

Supporting Jordan's Youth: For the Gre

By H.E. Hala Lattouf, Minister of Social Development



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“Give us a chance.

We will never let you down.” These words from a group of young Jordanians volunteering in their communities capture the spirit of so many of our youth today who believe in themselves and are ready and willing to do what it takes to drive the country's social and economic development. Engaging Jordan's young people as an indispensable positive force for change through community involvement and volunteerism will help address many of the challenges we face. It will also foster a sense of belonging and connectedness to their peers, community, and to our nation as a whole.

Today's youth face many challenges. Seventy percent of Jordan's population is under the age of 30, with large numbers competing for limited resources. As a result, Jordan's young people over the years have faced high unemployment rates, especially for the unskilled; high poverty rates; and in some communities, extremely limited access to volunteer opportunities or quality youth-friendly social services. Such barriers stand in the way of real community development and social change. They can be overcome, however, by the enthusiasm and energy of young people themselves, by innovative community-based programs, and by the strong leadership of His Majesty King Abdullah II. Together, we are expanding support to promote and sustain model activities and effective strategies that offer Jordan a real window of opportunity to make a difference.

Building on His Majesty's vision, the Jordanian government has increased its investments in young people to unleash their own potential and actively build their communities. For example, the Higher Council for Youth addresses cross-cutting youth issues and has developed a strategic five-year plan to better

harness the power of youth and respond to their needs. Projects for training and employment, in partnership with the private sector, are growing, as are initiatives like *Kuluna Al-Urdaun* that actively engage youth in their communities and enhance their participation in the decisions that impact their lives.

Yet even with these many advances, there are some significant issues that still need to be addressed. For example, despite Jordan's high rates of educational attainment and adult literacy, a number of youth still drop out of school before completing their secondary education. Young people also continue to face significant difficulties entering the job market, with nearly a third of those ages 15 to 19 being unemployed. Even with advances in gender equity, girls and women in some disadvantaged communities still do not have adequate access to the job-related opportunities necessary to lead full and productive lives. Moreover, youth in underserved neighborhoods are simply not engaged in civic activities because volunteer service projects are not sufficiently institutionalized at the local level to reach them. This leaves young people without a voice or the opportunity to contribute to the greater good.

Research shows that when youth do participate in community service, they are more likely to feel useful and better understand their roles as citizens in society. Among its many benefits, civic engagement increases a sense of identity and connection to their peers, adults, and community. Furthermore, when we create positive supports and opportunities for youth and keep them hopeful about their futures, their chances of transitioning successfully to adulthood greatly increase.

In addition to new government investments in youth empowerment, innovative strategies are also bubbling up from the community level. The exciting partnership between USAID, the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), and the International Youth Foundation (IYF) has resulted in a new comprehensive program, *Youth:Work Jordan (YWJ)* that aims to improve young people's job readiness and their access to



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youth-friendly services in some of our most underserved neighborhoods. It does so by bringing together national leaders, local businesses, parents, and young people to improve conditions and expand opportunities for youth. This five-year community-driven initiative has as one of its top priorities to increase civic engagement and volunteer activities among vulnerable youth. MoSD is working with IYF and USAID to identify gaps in services, promote innovation, and build alliances.

We hope YWJ will also serve as a model for programs that work on a horizontal, community-based level and that promote sustainable solutions in Jordan’s underserved neighborhoods. Effective strategies identified at the local level will help shape and inspire improved youth policies at the ministerial level. As the program evolves, we will identify and share lessons and best practices with the development community in Jordan and beyond.

One unique element of this comprehensive approach is that civic engagement goes hand in hand with workforce development. When young people volunteer, they accomplish more than improving conditions around them. They build critical life skills that are needed for success in the workplace, such as taking the initiative, working as a team, managing projects, and finding solutions. Being engaged civically also helps young people form a vital connection to their community, to each other, and to a shared vision of the future. This focus on inclusion and empowerment sends a powerful message: that every young person, no matter how poor, has the right to live in a safe and caring society.

This issue of what it means to be a citizen, the nature of each citizen’s responsibilities, and how different aspects of our identity and heritage contribute to shaping our sense of citizenship and belonging, is part of our growing national dialogue. From an Islamic perspective,

for example, citizenship is a religious concept based on balance, harmony, and respect for others. “He gives Wisdom to whomever He will. Whoever is given Wisdom has truly been given much good, but only those with insight bear this in mind.” (2:269) God gave us the wisdom and ability to live in harmony with ourselves and others, to know our obligations and rights, and to be responsible citizens.

We will build on these strong religious foundations and community values to further expand citizenship opportunities for our young people. I am hopeful, in fact, that initiatives such as YWJ that highlight civic engagement and draw on the best of our tradi-

tions will help gain greater support for one of my personal dreams—to establish a national volunteer service program in my country.

I am pleased, therefore, to see the growing excitement among Jordanian youth to take on a greater role in society. When I visit young people in their communities, I see their love for this country and their deep yearning to be a part of its future. A study of YWJ-targeted neighborhoods confirms that Jordanian youth want to participate in volunteer activities when given a chance to do so.

We in Jordan and the international community must build on the successes and experiences we’ve already gained to ensure today’s young people are active and productive citizens who can advance the sustainable development of our countries that we all seek. We can do this when we promote effective youth programs that are embedded in the local community and supported at the highest levels of government and when we protect the rights of all citizens to live in peace and have a voice in society.

Jordan has such great potential because of the energy, enthusiasm, and positive growth of its youth. They are our future, our legacy, and our greatest asset. So it is important to constantly press this point that young people are valuable resources, not society’s problems. They play a particularly critical role not just as our country’s future leaders but as today’s active players. It’s time to tap into their extraordinary capacity to improve their own lives and communities and as newly engaged citizens to enhance the quality of life for all Jordanians.

If we commit to uphold the best in Islam and our traditions, empower and equip this younger generation as well as inspire them meaningfully and responsibly, we will not only continue to advance as a nation. We will be able to positively impact the world. **Y**