

QUEEN RANIA AL ABDULLAH

RAISING THE POTENTIAL OF ARAB YOUTH

In the UK, the median age is roughly 40 years old. In the US, it is 35. In Jordan, it is 23.5. With almost 40 percent of Jordan's population under the age of 15, creating employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for its youth is an urgent, constant challenge. One innovative organisation, Injaz, is meeting this challenge head on. Injaz, which means "achievement" in Arabic, aims to inspire and prepare Jordanian youth to compete in the global economy.

In collaboration with businesses, educators, and government officials, more than 2,000 private-sector Injaz volunteers work through Jordanian schools and universities to teach young people marketable skills, from economics to entrepreneurship to ethics.

The dynamic exchange between students and business leaders benefits

both sides; for youth, abstract theory is brought to life, and for volunteers, engaging with Jordan's young people provides a vibrant window on their future employees and consumers.

Since its successful start in Jordan, the Injaz model has spread to 12 Arab countries. When a Kuwaiti businessman first heard about Injaz, for example, he was struck by its potential. "It's about time we stopped blaming government for the state of our youth and accept some responsibility," he said.

One month later, he had convinced many prominent business leaders to support Injaz and join him in training Kuwait's best and brightest, sharing business acumen, and revealing lessons learned. Since then, 65 public schools have been transformed into entrepreneurial training hubs, which proudly reclaim the mercantile spirit of Kuwait's forebears.

As one of Kuwait's corporate volunteers so passionately put it during the launch of Injaz Kuwait in 2006, "Today I present to you a discovery more important than an oilfield. Today, a group of private sector volunteers gift Kuwait 1,000 students with whom to build an economy."

Across the region, more than 300,000 students have enrolled in Injaz courses. Saudi Arabia is launching its own Injaz programme this year. Yet helping hands such as Injaz are still out of reach for too many young people in need. In the Middle East, youth unemployment stands at or above 25 percent—nearly twice the global average. And worldwide, the 1.2 billion young people between the ages of 15 and 24 need practical support if they are to become productive contributors to the global economy and the communities they call home.

That is why the work of organisations such as the International Youth Foundation (IYF) is so important. The IYF is equipping young people in nearly 70 countries with the skills, training and self-confidence to be outstand-

ing employees, lead healthy lives, and give back to their communities.

I saw these efforts myself when I visited a "Dreams Workshop" in Turkey, where teenage volunteers were using a combination of teamwork and arts-based education to teach disadvantaged children how to communicate effectively, think creatively, and solve problems co-operatively. More than 32,600 children and young adults in Turkey have benefited so far from such workshops, which are part of a global initiative of the IYF and Nokia.

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Similar successes are being written through youth-focused endeavours worldwide. In Egypt, thanks to the IYF, college graduates can now access training and job placement services at two pathbreaking career development centres.

In the Philippines, out-of-school youth, including former child combatants in the war-torn area of Mindanao, are gaining confidence and paychecks by learning how to build houses for families who have fled the violence or lost their homes in natural disasters.

In Indonesia, more than 3,000 young people are benefiting from entrepreneurial and job training. In Delhi, India, more than 600 children of parents with leprosy are receiving vocational training as well as social and emotional skills to help them compete for jobs.

Life-planning, teamwork, communication, and problem-solving capabilities are often called "soft skills," but they have a very real long-term impact on young people's lives and prospects. In one study of an IYF life skills programme in more than a dozen countries, 43 percent of young people in nine countries scored higher grades in school after participating in their

programmes, and 66 percent in 11 countries aspired to higher levels of education.


One life skills programme in Mexico, supported by the IYF and General Electric, halved school drop-out rates, while another in Latin America and the Caribbean has equipped nearly 20,000 at-risk youth with IT and life skills training, with more than half securing employment.

Now is the time to intensify such investments and scale up such successes—widening the embrace of youth-

supported programmes, encouraging more young people to participate, and persuading more private sector experts to share their time and talent.

As I have told groups of young people from across the Arab world who are working to advance their personal growth and achievement: "You are the tools of change, and change must start from within."

To that end, at this year's World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, I launched the Injaz "One Million Voices" campaign, which aims to reach a target of 1 million young Arabs by 2018—educating, energising and equipping them with the skills and motivation to lift the region's prospects and become productive, engaged global citizens.

Today, I am urging you to do your part to help. Be a mentor. Volunteer. Offer financial support. Provide internships at your company. Hire youths. Help make a difference in a young person's life—and build a brighter future for us all. 

Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan established the Jordan River Foundation and serves as UNICEF's First Eminent Advocate for Children and Regional Ambassador of Injaz Arabia. She is a member of the IYF Board of Directors.



In the Middle East, where youth unemployment stands at 25 percent, Queen Rania is supporting a new initiative that prepares young people for the job market. PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE OFFICE OF HER MAJESTY

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SANA SHAMSHER SATTI

AGE 21, RAWALPINDI, PAKISTAN

Ever since I was very young, I dreamed of becoming a doctor and supporting my siblings so they could get a good education. But I faced many challenges. I was born near the town of Muree, an hour's drive northeast of Islamabad, Pakistan.

My father, who was a teacher, struggled to find the money to educate me, my brother and three sisters. We all wanted to do well and make our parents proud, but our education was poor. If my father had not been a teacher, I would most certainly have dropped out of school by fifth grade.

Schools in villages like mine simply don't have what they need, which helps explain why more than half the people living in Pakistan's rural areas are illiterate. Our schools have no career guidance programs or knowledge about computers. There are no debates, competitions or class trips where students learn about the larger world. I discovered too late that I had chosen the wrong subjects to get my medical degree. I was so disappointed that for a while I gave up my dreams.

Though I knew my job prospects were poor, I decided to continue my studies. After much hard work, I moved to Islamabad to attend the university, where I graduated in March 2006 with a B.A. in statistics

and economics. After a long search, I finally got a job interview. It did not go well, and I was turned down.

Even young people in Pakistan with a good education have a difficult time getting jobs. The foremost reason is the lack of educational relevance—including technical education. Our options simply do not satisfy the requirements of the current market. So a large number of youth are educated but not employed. Of course, the ongoing political instability and violence in Pakistan also creates doubt about our country's economic and social development—and job prospects.

Last year, my father told me about a new job training program. When I was accepted, I hoped I would learn how to better conduct interviews and enhance my communications skills. But I learned more. The program offered us training in customer service, selling and corporate ethics, as well as practical advice—like appropriate dress codes in the workplace. Before, I was not able to speak well in public. Thanks to the confidence-building exercises, all of that has changed. On the first day of classes, almost no one had any goals. By the end, everyone was talking excitedly about how they wanted to get a job or continue their studies. All of a sudden, everyone was motivated. It's like we realized this is not the end—there is much more to do.

The training I received in this program is the reason I am now employed in a customer relations job with U-fone, a mobile telephone company in



Above: Sana's job training program is implemented by ASK Development and managed in partnership with Rural Support Programmes Network, two Pakistani organizations working with IYF.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF EEA

Rawalpindi. It has really changed my economic prospects. Growing up, the greatest mission that I set for myself was to get a job and save enough money to help educate my younger siblings. I am 21 now and so happy to have realized those distant dreams.

As young people, we can be catalysts for change in Pakistan, directing our country toward a better future. But we need to prepare ourselves. There is so much more out there for us to accomplish. **Y**

Sana Shamsheer Satti participated in a job skills training program supported by the Education & Employment Alliance (EEA). An initiative of the International Youth Foundation with funding from a US\$13 million cooperative agreement from USAID, EEA works in Egypt, India, Indonesia, Morocco, Pakistan and the Philippines to help young people enhance their job prospects.

FARAJII R. MUHAMMAD

AGE 29, BALTIMORE, MARYLAND USA

I always knew my life would be used for something great. But there I was—a trained actor from the Baltimore School for the Arts, a couple years out of high school—with an undetermined future.

I wanted to do something for my people, but I also wanted to be the next Denzel Washington. My mind said it would be foolish to let my acting training go to waste. My heart said I was born to serve a bigger cause.

Growing up in the Nation of Islam, I learned that my life as a young black man was valuable. Yet today, I see youth as an endangered species—under attack socially, politically and economically. I couldn't sit idly by and watch my peers and my community deteriorate. I had the passion, talent and foundation of my beliefs to improve life for those around me. I only needed the opportunity.

Once I decided to devote myself to developing young leaders, the doors of opportunity opened up. In 1999, my future wife, Tamara, and I started New Light Leadership Coalition (NLLC). She was 17. I was 19. We had no idea how to operate a nonprofit organization, but we shared the desire to make young people leaders. We both wanted to change the culture where young people are being used to promote an agenda led by adults—adults who only engage us when cameras are around. We also grew tired of seeing young people wasting their innate leadership abilities.

Young people in Baltimore face many challenges. The high school dropout rate for black males has climbed above 60 percent. Homicides totaled nearly

300 last year, with many victims in their teens and early 20s. Baltimore has more young people on the streets than in the workplace.

In addition to the external challenges, primary internal impediments—for black youth, in particular—include self-hatred and lack of self-knowledge. These two conditions have led black youth in a downward spiral. Despite the chaos, confusion and dissatisfaction, I believe young people are capable of doing great things.

NLLC hosted its first leadership conference in Baltimore in November 1999. We wanted to address how young people see themselves. Surprisingly, the event attracted 100 students from around the city. I knew something major had just happened. A change was taking place, with young people at the center.

Since then, NLLC has trained more than 2,000 young people nationwide on key principles of leadership. We also give young people the tools to resolve conflicts, become youth entrepreneurs, engage politically and operate and manage student organizations.

We have to change the thinking of young people before making any changes on the streets or in the halls of power. I want young people to see their lives as valuable. I want them to break down old, oppressive structures and usher in a new reality that benefits us all. This is the mission I was called to do, and it will be my contribution to make this a better world. **Y**

Farajii R. Muhammad serves as President of the nonprofit Baltimore-based youth organization New Light Leadership Coalition, Inc. For more information about NLLC, visit www.nllc.org.

Farajii Muhammad and his future wife Tamara were teenagers when they founded a youth leadership organization in Baltimore.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHER MYERS

