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EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT TRANSITIONS IN SOUTH AND EAST MEDITERRANEAN COUNTRIES*

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from surveys in 2015-16 among nationally representative samples of 15-29 year olds in five South and East Mediterranean countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon). The labour market careers of males and females, from different family class backgrounds, and with different educational attainments, in urban and rural areas and in the different countries, are compared. It is argued that rates of youth unemployment are not 'massive' and are typically well below those recorded in Southern European countries in recent years. Job quality rather than job scarcity is identified as the major labour market problem experienced by all socio-demographic groups of young people. It is responsible for in-work poverty, inflating the numbers of young women who become inactive in the labour market, and extending the queues of higher education graduates who are waiting for commensurate jobs. We also argue that education is neither the source of nor an answer to the region's youth labour market problems. In conclusion, the paper argues that current youth labour market conditions are partly long-standing and customary, but have surged as a result of population growth combined with the neo-liberal economic and social policies that the region's governments have adopted since the 1990s. The paper concludes that while labour market conditions are serious problems for the region's young people and their families, they do not as yet constitute societal crises.

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INTRODUCTION

Aims

The aims of this paper are to define more accurately than hitherto the entry into employment problems that are currently encountered by young people in the South and East Mediterranean (SEM) region, to specify which young people experience which problems, then on the basis of young people's typical responses and possible government actions, to identify the more likely outcomes.

MENA youth

Much has been written about youth in SEM countries, and throughout the wider North Africa and Middle East (MENA) region, since the 'Arab Spring' of 2011. Virtually all commentators have named young people's difficulties in making transitions from education to employment as part of the inflammatory context if not the main cause of the eruptions that shook rulers throughout the region and toppled regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. 'Massive' levels of youth unemployment have been routinely cited as indicators of young people's difficulties. Unemployment is an internationally understood condition, and claims about massive levels throughout the MENA region are re-cited from publication to publication until accepted as established fact (as, for example, in Boughzala, 2015; Honwana, 2013; Noueihed and Warren, 2013). Poor quality and vocationally irrelevant education (Assad and Baroum, 2009; Dhillon et al, 2009), coupled with swaths of poor quality jobs in the countries' informal economic sectors (Chabaan, 2009; Hammounda, 2010), are also named as part of the nexus of difficulties that impede young people's progress from education to work and towards adulthood more generally. It is claimed that throughout the region youth is now normally followed by a new life stage of 'waithood' as adulthood recedes towards an unspecified point in the future (Dhillon and Yousef, 2009). We argue below that job quality, not unemployment, should be foregrounded as the major difficulty confronting the region's labour market entrants, and that better-quality, or more vocationally relevant education, will not be part of any solution. We also reject of the possibility of 'waithood' lasting sufficiently long, for enough young people, as would be necessary to pose a societal crisis.

Despite the volume of academic writing (see above) and official reports on youth in MENA countries since 2011 (see, for example, Bardak et al, 2015; Barsoum et al, 2014; European Training Foundation, 2015; Population Council, 2011; Zouari, 2014) there are still major gaps in our knowledge about youth labour markets in the MENA region. Even surveys of representative

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samples offer just snapshots which identify, for instance, the proportions of an age group who were unemployed at a specific point in time (for example, Hammouda, 2010; Population Council, 2011). These reports do not distinguish long-term unemployment from brief episodes between jobs, or between leaving education and first jobs. They do not track whether levels of unemployment subside, or whether the quality of young people's jobs improves, as they progress towards adulthood. Our evidence, from surveys in 2015-16 of nationally representative samples of 15-29 year olds in five SEM countries, offers another cross-sectional snapshot, but we will show that the biographical information collected and the age range covered enable us to introduce a longitudinal dimension into our analysis. We can thereby specify which young people experience specific impediments to their progress, their typical responses and the outcomes. The large total size of our combined samples (around 10,000) also allows us to distinguish how typical youth labour market careers vary by gender and according to individuals' educational backgrounds, between urban and rural areas, and between countries. We will demonstrate that established Western social science concepts and methods, which worked to explain changes in youth transitions in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 (authors; Gebel and Noelke, 2011; Kuhar and Reiter, 2012), prove fit for our purposes here which include showing how some configurations of young people's circumstances and their typical responses bear the distinctive imprint of the region's Islamic and Arabic histories and cultures as well as governments' more recent social and economic policies.

Methods

As stated above, our evidence is from surveys in 2015-2016 of nationally representative samples of approximately 2000 15-29 year olds in each of five SEM countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon), all the littoral Arab majority states except Libya and Syria where conditions at the time made survey work impossible. The surveys were overseen by local social science partners who contracted the fieldwork to survey organisations that had experience of, and existing tried and tested methods (which varied from country-to-country), of surveying nationally representative samples. Respondents were members of the target age group who were resident in representative samples of households. All respondents were interviewed at home, by same sex interviewers, using a standardised and fully structured questionnaire (all questions were closed) which was available in English, French and Arabic. This instrument was pilot tested in each country, following which the local research partners ensured that the questions and answer categories could be applied with the same meanings in each country. In Lebanon, refugees from the war in neighbouring Syria, who were mostly living in camps, estimated at around 1.25 million, approximately a fifth of the country's population, were not included in the survey.

The interviews included questions about each respondent's family background (parents' education and occupations), the respondents' own education, and labour market careers if they

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had completed their education. Whether respondents were married, 'in a relationship' or single, and whether they were living with their parents or elsewhere, were also recorded. Employers, the self-employed, employees, apprentices and family workers were asked about their monthly incomes. Answers in the local currencies were subsequently converted into € at purchasing power parity (ppp). Individuals without earned incomes were asked about their sources of money for personal spending.

There were additional questions on housing and family relationships, uses of free time, and religious and political orientations and activities, but here we confine attention to the samples' transitions from education into (or not into) their countries' labour markets. The questionnaire surveys were complemented by qualitative fieldwork in three contrasting regions in each of the five countries, but here we deal solely with the survey evidence which sketches the macro-realities of youth, education, employment and its alternatives throughout the SEM region.

FINDINGS

We proceed below by presenting our evidence on movements with age out of education into different types of earning, unemployment and inactivity (in the labour market). We focus first on unemployment and inactivity rates, then the kinds of the jobs held at the time of the survey, and histories of job changing. We subsequently examine the relationship between the samples' educational attainments and their labour market biographies, how educational achievements and labour market prospects varied by gender, between those living in urban and rural areas, and between the five countries. As we proceed we disaggregate unemployment, inactivity (in the labour market) and employment, we specify which groups of young people were most likely to experience specific impediments during their education-to-work transitions, and we discuss the likely long-term implications.

Transitions

Table I presents the positions vis-a-vis the labour market of our combined five country samples, separately for males and females, and divided into three age groups – 15-19, 20-24 and 25-29. These tables portray the movement with age out of education – from 69 percent to 35 percent then seven percent of males, and from 74 percent to 33 percent then five percent of young women. The percentages in employment (employers, self-employed, employees, apprentices and family workers) rise with age from 20 percent to 40 percent then 71 percent among the males, and from six percent to 14 percent then 30 percent among the females. The percentages who were unemployed that the time of the research also rise: from four percent to 11 percent then 14 percent among males, and from two percent to nine percent then 10 percent among females. The Arab-Islamic region is distinctive in world terms not in its high rates of youth unemployment but

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in its low rates of employment, which are due to low rates of labour force participation, specifically by women (see also Roudi, 2011). The percentages who were inactive within our combined five country samples rose among males from eight percent to 15 percent, then fell-back to nine percent among those aged 25-29, while for females the rates rose consistently from 18 percent to 43 percent to 55 percent.

Table I: Positions vis-a-vis the labour market in age groups (all countries)

a. Males

	15-19 %	**20-24 %**	**25-29 %**
Education	69	35	7
Employer	<1	2	5
Self-employed	2	7	14
Employee	13	27	47
Apprentice	2	1	2
Family worker	3	3	3
Total employed	*20*	*40*	*71*
Unemployed	4	11	14
Inactive	8	15	9
N =	1826	1884	1566

b. Females

	15-19 %	**20-24 %**	**25-29 %**
Education	74	33	5
Employer	<1	<1	1
Self-employed	1	2	4

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Employee	3	10	22
Apprentice	<1	1	1
Family worker	1	1	2
Total employed	*6*	*14*	*30*
Unemployed	2	9	10
Inactive	18	43	55
N =	1526	1541	1517

The categories in Table I were originally developed for use in Western countries. The exception is 'family work' which was added on account of its relevance throughout the SEM region. In the West there are current debates about whether these categories remain fit for purpose, and we need to ask whether they are fit for export into the MENA region. Unemployment is now routinely measured in Labour Force Surveys using criteria proposed by the International Labour Office in 1982. This measurement means that a person is not employed at the time of a survey, has not worked during the last seven days, has searched for work during this period, and can start more-or-less immediately if offered a suitable job. This measurement may have been a satisfactory indicator of the scale of job deficits in Western countries during the decades preceding 1982 when, in most regions in most countries, there were enough full-time jobs for all who wanted them. Today it is argued that the measurement conceals considerable mis-employment (beneath the level for which a person is experienced and qualified) (see Brown et al, 2010), under-employment in part-time, temporary and other low-paid precarious occupations (Standing, 2011), and enforced self-employment (see Inman, 2014; MacDonald, 1996; Smeaton, 2003). The 'inactive' category is also questioned, and NEET (not in education, employment or training) has become a widely used measurement of the scale of non-employment among employable young people. It has been used in the SEM region (Bardak et al, 2015). The concept dates from the early-1990s when the acronym was derived from the title of a report from South Wales which measured the scale of unemployment among the region's 16-18 year olds who were no longer included in the UK official unemployment figure (Istance et al, 1994). However, the NEET concept has been criticised heavily for the same reasons as the inactive category – for aggregating hugely dissimilar situations (see, for example, Furlong, 2006).

The statistics in Table I are the groups to which respondents assigned themselves. The sole exception is the unemployed category where respondents who self-assigned were left only if they passed two additional ILO tests and had not worked during the last seven days and would start

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more-or-less immediately if offered something suitable. The remaining test, searching for work in the last seven days, was considered too harsh to be applied throughout the SEM countries.

Unemployment

Unemployment is a risk faced by labour market entrants throughout the SEM region. Our surveys show that rates of youth unemployment varied from country-to-country, between urban and rural areas, then differed by gender and educational attainments. However, the overall unemployment rates were not particularly high by current global and European standards. We, like other commentators, can inflate the apparent scale of the job deficit in SEM countries by replacing youth unemployment rates with NEET rates. Across the combined five country samples of 25-29 year olds, by which age they had nearly all completed full-time education, 23 percent of males and 65 percent of females were NEET at the time of the surveys. However, the unemployment rates, measured in the internationally standardised way, were not exceptionally high by current global and European standards. In Greece and Spain youth unemployment rates, measured in the same ways, have risen above 50 percent during the post-2008 era.

The point that needs to be stressed is that in all countries, whatever their proportion in an age group or socio-demographic group, the unemployed need to be disaggregated. Some youth unemployment is 'transitional'; an episode between completing education and finding a job. Sometimes unemployment becomes 'recurrent' in chequered labour market careers in which short-lived jobs are separated by spells of unemployment. Then there is long-term unemployment and this is the type of youth unemployment that is known to have enduring scarring consequences (Tumino, 2015). The proportions of 25-29 year olds who were unemployed at the time of the surveys, who had never worked but still wanted to work (thereby indicating that they were not reconciled to joblessness), were 7.8 percent among the males and 4.8 percent among the females. They were at risk of long-term 'exclusion', as were others who can be identified by unpacking the inactive group.

Inactivity

All countries have some inactive (in the labour market) young people. In some cases this is because neither education, employment nor training are realistic in the short-term. This can be due to physical or mental health problems, or lifestyle issues involving alcohol, drugs or criminality. There are also 'discouraged workers' who have ceased searching because they no longer expect to be offered jobs. Other discouraged workers shelter in an extended education. Male inactivity rates, which fluctuated between eight percent and 15 per cent in the different age groups, offer an estimate of the proportions in both sexes who were inactive for one of these reasons

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Among women in Arab-Islamic countries, inactivity rates are inflated by cultural reservations or outright resistance to women's employment outside the family (CAWTAR, 2017). Some international commentators claim that the economies of the countries would benefit enormously if greater use was made of women's capabilities (for example, Morikawa, 2015), but a more likely short-term outcome of a sudden influx of female job-seekers would be a steep rise in female unemployment. At present young (and older) women are unlikely to accept jobs unless they offer 'decent' working conditions and environments. We will see below that, in certain socio-demographic groups, most mothers of our respondents had labour market careers, and this applied to our female respondents in the same socio-demographic groups. Resistance to employment by young women and their families in SEM countries is typically nuanced. Few will countenance non-family employment in which women are likely to be targets for sexual innuendos and where their own morality will be questioned. They want 'decent' work environments, and decency in SEM countries, as young women and their families define it, is difficult to find outside government departments and public services. These were the source of just 14 percent of all jobs held by our samples of male and female 15-29 year olds.

We will return below to unpacking the inactive group to estimate the proportion who could be activated if offered appropriate opportunities.

Geographical differences

Table II: Labour market positions, 25-29 year olds, by country

	Morocco	**Algeria**	**Tunisia**	**Egypt**	**Lebanon**
	%	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**
Education	11	7	6	3	4
Employer	1	1	2	2	8
Self-employed	18	10	4	3	12
Employee	32	29	25	41	44
Apprentice	4	2	3	-	1
Family worker	1	2	2	4	2
Total employed	*56*	*44*	*36*	*50*	*67*
Unemployed	4	15	29	6	3
Inactive	29	32	29	41	26

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N =	429	616	702	606	730
Mean monthly incomes of employees, all ages, in ppp €	519	695	451	413	1137

Among 25-29 year olds, the total employment rate (employers, self-employed, employees, apprentices and family workers) was lowest in Tunisia (just 36 percent), and this country had the highest proportion who were unemployed (29 percent) (see Table II). Egypt had the highest proportion (41 percent), mainly young women, who were inactive. Lebanon proves the exceptional case among the five countries. It had the highest proportion of 25-29 year olds who were in some form of employment (67 percent), and the lowest proportions who were unemployed (three percent) and inactive (26 percent). Lebanon employees aged 25-29 generally had far higher salaries (a monthly mean of €1137) than employees in any of the other countries where the range was from €413 to €695. These country differences are important. They represent the situations that national governments must address. However, they rarely represent accurately the risks and opportunities facing specific socio-demographic groups of young people in any country.

Table III: Labour market situations of males and females aged 25-29 in urban and rural areas

	Urban males %	Rural males %	Urban females %	Rural females %
Education	8	5	6	4
Employer	5	4	2	1
Self-employed	14	14	4	4
Employees	45	49	30	11
Apprentices	3	2	1	1
Family workers	2	4	1	3
Total employed	*69*	*73*	*38*	*20*

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Unemployed	14	13	10	10
Inactive	9	9	47	66
N =	967	599	934	583

Within all our survey countries these risks and opportunities varied between rural and urban locations, and within these by gender, and also, as we shall see later, by educational attainments. The main differences between urban and rural locations were among the young women. There were only minor differences between the positions vis-à-vis the labour market of urban and rural 25-29 year old males. Among the young women there were stark differences: 30 percent were employees in urban areas but just 11 percent in rural locations, while 47 percent and 66 percent respectively were inactive (see Table III).

Employment and job quality

Apart from employers and the self-employed, the categories of employment offered to respondents in our interview schedule did not correspond to the main sub-packs into which jobs were divided. Even in Europe's more weakly regulated economies, most employment is formal and is subject to some regulation. Employees must be given written contracts specifying hours of work (which may be zero hours) and other conditions, and the circumstances in which they can be dismissed. This kind of regulated formal employment is scarce in SEM countries outside the public sectors and large private corporations such as banks and telecommunication firms. Most private sector employment is informal (World Bank, 2014).

Formal and informal employment

A common complaint among the SEM region's young people is that they are excluded from formal 'quality' jobs. If age was their sole problem, individuals who were disadvantaged when in their twenties would enjoy compensating advantages as they grew older. All societies have age regimes (Pickard, 2016) which govern how people of given ages are expected to behave and how they can expect to be treated. In Germany most 15-24 year olds expect to be in education or apprenticeships. Skilled jobs are reserved for older citizens who have completed earlier preparatory career stages. In Spain (see Golsch, 2003), and in other Mediterranean European countries, it is atypical for individuals to be offered permanent jobs much before age 30. Economic and family cultures reinforce each other in insisting that secure jobs paying a family wage should be for child-rearing adults who are responsible for maintaining their households. In this respect, there are similar age regimes on both sides of the Mediterranean. However, in SEM countries many young people cannot progress into 'quality jobs'. There are simply not enough.

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Hence the prevalence of in-work poverty. A survey in Tunis in 2016 found that 10 percent of the population had begged for money on the streets, and nearly a half of these beggars had other jobs (Tarfa, 2016).

The main contrast in job quality in SEM countries is between the public sector and private businesses. Within our samples, those employed in their countries' public sectors were by far the more likely to have written contracts of employment (77 percent against 30 percent) and to be insured in their countries' state social security systems (71 percent against 26 percent) Also, private sector employees worked more hours for less pay than their public-sector counterparts (see Table IV). Employers did not try to tailor hours of work precisely to match their workflows. Public sector employees normally and officially worked eight hours a day, five days a week, though this did not mean that they all actually worked for all these hours. In the private sector an informal job of unspecified duration would normally involve being at work, doing the job, for eight hours a day, six days a week, and longer if required, not necessarily for extra pay. On farms individuals of any age could be hired as day labourers during planting and harvesting seasons. They would be employed one month then unemployed in the next.

Table IV: Hours of work and rates of pay in public and private sector employment

Hours worked per week	**Public sector**	**Private sector**
Top quartile	48	54
Median	40	48
Bottom quartile	30	35
Pay per month in PPP (€)		
Top quartile	1094	875
Median	766	494
Bottom quartile	451	280

The young people's main labour market problem was the acute shortage of good quality, public sector jobs. Only 14 percent of their jobs were in the countries' public sectors. In terms of educational levels, higher education graduates (but only 18 percent of their jobs) were the most likely to be in the public sector. A higher proportion of females' than males' jobs were public sector (18 percent and 12 percent), but these figures must be set in the context of the much lower total employment rate among females. There was no difference between rural and urban areas,

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but with age the proportion of employees in public sector jobs rose gradually from just eight percent among 15-19 year olds to 13 percent of those aged 20-24 and 16 percent of 25-29 year olds. Many in their late-20s were still in low paid informal private sector jobs and had no prospect of progression to anything better. Western ideas about what 'a job' will mean, and also about individuals having a choice over their occupational futures, are inapplicable in SEM contexts (see Sultana, 2017).

It seemed, unsurprisingly, that most of our respondents' current jobs were not regarded as final labour force destinations. Most of the young employees realised that they could be dismissed, or they could choose to leave jobs of their own accord, at any time. There had been considerable job changing within the informal sector. Among the 25-29 year olds who were in employment when interviewed, 49 percent were still in their first jobs, 32 percent had held one previous job while 17 percent had held two or more. Recurrent unemployment would have been a risk in these chequered labour market careers. For young people who did not progress through higher education, and for many of the latter, the best career strategy was to stick in an informal good job, defined in terms of its likely longevity, the pay, and their treatment at work (see Montieth and Giesbert, 2016). Others needed to use their contacts and local reputations to build careers in the informal sector, moving between jobs and eventually into relatively good informal jobs.

When employment itself is informal, the same will inevitably apply to job searching and recruitment. So the SEM countries offer further evidence of Granovetter's 'strength of weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973). In the SEM countries these informal labour market processes are controversial when they operate in recruitment to formal employment, especially in public sector jobs. It is widely believed that without *wasta* (useful connections) entering these labour force segments will be very difficult if not impossible. We must note, however, that the same individuals who complain about lack of *wasta* excluding people like themselves from decent employment are likely to feel fully justified in doing all that they can to assist their own family members and friends, and have no qualms about seeking such assistance for themselves. Thirty-eight percent of employers, and 57 percent of both the self-employed and respondents who described their current jobs as permanent, but even more, 78 percent of those with temporary employment, said that they had obtained these positions through family and personal contacts.

Employers and the self-employed

Nineteen percent of the 25-29 year old males were either employers, self-employed or working for their families. They accounted for a third of all male employment. Among females roughly a quarter of those with jobs were self-employed, employers of others, or doing family work. Only 17 percent of all employers and 30 percent of the self-employed had held these positions since they first entered the labour force: 64 percent of the current employers and 53 percent of those currently self-employed had begun their working lives as employees. Some had 'progressed' into

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self-employment or running businesses with employees, but for others self-employment was likely to have been a last resort. Some young people had made rapid progress into their countries' relatively prosperous business classes, but approximately a half of the self-employed had earnings within the bottom quartile of employees' incomes. Most of the respondents' businesses were in agriculture or trading (wholesale or retail), but some were supplying professional and business services. Our respondents were part of the SEM countries' first tech-savvy digital generation (see Osman, 2012), and some were pioneering related enterprises. Their careers are examples of 'moving on' and simultaneously 'moving up', while others had resorted to 'survival self-employment' as their only alternative to unemployment.

Highly flexible, informal labour markets allow some individuals to construct their own careers and biographies, though as is always the case, some progress while others stick or slide. The two percent of our 25-29 year old males and the one percent of our females who said that they were apprentices when interviewed were rarely taking their first steps following completion of their education. Most had already been employed in more than one previous job. They had 'stepped back' in order, they must have hoped, that they would eventually 'move forward' though this could never be guaranteed, and there were high risks of failure given the overall quality of the jobs offered in the SEM countries' youth labour markets. The occupational profiles of SEM countries are typical of pre-industrial societies – high levels of both self-employment and informal employment. By the time of our surveys these profiles had spread from rural areas into the region's expanding cities.

Historical contexts

Issues of job quality are currently being experienced by people of all ages in specific SEM historical contexts. When the countries achieved full independence between the 1920s and 1960s their first genuinely post-colonial regimes all subscribed to some version of socialism. Socialism was popular globally in the 1950s and 60s. Public sectors in SEM countries were expanded with the eventual aim of offering decent, modern jobs to all. Young people who succeeded in education were rewarded with such jobs, and today's school and university leavers feel equivalently entitled. Generally, governments had honoured their side of this 'bargain' at the time when our respondents' parents finished their education. However, since the 1990s the ruling regimes in all the countries had adopted neo-liberal social and economic policies. Government spending and employment had been held down or rolled back at a time when increasing numbers of young people were entering the countries' labour markets.

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Table V: Populations (in millions)

	1950	1980	2010	2017
Algeria	9	19	36	41
Egypt	22	43	82	95
Lebanon	1	3	4	6
Morocco	9	20	32	35
Tunisia	3	6	11	11

Source: www.worldbank.org

Table VI: Total fertility rates

	1960	2015
Algeria	7.5	2.8
Egypt	6.6	3.3
Lebanon	5.7	1.7
Morocco	7.1	2.5
Tunisia	6.9	2.1

Source: www.worldbank.org

During the second half of the 20th century the countries' populations doubled then doubled again (see Table V), which overwhelmed the supply of decent jobs. Fertility rates have now fallen but are at a sub-replacement level only in Lebanon (see Table VI). In the other four countries the numbers entering the labour market year-by-year will continue to increase, but more slowly than in the recent past. Under these conditions, completely unregulated informal labour markets have held down unemployment by allowing the creation of swaths of low-quality, low-paid and insecure jobs. It is this, rather than a straight-forward job deficit, that is the source of the labour market problems currently experienced by most of region's young people and their families. The World Bank's preferred remedy is more neo-liberalism: cut public sector deficits, shrink still 'bloated' public sectors and create space for private enterprises to expand alongside wider regulation, but with weaker regulations, of labour markets and businesses, and easier access to credit (World Bank, 2014). In the short-term at any rate, these solutions could exacerbate both the unemployment and job quality problems currently experienced by young job-seekers. Only 14 percent of their jobs were in the 'bloated' public sectors. There were few young people to shake-out. Also, informal employment is so traditional, widespread and entrenched that looser regulations are unlikely to persuade employers or the self-employed to move their jobs into the formal sector.

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Rather than the SEM countries' demographic surge (the expansion of the youth age groups in the early 21st century) becoming a labour force disaster (see Population Council, 1998, 2011), our inference is that Arab–Islamic culture (which keeps many young women inactive) and the extent of informal, completely unregulated employment, have enabled the countries to cap their youth unemployment rates at moderate or low levels. We have seen above that the proportions who had become long-term unemployed by their late-20s, and who were at risk of longer-term socio-economic marginalisation or exclusion, were beneath 10 percent.

Education and employment

During the 1990s and early-2000s the SEM countries followed the advice of international financial institutions. The countries were rewarded with loans while they liberalised markets, privatised as much as possible, and held other government spending down while investing heavily in 'human capital'. The outcome can be seen in Table VII. The proportion of males with primary education or less had declined from 51 percent among respondents' fathers to 19 percent among their sons. Among females the decline was from 60 percent among the mothers to 19 percent of their daughters. The proportions completing higher education had risen from 10 percent to 34 percent among males and from six percent to 34 percent among females. Respondents' fathers had been better educated then their mothers, whereas this gender gap had been eliminated among our respondents.

Table VII: Highest education of parents and respondents, 25-29

	Fathers	**Males 25-29**	**Mothers**	**Females, 25-29**
	%	%	%	%
Primary or less	51	22	60	21
Middle or full secondary	39	35	34	37
Vocational	-	15	-	12
Higher education	10	28	6	30
N =	7776	1148	7844	1174

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Educational attainments were higher in urban than in rural areas (see Table VIII) and varied between countries (Table IX). The proportions of 25-29 year olds with a higher education qualification were highest in Lebanon (43 percent) and Tunisia (38 percent) while the proportion with no more than primary schooling was highest in Morocco (36 percent).

Table VIII: Education attainments among 25-29 year olds in urban and rural areas

	Urban **%**	**Rural** **%**
Primary or less	15	26
Middle or full secondary	36	30
Vocational	10	21
Higher education	40	23
N =	1647	987

Table IX: Education attainments among 25-29 year olds in different countries

	Algeria **%**	**Egypt** **%**	**Lebanon** **%**	**Morocco** **%**	**Tunisia** **%**
Primary or less	15	19	7	36	22
Middle or full secondary	20	16	44	34	40
Vocational	31	41	6	5	-
Higher education	34	24	43	26	38
N =	181	602	720	429	

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International advisers are now urging the countries to follow quantitative expansion by improving the quality of education. They want standards of attainment in secondary and higher education to rise, less rote learning, fewer tick-box tests, and closer alignment of curricula with the requirements of employers (see Boudarat and Ajbilou, 2009; Chaaban, 2009, Dhillon et al, 2009; Salehi-Isfahani and Dhillon, 2008). However, it is easier to demonstrate the prevalence of low scores in internationally standardised tests than to prove that the recommended changes would enhance young people's job prospects.

Table X: Labour market positions by educational attainments, 25-29 year olds

a. Males

	Primary or less	**Secondary**	**Vocational**	**Higher**
	%	**%**	**%**	**%**
Employer	2	7	5	8
Self-employed	22	19	9	7
Employee	43	42	75	57
Apprentice	5	4	-	<1
Family work	1	3	5	3
Total employed	*75*	*75*	*94*	*75*
Unemployed	13	14	4	17
Inactive	14	10	2	8
N =	251	404	168	325

b. Females

	Primary or less	**Secondary**	**Vocational**	**Higher**
	%	**%**	**%**	**%**
Employer	<1	2	-	2
Self-employed	4	3	2	4

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Employee	13	14	18	46
Apprentice	2	1	-	-
Family work	3	2	3	1
Total employed	*22*	*22*	*23*	*53*
Unemployed	8	7	5	19
Inactive	69	71	73	28
N =	248	436	142	348

The SEM countries have extensive experience of active labour market programmes which offer incentives for employers to recruit the young unemployed, or training which is intended to equip young job seekers with skills that enhance their labour market prospects. Egypt and Tunisia have invested heavily in such measures (European Training Foundation, 2015; Zouari, 2014). Table IX shows that Egypt has also invested heavily in vocational education.

In support, advocates of educational reform might point to some evidence from our surveys. Just 43 percent of 25-29 year old respondents felt that their education had prepared them for the labour market, but this varied by levels of education from 21 percent of those with no more than primary schooling to 63 percent of those with higher education qualifications. Advocates of educational reform can also point to some evidence in Table X. Among male 25-29 year olds, the proportion in employment among those who had progressed through higher education was lower than among those who had ended their education with a vocational course (57 percent and 75 percent) while the proportions who were unemployed at the time of the surveys were 17 percent and four percent. However, these findings are not replicated in the female samples. The low inactivity rate among 25-29 year old female higher education graduates (28 percent) compared with at least 69 percent in all other educational groups (see Table X) indicates the basic level to which inactivity could fall if all young women could be offered 'suitable' job opportunities.

Active labour market programmes in the region have yielded mixed results. It is quite easy for new measures to deliver early positive outcomes through deadweight (being used by employers who would have recruited and trained young people in any event) and displacement (of the applicants who would otherwise have been recruited and trained). Maintaining positive outcomes when the measures are expanded proves impossible.

In any case, a reason why young men (and young women even more so) will hesitate and probably decide against a vocational route when they have the option of university is evident in

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Table XI. Graduate 25-29 year olds commanded far higher salaries than any other educational groups. The indications are that, just as in Europe, in SEM countries, certainly for males, vocational routes are simultaneously safety nets (reducing risks of unemployment) and sidetracks away from the best paying jobs (see Shavit and Muller, 2000). For women, higher education is the most likely route to a job, and to a higher paying job, than will be the outcome from any other educational route.

Table XI: Mean incomes in € (PPP) by highest educational qualification, 25-29 year olds

	Males	**Females**
Primary or less	533	414
Secondary	847	658
Vocational	618	631
Higher	1051	995

In Northern Europe and North America, higher education graduates will move down the labour market rather than remain unemployed. This is what employers and their families expect them to do. They thereby pass down risks of unemployment to the least qualified (see Zwysen, 2016). Graduates move down despite suspecting, as they must, that lowering their starting points will not open doors to fast upward moving career escalators but could lock them long-term into lower status and lower-paid occupations than they might have obtained by waiting (see Vohemer and Schuck, 2016). Waiting is culturally acceptable to families in southern Europe and the SEM countries. They will support their graduate children with housing, subsistence and spending money. Non-employed respondents were asked about sources of income for personal needs: 59 percent said their fathers, 18 percent said their mothers, 23 percent said other relatives and friends, and just eight percent earned money by performing small tasks. Families are prepared to be patient, and employers will not be prejudiced against graduates who have spent months or even years waiting rather than earning. Tunisia had the highest level of youth unemployment among our five countries, and along with Lebanon it also had the highest proportion of the age group who were becoming university graduates. One might say that Tunisia was experiencing high youth unemployment despite its investment in higher education, but it is probably closer to the truth to suggest that its high youth unemployment was due partly to its high proportion of university graduates. Family and economic cultures interlock to make waiting not just acceptable but far preferable to stepping down. Graduates' families overall are better-able to support a 'waiting' son or daughter than other households because of the greater likelihood of graduates

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having two parents with management or professional jobs, or running profitable businesses, though most graduates do not have these advantages, and here our focus is on the labour market opportunities that await young people in SEM countries rather than with who can best afford to wait, who eventually gets the better jobs, how and why. There is a big drop from a career job with a written employment contract of indefinite duration into the much lower pay, perpetual insecurity and absence of structured opportunities for career progression in the SEM countries' informal labour market sectors.

There is a powerful feeling across the SEM region that not only are graduates entitled to commensurate graduate jobs, but also that governments ought to provide these jobs. Secondary schools and universities were opened by former colonial powers to educate young people who would fill jobs in public services and administration. Young graduates still expect their now independent countries' governments to honour this unwritten contract (see Bogaert and Emperador, 2011). Until suitable jobs are offered, graduates feel justified in waiting while they protest and campaign for governments to fulfil their side of the contract. In this sense, the 'waithood' life stage (see Dhillon et al, 2009) is culturally justified and enforced, and the same applies to needing to wait to marry until young couples or their families can afford the substantial costs of a wedding: dowry, gifts and celebrations, plus the costs of setting up a new family home (see Singerman, 2007).

Classical economic theory suggests that the relatively high unemployment rates among male graduates should result in their salaries declining towards those offered to young people with vocational and just general secondary school qualifications, but there is no evidence of any such trend. As in Western countries, and as has been known for a long time (see Pen, 1974; Routh, 1965), market pressures result only in minor (and often short-lived) fluctuations in rates of pay which tend to stick at the levels that are historically and culturally deemed appropriate for the occupations and types of entrants.

DISCUSSION

Crisis?

In any country worldwide, the criteria for satisfactory outcomes to the youth life stage are that young adults must be able to procure livelihoods which enable them to establish family households in which to rear a successor generation. It is only these conditions not being met – an unsustainable situation to which there is no known or achievable remedy – that will justify talk of a societal crisis. When (the ages) and how the criteria are met vary between countries and between socio-demographic groups within countries. In the SEM region, 'how' is different for males and females. Males must become able to act as, even if they do not need to become, main household earners. Young women must ideally marry, then bear and rear children.

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Whatever our respondents' educational levels, the earnings of individuals in employment rose with age. This means that individual young employees were typically experiencing some career progression (see Table XII). Needless to say, some groups' earnings were rising more rapidly than those of other groups, and even at age 25-29 many young people, especially those with no more than primary schooling, were still on low pay, and some (those who were inactive in the labour market and the unemployed) were not earning anything. The combination of low pay, no security and no prospects of career progression is the typical job quality problem that confronts young people across the SEM region. Most unemployment is absorbed as episodes between education and first jobs, then between jobs in under-employed labour market careers. This is experienced as a serious problem by the region's young people, but it does not prevent most completing their transitions to adulthood.

Table XII: Median earnings of employees by educational levels and age groups in €ppp

	No more than primary school	Secondary	Vocational	Higher
Age 15-19	287	363	369	-
Age 20-24	370	492	410	615
Age 25-29	477	741	492	955

We have seen that 14 percent of male 25-29 year olds were unemployed at the time of our surveys, but only a half of these young people, seven percent of the age group, had never been employed. This is the proportion whose unemployment was neither transitional nor recurrent. Another nine percent of male 25-29 year olds were inactive in the labour market. This 16 percent were at risk of long-term socio-economic marginalisation.

The young women with jobs (typically higher education graduates) were likely to marry but were capable of living independently. Those who left education and did not enter the labour market needed to marry if they were to accomplish successful life stage transitions. Enneli and Enneli (2017) have argued that in Turkey the inability of disadvantaged young males to obtain jobs with salaries that will support independent family households will erode young women's ability to reproduce the life stage transitions that have been customary for their gender. However, at the time of our surveys, only 255 out of the 1497 25-29 year old female respondents (17 percent) were inactive and neither married nor in a relationship.

Possible and probable futures

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Youth unemployment is a problem in SEM countries, but job quality is a more serious problem that is experienced by more young people. The poor quality of much of the employment that is available is responsible for in-work poverty, keeping university graduates waiting, and inflating the number of young women who are inactive. Needless to say, the quality problem would disappear if genuine full employment could be achieved, but this would require an improbable massive scale of job creation.

Advice from international financial institutions remains consistent: create conditions in which private enterprises can flourish. This is to be achieved by holding down public spending and payrolls, easier access to credit for businesses (presumably by an SEM version of quantitative easing) while loosening employment regulations in the formal sector, thereby encouraging a switch from informal into formal employment. The latter may prove difficult in countries where avoidance of existing regulations has become a normal part of working life for employers and employees alike. The region's young people are already active self-starters. A third of the males in our surveys who were earning money were doing so in their own or family enterprises. The main obstacle to expanding these businesses was not said to be difficulty in obtaining loans but in selling the goods and services that they were producing. Encouraging and assisting more young people to create their own employment will simply intensify competition in this major economic sector.

Young people will not be enthusiastic if they are somehow channelled into vocational education because this is typically a route into low quality jobs and a temporary shelter for women who are destined for labour market inactivity. Given the option, young people will vote for more public sector jobs. Young graduate men and women are the groups who are most likely to see, and to benefit from, public sector job creation as the solution to their labour market problems. These young people belong to their countries' demographically best formed and politically most active classes (Roberts et al, 2017). Governments in the region might therefore respond and leave other young people to cope with poor quality jobs. If so this will be partly because the vast majority of the young people are demonstrating that they and their families can cope. However, another possible scenario, in our view the most likely, is that current labour market conditions in the region will be normalised, meaning that they will be accepted as fixtures on the economic landscape. Opportunities should improve if the economies grow, and the size of incoming youth cohorts will definitely increase more slowly than in the past. Young workers will then be needed to support increasing numbers of ageing citizens as today's swollen youth cohorts move through adulthood and eventually into later life.

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