

Young People and the UN Millennium Development Goals in the Arab World: Why Youth? Why Now? Case Study of Morocco

By
Leila Hanafi
Washington, D.C.
December 12th, 2007

In a stimulating and youth led atmosphere, a large group of young activists, and students joined development professionals, faculty, government officials, media, and civil society representatives at the World Bank headquarters recently to address youth impact on the development process, experiences of youth who have made a difference in their communities, and how youth can contribute to achieving the United Nations Millennium Development Goals MDGs (the global development framework adopted by the United Nations in 2000 for improving people's lives and combating poverty in a sustained way by 2015).

In the Arab world, young people are standing at the crossroads of major changes in their countries. Taking care of youth, especially the most vulnerable and disadvantaged is necessary for economic, social, and political well-being. Daniela Gressani, World Bank Regional Vice President for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a stalwart advocate of youth issues welcomed the group and stressed in her keynote message that investing in young people is critical to achieving nearly all of the Millennium Development Goals.

One of the greatest opportunities, and challenges, the world faces today is the "youth bulge," which affects primarily, but not exclusively, the demographics of developing countries. *The World Bank Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation* states that around 50% of the world population today is under 25 years of age, and nine out of ten of these young people live in poor countries. It is clear, given such age demographics, that if the specific needs of young people are not identified and addressed, the MDGs will not be met. Dr. Michal Rutkowski, Sector Director of the World Bank MENA Human Development department, pointed out that we should not let young people become a burden for the economy, but should rather "contribute through adequate programs for their successful development, something that will help us grow economically and reduce the level of poverty."

Case Study of Morocco

Following Dr. Rutkowski's presentation, Moroccan Ambassador Aziz Mekouar outlined Morocco's experience in addressing youth as one of the most vital component in any development strategy, and how Morocco has integrated this component to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. More than 50% of Morocco's population is less than 25 year-old. Ambassador Mekouar stated that "the issue of young people has proven to be a major cross-cutting theme, embedded in almost every MDG...whether it be poverty reduction, education, improved governance, health and infectious diseases ... it is a fact that, giving a special attention to young people is not only at the core of achieving the MDGs, but will ensure that these goals will be achieved in a durable sustainable manner."

This is exactly what the recent initiatives in Morocco have targeted, either directly or indirectly. In 2005, the Moroccan Government launched the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), a landmark in Morocco's recent economic and social history. The goal of INDH aims at creating jobs and activities that will generate income for people who are most in need, particularly women and youth. This program, with a budget of US\$1 billion, represents the Moroccan broad framework to achieve the MDGs, at a national level. It is designed as a Community-Driven Development (CDD) program and relies on a participatory approach by which the citizens of the targeted marginalized communities express and prioritize their needs in terms of basic infrastructure, social services, income generating activities and capacity building.

Young People Fostering Change

Showcasing the work of young people, during the event, was a unique first-hand opportunity for participants to cross cultural boundaries and learn about what has been done successfully by young people in other countries to reduce youth poverty. It was “a great opportunity that allowed us to exchange ideas...and mobilized us to get involved in MDGs related activities, advocacy and implementation,” shared Maha Adnani, young University student from Morocco.

This event is an example of initiatives that we are taking, as young people, to promote the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Youth-led efforts of this type can serve as an advocacy platform and raise awareness within the international development community of the fact that young people have indeed a great potential for change, and can provide a long-lasting and effective dividend towards meeting the MDGs through building social capacity for development to 2015 and beyond.

Special Note:

The evening also featured an art exhibition by Fatema Mellal, a young Moroccan artist from a remote village in Southern Morocco, who uses art to support youth in her community.

This event was presented by the United Nations Association of the National Capital Area- International Law and Africa Committees in collaboration with the World Bank Middle East and North Africa Vice Presidency, World Bank InfoShop, UNDP USA, and the Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco.



Leila Hanafi, World Bank MENA Youth Innovation Fund Winner, panel moderator; Michael Rutkowski, Sector Director (MNSHD), World Bank; Mark Parkison, USAID Morocco; Ambassador Aziz Mekouar, Ambassador of Morocco to the US; Elizabeth Latham, Executive Director, UNDP USA; Alexandra Mattson, Peace Corps Morocco Desk; Raj Raina, Y2Y World Bank EAP Youth Innovation Fund; Salmane Blayachi, Youth activist, Morocco; Samantha Constant, Middle East Youth Initiative, Brookings Institution, Washington DC