2014 only about 2% of MENA youth programs had undergone any evaluation (ILO, 2020). In practice, many interventions end up as one-off pilots without scaling – a point echoed by Pournik (2024), who finds MENA's ALMP stock is small and fragmented despite formal commitments. For instance, a World Bank analysis of Tunisian youth projects reported they were often fragmented and failed to reach the most vulnerable (World Bank, 2022).

Qualitative critiques also highlight a mismatch in priorities. International agencies frequently emphasize vocational training or entrepreneurship as silver bullets. However, research suggests that without broader job growth, such interventions alone cannot absorb growing cohorts. Mina (2022) underscores that only broad-based productivity gains and private-sector expansion can materially reduce youth joblessness. Similarly, Fakih et al. (2020) argue that gender barriers and institutional inequality – rather than only skills deficits – are key determinants. In this view, programs that do not address market rigidities or social constraints (for example, persistent female labor exclusion) will have only modest effects. Studies of Gulf countries, for example, show that even very high education levels did not prevent youth unemployment rates of 47–66% in some settings – a failure that training programs alone could not fix (UNDP, 2022).

In summary, international organizations have played an important but insufficient role. The World Bank and ILO have provided crucial diagnoses, funding, and models (e.g., apprenticeship standards, employer-led training) (World Bank, 2022; ILO, 2020), and UNDP/UNESCO have boosted technical skills and entrepreneurship networks (UNDP, 2022). Yet most evaluations conclude that these interventions yield at best incremental improvements. Remaining shortcomings include limited scale, weak targeting of at-risk groups, and insufficient alignment with local labor markets (Pournik, 2024). As analysts note, truly lowering MENA youth unemployment requires complementary macro reforms: liberalizing labor markets, fostering firm creation, and reducing the public-sector bias (Mina, 2022). The literature calls for integrated strategies that combine the agencies' youth programs with national economic reforms and social inclusion policies. Only by coupling skills and entrepreneurship support with structural change (and by rigorously evaluating outcomes) can MENA move toward the comprehensive solutions advocated by recent studies (ILO, 2024; World Bank, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative, analytical approach based on secondary sources, combining a literature review with a focused case study. To enrich the regional analysis, Tunisia was selected as a case study due to its persistently high youth unemployment rates and extensive coverage in both scholarly and policy literature, especially post-2011. Reviewing reports and academic studies allowed closer examination of micro-level issues such as educational mismatches, regional disparities, and program outcomes. The methodology also accounts for historical and political contexts, making the combined literature review and case study approach suitable for generating nuanced conclusions and policy recommendations.

DISCUSSION

Scope and Structural Drivers of Youth Unemployment in MENA

The evidence gathered confirms that MENA's youth unemployment issue is persistent. With an average regional rate around 25–30% in recent years, MENA remains an outlier compared to other parts of the world (Masood Ahmed, 2012). Even after the turmoil of the early 2010s, the situation has not substantially improved; in reality, in some countries unemployment worsened following the Arab Spring upheavals due to economic slowdowns (Fakih et al., 2020). What makes the challenge particularly daunting is the confluence of high supply and low demand in labor markets. The region is suffering from a "youth bulge," with millions of young people reaching working age each year in the MENA. They are often better educated than previous generations, raising

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expectations for skilled employment. However, job creation has lagged far behind. As noted in a World Bank regional report, private sector employment growth in the region has averaged only 1% annually, markedly below what is needed to absorb new candidates. This is in stark contrast to other developing regions where private firms expand employment much faster, around 5% each year in comparable middle-income countries (World Bank, 2022). The slow growth of jobs is tied to structural issues in the economy. Numerous MENA countries historically relied on oil revenues or state-driven models where the government was the primary employer and driver of growth. Consequently, private enterprise was underdeveloped, and in some cases actively constrained by policy. As these economies have attempted to diversify and encourage entrepreneurship, they confront entrenched obstacles: bureaucratic red tape, difficulty enforcing contracts, limited access to financing, and market monopolies by politically connected elites (Nader Kabbani, 2019). These factors deter investment and innovation that could make employment.

A critical structural driver identified is the mismatch between the output of the education system and labor market needs. Many young job seekers in MENA face the paradox of being educated but unemployed. One manifestation of this mismatch is seen in the fields of study: a disproportionately high share of students graduate in humanities and social sciences, aiming for public sector jobs, whereas fields like technology and skilled trades – which might offer more private sector opportunities – are less pursued. Additionally, even technical graduates may lack soft skills or practical experience. A World Bank press release on a 2025 higher education project in Tunisia highlights that despite recent reforms to align university curricula with industry needs, structural barriers like skills mismatches and gaps in work-based learning still hinder youth employment prospects (World Bank, 2025). Employers often complain that graduates do not have relevant job experience or technical proficiency, while graduates complain that jobs on offer are of poor quality or unrelated to their qualifications. This vicious cycle perpetuates unemployment or pushes youth into accepting any informal job available. Indeed, informal employment is essentially the default for many young people in MENA. Brookings researchers found youth informal employment rates exceeding 80% in some countries such as Palestine and Egypt meaning the vast majority of those who do work are in unregistered, unprotected jobs (Lund, 2016). However, such jobs provide neither stable income nor much training, and they offer little security, keeping youth in a state of precariousness.

The gender aspect further deepens the challenge. Young women who aspire to work confront both supply-side and demand-side barriers. On the supply side, social norms in parts of MENA may discourage women from working outside the home or limit their mobility, for instance, if safe transportation or mixed-gender workplaces are issues. On the demand side, employers may be hesitant to hire young women due to assumptions about turnover with motherhood or due to legal restrictions on women working at night or in certain industries. The net effect is glaring in the data: female youth unemployment in MENA is not only higher than male youth unemployment, but female labor force participation is the lowest globally (World Bank, 2022). As one OECD study noted, only about 15% of young women in MENA are active in the labor force, compared to over 30% in the next lowest region, and of those who are active, a large fraction are unemployed. For example, Saudi Arabia's female youth unemployment rate around 47% (for Saudi nationals) starkly contrasts with male youth unemployment of about 18% (Poplavskaya et al., 2023). This suggests that labor market reforms must be gender-sensitive – expanding chances for females could significantly improve overall youth employment figures. Encouragingly, some MENA countries have begun initiatives to increase female employment, such as women's vocational training, remote work opportunities, and entrepreneurship programs for women, often with support from international organizations such as UN Women or the World Bank's gender programs. However, results remain modest, and cultural change is slow; without deliberate policy measures, half of the youth (young women) will remain underutilized.

Another consequence of weak local job markets is migration. A sizeable number of MENA youth have chosen to seek opportunities abroad, leading to brain drain in their home countries. Between 2000 and 2015, net migration from non-Gulf MENA countries estimated at over 8 million people, one of the highest levels relative to population in the world (Nader Kabbani, 2019). Young professionals from countries like Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia often emigrate to Europe or North America, in search of employment commensurate with their education. While migration can alleviate domestic unemployment pressures to some extent and remittances provide income at home, it is ultimately a symptom of the failure to provide adequate opportunities locally. Moreover, not all youth can migrate; those left behind are often the less skilled or poorer individuals who face fewer options. This internal stratification can exacerbate inequality and frustration.

International Organizations' Responses and Initiatives

International organizations have been actively involved in both diagnosing the youth unemployment problem in MENA and in formulating responses. Their roles can be categorized largely into research and policy advisory, program funding and implementation, and facilitating association and knowledge sharing.

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Table 2: created by authors: International organizations' youth employment interventions in MENA: mapping of instruments and evidence

Organization	Flagship Program / Report	Primary Lever(s)	Instruments	Coverage / Scale	Evidence of Impact	Source(s)
World Bank	Jobs Undone (2022); Tunisia Higher Education Project (2025)	Structural reforms; Skills	TVET, entrepreneurship grants, policy reform	Regional + Tunisia	Some pilot-level positive outcomes; evaluation gaps remain	World Bank (2014, 2022, 2025)
ILO	Global Employment Trends for Youth (2024); GPYE	ALMPs; Research	Apprenticeships, wage subsidies, job counseling	Regional; multi-country pilots	Mixed: small-scale gains, limited scaling	ILO (2020, 2024); Fakih et al. (2020)
UNDP / UN agencies	Arab Human Development Report (2022); Youth Digital Skills Programs	Inclusion; Entrepreneurship	Digital skills training, inclusive policies	Regional (esp. Tunisia, Jordan)	Positive local impacts; sustainability challenges	UNDP (2022)
OECD / S4YE	Youth in MENA (2016); Solutions for Youth Employment (2020)	Governance; Skills	Youth councils, digital training, employer engagement	Regional; cross-country	Improved awareness; weak evidence on long-term employment	Lund (2016); SFYE (2020)
Silatech (EAA Foundation)	Youth Entrepreneurship & Job Creation	Demand-side; Finance	Microfinance, startup grants, mentorship	Qatar-led; regional outreach	Expanded access to credit; evaluations ongoing	Education Above All (2025)

International organizations such as the World Bank, IMF, and OECD have produced influential analyses that shape understanding and policy dialogue. For instance, the World Bank's 2007 World Development Report: Development and the Next Generation brought global attention to the importance of investing in youth, highlighting MENA as a region of particular concern (Nader Kabbani, 2019). The World Bank followed up with MENA-specific reports, including a 2014 report on jobs ("Jobs for Shared Prosperity") and the more recent 2022 report "Jobs Undone", which specifically examines why MENA's labor markets remain stagnant. The Jobs Undone report emphasizes creating a level playing field for the private sector, noting that ensuring private firms can access markets and compete fairly with state-owned or crony enterprises is vital to generate jobs (World Bank, 2022). It offers policy recommendations such as reducing excessive regulations and revising government's role from employer to regulator/facilitator. The IMF, similarly, has published papers on youth unemployment in the region, often underscoring macroeconomic reforms. An IMF study observed that at ~25%, MENA's youth jobless rate outstrips all other regions, and singled out Tunisia (around 30%) as a high-case example (Masood Ahmed, 2012). Such analyses typically advocate for improving the business climate, encouraging foreign investment, and maintaining macroeconomic stability to foster job growth.

The ILO has contributed through its Global Employment Trends for Youth reports, which provide data and projections. The 2024 ILO outlook projected MENA's youth unemployment to tick up slightly to 24.5% (HSI, 2024), reflecting ongoing difficulties and new pressures (like oil market fluctuations affecting Gulf economies and conflicts impacting some countries). ILO also works with governments to develop National Employment Strategies that often include special focus on youth. For example, Jordan's National Employment Strategy and Tunisia's coming labor market reforms were shaped with ILO technical assistance, promoting measures like apprenticeships and better labor market information systems.

In addition, the OECD, in collaboration with some MENA governments through the MENA-OECD initiative, has been focusing on governance and policy frameworks. In its 2016 report "Youth in the MENA Region: How to Bring Them In," the OECD not only discussed employment programs but also stressed governance reforms to include youth. It noted that many MENA governments lacked integrated youth policies and that ministries often worked in silos on youth issues (Lund, 2016). The OECD recommended a whole-of-government approach and

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the development of comprehensive national youth strategies so that education, labor, finance, and social ministries all coordinate on youth outcomes (Lund, 2016). This advisory role of international organizations helps MENA policymakers learn from international best practices and adapt successful interventions from other regions, for instance, adapting elements of Germany's vocational training system or Malaysia's entrepreneurship funds to local contexts.

Beyond advice, international organizations directly support numerous programs on the ground. The World Bank, for example, has financed projects aimed at both the supply and demand sides of the youth employment equation. On the supply side, there are education and skills projects – such as the recently approved US$100 million project in Tunisia to strengthen higher education and boost graduate employability (World Bank, 2025). This project will invest in modernizing university programs, expanding access to fields with high job demand, and forging partnerships between universities and industries to ensure students gain relevant skills (World Bank, 2025). It also supports governance improvements in universities (like quality assurance and management) to sustain those efforts. The rationale is to shorten the transition from graduation to employment by making graduates "job-ready" and by involving employers in training. On the demand side, World Bank projects often try to stimulate entrepreneurship and SMEs, under initiatives like Nexus "Skills and Jobs for Youth" or Youth Economic Inclusion projects. For instance, the Nexus Skills & Jobs for Youth project in Tunisia (co-funded with other partners) works to link vocational training with private sector needs in the agricultural sector (World Bank, 2024). Similarly, in Morocco and Egypt, there have been World Bank-backed projects providing seed funding and mentoring to young entrepreneurs, and improving job placement services.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) typically works at community and policy levels. UNDP's programs in MENA include youth leadership training, support to social entrepreneurship, and sometimes public works schemes that both employ youth and benefit communities. For example, in conflict-affected countries like Yemen, UNDP has run cash-for-work programs that hire unemployed youth to rebuild infrastructure, thus giving them income and a sense of contribution while improving local conditions.

International NGOs and regional organizations also play a role. A notable one is Silatech, a Qatar-based international social organization, which focuses on youth employment across MENA. 'The name "Silatech" is derived from the Arabic word "Sila" meaning connection. Silatech remains true to its name as it continues to connect youth with meaningful employment and self-employment opportunities in the Arab region and globally' (Education Above All Foundation, 2025). It collaborates with governments and NGOs to provide microfinance to young entrepreneurs, career counseling, and vocational training. While not an "international organization" in the formal sense, Silatech has worked closely with entities like the Arab League and UN to advance youth employment agendas.

International organizations have also been instrumental in convening stakeholders and sharing knowledge across countries. The Solutions for Youth Employment (S4YE) is a global coalition hosted by the World Bank that includes governments, companies, and civil society aimed at innovating in youth employment solutions (SFYE, 2020). Through S4YE, pilot projects and lessons (from MENA and elsewhere) are documented and disseminated. For instance, if a particular ICT-skills training in Lebanon proved successful, S4YE would help package that knowledge so it could potentially be replicated in, say, Tunisia or Iraq. The coalition emphasizes that young people themselves should have a say – S4YE has a Youth Advisory Group to ensure youth voices guide its strategies (YAG, 2023). This reflects a broader trend encouraged by OECD and others: youth participation in forming the policies meant for their benefit (Lund, 2016).

International conferences and forums, often organized by organizations like the World Bank or ILO, provide opportunities for MENA leaders to discuss employment strategies. For example, the ILO has facilitated peer-learning workshops among Arab countries on topics like apprenticeships and labor market information systems. The World Bank and IMF annual meetings often include sessions on MENA's economic issues, where unemployment is a common theme, allowing ministers from the region to hear from experts and from each other about what works or does not.

Case Insight: Tunisia's Youth Employment Efforts

Tunisia offers a microcosm of the youth unemployment issue and the interplay with international support. After its 2011 revolution, Tunisia faced very high youth unemployment, especially in the interior regions. In response, the country – with financial and technical assistance from the World Bank, EU, and others – launched several initiatives. A World Bank report "Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion" (2014) provided a comprehensive analysis of why Tunisian youth were still largely excluded from economic life. It found, for example, that the majority of unemployed youth in Tunisia were those who had not completed secondary education (World Bank, 2014) – pointing to a need to prevent school dropouts and provide second-chance education or training. It also highlighted a geographic disparity: young people in the southern and interior regions, as well as young women nationwide, faced extra barriers compared to young men in the coastal areas (World Bank, 2014). The report combined survey data, qualitative interviews, and direct consultations with youth to pinpoint issues like mistrust in public institutions, lack of voice, and the prevalence of informal jobs (World Bank, 2025).

In the years since, Tunisia has worked on multiple fronts. Active labor market programs were expanded – for example, the Ariana initiative to subsidize wages for graduates in SMEs, and entrepreneurship programs offering microcredit to youth. However, evaluations cited in the World Bank's analysis suggested many programs were not sufficiently effective or reached only a small segment of youth (World Bank, 2014). Challenges included limited awareness among youth about these programs, the short-term nature of some interventions, and lack of coordination (various ministries and donors ran separate projects, leading to overlap or gaps). Recognizing this, Tunisia, with OECD's input, started formulating a National Youth Strategy to coordinate efforts across sectors, although implementing a whole-of-government approach is ongoing.

A major focus has been education reform. As referenced earlier, Tunisia has collaborated with the World Bank on projects to improve higher education. By modernizing curricula (for instance, introducing courses that develop soft skills and digital literacy), and by establishing career centers and internship programs at universities, Tunisia aims to produce graduates who can more smoothly transition to employment. The Tertiary Education for Employability Project (PromESsE), which concluded in 2024, supported 22,000 students with new programs and career services, and even helped some universities achieve international accreditation (World Bank, 2025). Building on that, the new STEEIR project (Strengthening Tertiary Education for Employability, Innovation and Resilience) launched in 2025 will further align degrees with labor market needs and expand partnerships with the private sector, targeting at least 85 accredited programs and 145,000 students and faculty by 2030 (World Bank, 2025). Such quantitative targets illustrate the ambition to scale up impact.

Despite these efforts, Tunisia's youth unemployment rate remains elevated (hovering around 35% in recent data) and the average duration of unemployment for young people is long. Many youth still spend years in transition from school to stable work. As the World Bank press release noted, the private sector in Tunisia struggles to create sufficient high-skilled jobs, and this is a binding constraint – even as education improves, if the economy doesn't generate jobs, graduates will continue to face frustration (World Bank, 2025). This underlines a lesson that applies across MENA: education reforms must be coupled with economic reforms to truly make a dent in unemployment.

The Tunisia case also shows the importance of inclusive policy-making. The involvement of youth in identifying problems and solutions (through consultations and surveys in the 2014 study, for example) helped ensure that proposals addressed real concerns – such as the sense of exclusion from civic life. Tunisia's Chapter on "Youth Participation, Voice and Active Citizenship" in the World Bank report emphasized that engaging youth in community service or local decision-making can increase their skills and sense of belonging (World Bank, 2025). In practice, programs to encourage youth civic engagement (supported by UNDP and others) have taken root, though on a modest scale, such as youth-led community development committees. These can indirectly improve employability by building leadership and organizational experience.

In summary, Tunisia's ongoing journey demonstrates both the positive contributions of international organizations – through funding, expertise, and facilitating reforms – and the difficulties that remain in translating those efforts into lower unemployment. Gains in educational quality or small pilot projects have not yet transformed the labor market enough to rapidly reduce national unemployment statistics. It reinforces that tackling youth unemployment is a long-term endeavor requiring sustained commitment, policy consistency, and the agility to adjust programs based on feedback.

Evaluation of International Support Effectiveness

After addressing the initiatives, the question the research sought to answer is: How effective are international organizations in reducing youth unemployment in the MENA? The answer is mixed, on one hand, these organizations have been crucial in keeping the issue on the agenda and providing resources and knowledge. They have introduced new ideas such as entrepreneurship promotion, or the importance of monitoring and evaluation also have helped finance interventions that otherwise might not have been attempted. For example, without World Bank loans or grants, countries might not invest in experimental approaches like large-scale technical training centers or incubation programs for youth businesses. International efforts have also built capacity: government agencies have learned how to design active labor policies better and how to collect labor statistics more systematically with ILO's help on surveys.

On the other hand, the overall unemployment rates have not fallen dramatically, indicating that the impact of these efforts has been inadequate or slow to materialize at the macro level. Some reviews point out that international programs often target a few thousand beneficiaries in a country where hundreds of thousands are still unemployed – thus making a small dent. In addition, if underlying economic conditions are unfavorable (low

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growth, political uncertainty, budget crises), even well designed programs may struggle. For instance, a youth entrepreneurship program may train excellent young innovators, however if the banking sector will not lend to them or the market is monopolized, their startups might fail, leaving them unemployed again.

International organizations themselves have learned lessons. A review of youth employment projects by the World Bank noted the importance of monitoring outcomes and being ready to adjust (Lund, 2016). Early 2000s programs sometimes lacked proper evaluation; nowadays there is more emphasis on evidence, such as running pilot projects and rigorously evaluating results before scaling up. There is also a realization that context matters greatly: programs successful in one country cannot be copy-pasted to another without adaptation to local socio-cultural and economic context.

One positive trend is the shift towards holistic approaches. Instead of treating youth unemployment purely as a labor issue, there is a growing understanding (advocated by UNDP and OECD) that it ties into governance, education, and social inclusion. The OECD's concept of mainstreaming youth considerations across all ministries is one example of a holistic view (Lund, 2016). Practical implications can be seen in some state strategies. For example, a country might reform its education sector, change its business regulations, launch a national service program, and activate vocational training programs to address the problem from multiple angles. International organizations increasingly coordinate among themselves too; for example, the UN's Youth 2030 strategy and the World Bank's Human Capital Project both align with ILO's Decent Work agenda to push for environments where young people can thrive.

Equally important, the media can also help reduce youth unemployment by lowering information frictions, improving accountability, and amplifying effective pathways into work. Public-interest journalism and targeted campaigns surface skills gaps and market needs, directing young people toward credible training, apprenticeships, and entrepreneurship support, while countering misinformation about opportunities (ILO, 2024; UNESCO, 2021). News coverage and data-driven reporting also hold governments and international organizations to account for outcomes promised in youth employment strategies, encouraging course-correction and transparency (World Bank, 2022; UNDP, 2022). In parallel, collaboration with broadcasters and digital platforms can expand access to career guidance and job-matching services, which evidence links to better employment transitions when embedded in active labor-market programs (OECD, 2021; ILO, 2024). Finally, media narratives that highlight female role models and inclusive workplaces can shift norms and broaden participation among underrepresented youth, complementing structural reforms with culture-changing communication (UNDP, 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

In short, this paper argues that international organizations have played a supporting role in alleviating unemployment in the region, but they cannot solve the problem of youth unemployment alone. The effectiveness of these organizations may be most effective when local political will is strong. In countries that have implemented serious reforms—for example, some Gulf states that addressed their reliance on the public sector, or Morocco, which improved vocational training—results have begun to improve. In countries experiencing conflict or political paralysis, however, the impact of international efforts has been minimal; underscoring that peace and stability are essential conditions for the success of any employment strategy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth unemployment in the MENA region is severely entrenched and complicated. The evidence shows that chronic joblessness among youth stems from a convergence of factors – a “youth bulge” flooding the labor market, rigid economies that stifle private-sector growth, mismatches between education and job skills, and social barriers. If left unaddressed, these dynamics waste human capital, slow growth and even fuel social unrest – as seen during the Arab Spring uprisings. This research confirms that overcoming this challenge is essential to the region's future stability and prosperity.

International organizations have long sounded the alarm and intervened. Agencies like the World Bank, ILO, UNDP, and others have invested in studies and programs – from reforming curricula and funding skills training to promoting entrepreneurship and institutional reform. These efforts have laid important groundwork, helping to diagnose the issue and pilot innovative solutions. Yet the overall impact on regional unemployment has been limited so far. Most youth initiatives remain fragmented and have not scaled into coherent national strategies. This paper note that, without broad labor-market reforms and inclusive growth, targeted training or startup grants alone cannot absorb the rising youth cohorts.

A key lesson is that no single actor or intervention can solve MENA's youth employment issue. Instead, a concerted multi-stakeholder approach is required. Governments must enact bold economic reforms – for instance, easing business regulations, combating corruption and reducing public-sector bias – to unleash private-sector job creation. International organizations are best positioned to lend financial assets, technical expertise and global best practices to this effort. The private sector itself should be engaged as a partner in training and hiring young people. Crucially, youth voices must be included: giving young men and women a real role in designing policies and projects ensures that interventions reflect their needs and aspirations. When youth are treated as stakeholders (through youth councils, consultative forums, etc.), programs become more relevant and sustainable.

The Tunisian case study illustrates these points. After 2011, Tunisia collaborated with the World Bank, ILO and OECD on education and labor-market reforms. It modernized university curricula, expanded apprenticeships and launched wage-subsidy schemes for graduates. These movements – along with youth consultations – improved skills and youth awareness. However, Tunisia's youth unemployment rate remains high (around 35%). This underscores a critical gap: supply-side reforms (better education and training) must be matched by demand-side changes. Without enough new jobs in the economy, even better-trained graduates cannot all find job. Tunisia's experience also highlights the importance of coordination: early efforts were sometimes fragmented, reaching limited groups, prompting the government to develop a more coherent National Youth Strategy. Such lessons reinforce that integrated action plans – coupling structural reforms with targeted youth programs – are essential.

Building on these insights, the way forward must be broadly comprehensive and coordinated. Governments and partners should simultaneously pursue several strategic thrusts. First, fundamental economic reforms are needed to grow the private sector. This means leveling the playing field for small businesses and startups (including youth - led enterprises) by simplifying regulations, enforcing fair competition, and clamping down on nepotism. Second, education and training systems must be realigned with market needs: expanding vocational and technical training, integrating internships or dual - learning models, and updating curricula to emphasize practical, digital and soft skills. Policymakers should foster stronger links between schools and industry – for example, industry advisory boards, career centers and apprenticeship programs as piloted in Tunisia.

Third, active labor-market and entrepreneurship programs should be scaled up but rigorously managed. Well designed apprenticeship schemes, job placement services and youth entrepreneurship grants can help bridge the school-to-work transition, but only if they are strategically targeted and continuously evaluated. Setting clear metrics, conducting impact evaluations, and allowing successful pilots to expand (while discontinuing those that fail) will ensure resources are used effectively. Fourth, special measures are needed to reduce the gender gap. This means not only encouraging firms to hire and retain young women (for example through subsidized internships or awards for women-friendly workplaces) but also investing in childcare, transportation safety and legal reforms where needed, so that more women can work. Fifth, technology should be leveraged: online job portals, e-learning platforms and support for gig work can broaden opportunities for youth across urban and rural areas.

Throughout, youth participation and transparency should be built in. Young people should help shape the policies meant for them – via youth advisory boards, consultations or co design of programs – so that interventions address actual needs. Governments and partners should track progress with disaggregated data on youth employment, training and entrepreneurship outcomes, publishing dashboards of key indicators. Such accountability will highlight what works and what needs adjustment. Lastly, a public-private partnership approach is essential: sector-specific task forces and regular dialogues between industry, government and educators can align curricula with emerging skills needs and identify growth sectors where youth can find work. International bodies like the World Bank and ILO can facilitate these forums and co-finance initiatives that bring firms into the training pipeline.

In sum, the youth unemployment challenge in MENA demands a long-term, integrated reform agenda underpinned by collaboration at all levels. Coordinated action by governments, international organizations, private firms, civil society and young people themselves is the only way to unlock the region's potential. With sustained commitment to these strategies, MENA can turn its demographic "liability" into a dividend of inclusive growth.

By synthesizing evidence from regional studies, international reports and the Tunisian experience, this research offers an original, comprehensive roadmap for action. It contributes to the policy discourse by identifying concrete, multi-dimensional pathways forward – from economic liberalization and education reform to gender inclusion and youth empowerment – that collectively can move the needle on youth employment. Ultimately, the findings underscore that only through persistent, well-coordinated reforms and genuine stakeholder partnerships can the aspirations of MENA's youth be fulfilled and the stability of the region be secured.

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Data Availability

This research is based on publicly available literature and does not rely on original datasets. All data supporting the findings are available within the cited references.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Ethics Declarations

This study did not involve human participants, animals, personal data, or biological materials. Therefore, ethics approval, consent to participate, and consent to publish declarations are not required. No ethical approvals were necessary as the research relied exclusively on publicly available literature, official policy documents, and secondary data sources.

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