

Questions and answers on the ILO response to challenges in the Arab World

On 8 July 2011, the International Labour Organization (ILO) hosted a meeting on "The Arab World, Towards a New Era of Social Justice", which brought together representatives of countries from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the international community, donors and ILO constituents. A background paper entitled "Challenges in the Arab world: an ILO response" on the ILO's strategy and response was the basis for the discussions. It provides figures and trends on the employment situation and answers a series of questions around creating decent work opportunities in the region. A series of concept notes was also presented, covering areas where the MENA countries have requested ILO assistance. ILO is developing work in the MENA countries and seeks additional funding for some of these programmes.

What are the main common causes identified in the report for the popular uprisings that took place in several Arab countries?

Popular uprisings were the result of exacerbated poverty, unemployment, inequality and exclusion, themselves being the result of a long-term deficit of democratic governance, essential freedom and social dialogue. The report shows that unemployment is certainly central to the crisis. Despite economic growth, not enough jobs were created to absorb new labour market entrants or, when they existed, they were low quality jobs, some of which have been taken by migrant labour. Youth unemployment is especially a major challenge.

Can you give us an idea of the scale of the unemployment problems for youth ?

Unemployment among Arab youth is the highest in the world (23.6 per cent in North Africa and 21.1 per cent in the Middle East, compared to a world average of 12.6 per cent). Young people's risk of unemployment is four times higher than for adults. In 2010, out of 100 people that could work, not even half of them did. Levels of unemployment stood at 9.8 per cent in North Africa and 10.1 per cent in the Middle East in the same year, with high figures especially for women (15.0 to 17.0 per cent in North Africa and the Middle East respectively, compared to a world average of 6.5 per cent). The lack of employment opportunities in the formal sector, as well as under-employment, often push people into the informal economy. The lack of high quality jobs means that more than four out of ten people working in MENA countries in 2009 had a vulnerable job.

Based on these figures, is it fair to say that significant under-employment and poverty persist?

Definitely. However, there are major local disparities in the degrees of poverty within individual countries. The report points out that significant progress made at the national level by many countries towards Millennium Development Goal 1 (MDG1) masks severe disparities at the local level. They include lack of infrastructure, limited access to services and education and unequal access to information technologies. The disadvantaged countries are caught up in a vicious cycle: their situation hinders improvements in productivity and output, leaving no room for income increases, thus exacerbating their weakness.

What are the main reasons for the decent work deficit in MENA countries?

The report mentions several reasons such as chronically understaffed public employment services, the lack of a favourable environment for creating and developing micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, unregulated migration, the lack of labour standards and weaknesses in social dialogue. Also, an increase in productivity levels has been low despite achievements in education. But very often, schools, universities, vocational education and training institutions are turning out graduates lacking the skills that are needed in competitive labour markets. The result is that the percentage of young people who are both out of school and out of work (60 per cent) is higher in Arab countries than in any other developing region.

How is the ILO responding to some of these challenges ?

The need for social justice and decent work have been central to the demands of the current wave of popular movements. The ILO is ideally placed to support Arab countries, placing decent work and employment at the core of socio-economic policies and strategies. Our strategy responds to immediate challenges while also addressing structural issues that require medium to long-term responses.

What is your main focus ?

The ILO response is focused on promoting employment opportunities through the increased use of local resources, labour-intensive investment and environmental protection-related jobs, enhancing the capacity of countries to reduce vulnerability, and building on the existing coping strategies of social and employment safety networks to ensure implementation of the concept of a wider social protection floor.

Another challenge is to strengthen and broaden social dialogue to ensure a democratic transformation process and to reinforce the rule of law, since the strategy is rights-based, taking international labour standards and their promotion as benchmarks and aiming to use them to guide development.

Are you further developing programmes ?

ILO programmes to promote youth employment are expanding in many MENA countries, working with ILO constituents to improve school-to-work transition, active labour market policies and entrepreneurship promotion. The ILO is engaged in restructuring labour market governance and institutions, supporting the emergence of democratic trade unions and employers' organizations.

Support for the private sector is also a major concern, with emphasis placed on the promotion of a conducive enterprise environment and assistance to the development of micro and small enterprises.

Finally, we are currently seeking additional funding for specific proposals (for a total amount of USD 90,100,000) in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Tunisia and the Syrian Arab Republic. The largest proposals concern decent jobs for young people, employment-intensive investment in capacity building and pilot programmes, employment-intensive public works, promoting inclusive and equitable social dialogue for consensus-building in Arab states as well as strengthening workers' organizations.