

Investing in YOUNG PEOPLE

FINANCIAL TIMES SPECIAL REPORT | Friday January 27 2012

Online Mideast Focus

Schemes to help create work have been lent a new urgency by the Arab uprisings



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Jobless generation hungry for change

Social media networks may let tomorrow's adults talk and mobilise, but they do not confer life skills, writes Sarah Murray

Judging by the demographic make-up of everything from the Arab uprising to protests against rising tuition fees and the Occupy movement, 2011 was a year in which young people's voices achieved unprecedented prominence.

Yet, while many celebrate the fact that these voices, at least partly thanks to social media, are increasingly powerful, the protests have also highlighted the severe challenges many young people face. For some, the problems are as basic as lack of food or healthcare. Almost a third of children in developing countries are malnourished, according to Unicef, the United Nations' children's agency, with 150m underweight and 175m stunted in height because of chronic illness and poor diet.

For those not threatened by malnutrition or disease, joblessness can bring a sense of hopelessness and isolation from both the mainstream economy and the political process.

"In some ways, the Arab spring has brought home to us a reality," says William Reese, president and chief executive of the International Youth Foundation. "Those young people were disempowered – politically and economically."

The global financial crisis has underlined the fragility of youth in the labour market. At the end of 2010, more than 75m young people worldwide were struggling to find work, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The rate of youth unemployment has risen sharply as a result of the crisis. Between 2008 and 2009, it increased by an unprecedented 4.5m, according to the ILO. The average increase between 1997 and 2007 was fewer than 100,000 a year.

Young people in mature markets have borne the brunt of the unemployment pain, with developed economies and European Union markets experiencing youth unemployment numbers and rates higher in 2010 than any time since the ILO began recording them in 1991.

And, while – globally – more people are graduating from universities, those armed with a degree also number among those finding it hard to get a job.

"In Egypt, you have kids with a college education still living at home because they can't afford to get married, start a family or have their own home because they don't have a job," says Mr Reese. "So you've got a lot of disaffected middle-class people, too."

Mattias Lundberg, senior economist in the World Bank's Human Development Network, is more optimistic. "This is a deep crisis, but we will recover from it," he says.

Nevertheless, he acknowledges that seismic shifts in the world economy caused by slowing growth in industrialised nations mean that while opportunities are opening up for some, life for others will get tougher.

"It's going to be harder for someone from a wealthy country to compete with a young person in the developing world," he says. "On balance, and for the world, that's a great thing, but it makes life harder for those who are used to competing with a smaller group."

Meanwhile, technology is transforming the lives of young people. The rapid growth in social networking is



Taking to the streets: thousands of students protesting against youth unemployment and education budget cuts in Rome, Italy, last October. Europe has been badly hit by joblessness among the its young Getty

connecting young people to each other in ways that would have been impossible in the past, helping them express their views to mass audiences and rally supporters to causes they care about.

Mr Lundberg points to the big rise in the number of social media users in the five years since the World Bank launched its last World Development Report, which focused on young people. "In December 2006, Facebook had 12m users. In September 2011, it had more than 800m users," he says. "So on that level, the world is a very different place from five years ago."

However, social media networking sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, cannot alone give young people the technical and life skills they need to thrive in the global economy.

And while it is one thing to work on increasing literacy rates among schoolchildren, it is more challenging to assist young people who have dropped out of the education system, who are unemployed, and who may even have children of their own.

"There's been a fair amount of progress in terms of numbers of people staying in schools and getting a basic education," says Mr Reese. "But youth development is not always embraced, because it's harder to figure out and requires larger parts of government and business than it does to get a seven-year-old into school."

Moreover, among the current generation of 18-35s, prospects vary wildly. "There's a large group at the bottom that isn't getting the basic building block skills and is falling off the edge of the earth," says Bill Drayton, founder and chair of Ashoka, a leading US non-profit organisation that identifies and supports social entrepreneurs.

But Mr Drayton also sees large groups of young people who have a hunger to change the world. As part of Ashoka's efforts to help them do so, Ashoka supports university campus teams that want to promote social entrepreneurship and social innovation. Given the numbers of young people now entering the workforce as a result of the demographic "youth bulge", the private sector in its current form will not be able to provide sufficient jobs, so promoting entrepreneurship will be essential.

"We have to think about expanding self-employment and entrepreneurship and providing opportunities for young people to take advantage of their creativity and innovation," says Mr Lundberg. "Otherwise, we won't get out of this vicious cycle of unemployment."

In the marketplace, however, young entrepreneurs often face burdensome bureaucracy and a lack of access to credit, advice and networks, making it hard for them to turn their ideas into

businesses that might create jobs for themselves and others. The private sector, however, has a role to play in supporting these young entrepreneurs in a variety of ways. Youth Business International, a network of non-profit groups, taps into the business skills of its members to provide leadership skills, training, access to capital and mentoring for young entrepreneurs.

Microsoft, for example, has developed an entrepreneurship curriculum that helps young people build their own technology businesses.

And in 2010, a partnership was established between the US Agency

for International Development (USAID) and Cisco's Entrepreneur Institute and Networking Academy programme to promote workforce development and entrepreneurship in emerging economies.

Yet the path to entrepreneurship needs to begin at an earlier stage, says Mr Drayton.

He believes that young people need to be encouraged to think that they have the potential to bring about change, but argues that traditional schooling does not create this culture.

"Society doesn't understand how critical this is," he says. "We think

growing up is about learning knowledge and rules. But in fact, we want young people to have it in their heads that they can change the world."

This approach, argue many development experts, is critical, given the potential for young people to improve their own prospects and to help solve social and economic problems.

"Young people are part of the solution and not just part of the problem," says Mr Reese.

"They are problem solvers – and they are not just tomorrow's leaders. They can also play a role in helping society today."

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