

Youth agricultural Integration and Employment in the Mediterranean : Agricultural Education as a distinguished opportunity in the Middle East

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Introduction

Young people nowadays face a number of challenges especially in such contexts where they find themselves living with neither stability nor prospects of a prosperous future. Starting by a description and analysis of the political and economic context of middle eastern countries and how it affects the population especially the young generation, therefrom proceeding by providing propositions and guidelines to potential solutions intended to promote a better livelihood.

Agricultural sector in Syria and Lebanon

In the late 90s, the agricultural sector in Syria contributed to about 30% of the GDP and employed around 40% of the workforce. According to assessment reports, in 2010, the agricultural GDP contributed to 18% of the national GDP and 23% of its exports involving 17% of its workforce; moreover, ten million Syrian including children and others not directly linked to the agricultural sector, were rural dwellers of which 80% were living from agricultural work income (UNFAO, 2018). Official estimations declare that in 2018, agriculture contributed to 60% of the national GDP.

After more than 10 years of crisis, Syria's agricultural GDP still contributes to about 26% of the GDP, despite enduring severe consequences as the population displacement counted millions of Syrians which fled to relocate sometimes more than once to a safer zone implying the loss of productive assets on the way, in addition to the rising prices with the collapse of the currency. People are facing more and more difficulties to

buy essential food for survival caused by the agricultural sector damage and the high food prices driving high intervention with humanitarian aid. Consequently, food security collapsed counting 6.5 million severely insecure and in high need of support and 2.5 million people facing a high risk of food insecurity.

Agricultural areas were highly affected enduring the destruction of farmland and little input of needs as seeds, fertilizer, pesticide, fuel, destroyed assets and irrigation systems. (UNFAO report) However, the agricultural sector still represents a critical safety net for the 6.7 million Syrians. Currently, we may note significant improvement of the situation in Syria with most of its territory being safe and secure. However, there are still significant improvements to undergo, of which economic, in order to secure a viable and prosperous future for the current citizens and refugees.

On the other hand, in Lebanon, we may note since late 2019 the deterioration of the political and socioeconomic situation with its failing economy described by the WBG as one of the worst since the mid nineteenth century. Effectively, the hyperinflation and pressure witnessed by the citizens and host communities lead to a failure of most sectors, including but not limited to the health, agricultural, industrial and educational sector. Lebanese people find themselves deprived of the most essential commodities leading to a significant degradation in food security and living quality. Over and above, it is important to mention that in August 2020 large parts of the Lebanese capital were devastated due to the "Beirut Blast" which, according to experts, was one of the biggest

non-nuclear explosions in history. Consequently, significant damages tore the capital with around 200 deaths, more than 6000 injured, 300 000 homeless and around 15 billion USD in property damage not to mention the deterioration of the state of mind of most of the population especially young people.

While the Middle East forms the center of all interests politically and economically, Syria's crisis and more presently, the Lebanese crisis, would be one of the main unsolved challenges requiring political solutions that would meet every local and international countries' multidirectional interests (mainly in economics and politics), therefore an independent intervention shall be implemented in order to help both populations.

Considering the current situation in both countries and the necessity to first tackle a certain cluster of people and key sectors, the approach through the concept of education and agroecology would best suit the targeted communities, mainly young Lebanese and Syrian people.

Towards greater Youth Political Participation

Change is the main thing pushing development and evolution; indeed, our needs and wants constantly change, that is when adaptation is required. As previously stated, change happens when new needs and wants occur in a society. There, new technologies, strategies, attitudes and laws come in place; for instance, in the plan toward reviving the agricultural sector and overcoming the challenges in both countries, new needs for the targeted population are posed. Youth promotes the best approach to change, qualified by their new innovative ideas and their high acceptance of it, they are the most adept and most correlated cluster toward this issue. Therefore, regardless of their political, religious or any other form of social affiliation, youth should be able to voice their ideas and

opinions, and with such opportunity, young people are given an incentive to invest into human capital (their minds) boosting this way self-development skills with the realistic goal of doing or taking part in a positive step toward a better prosperous future.

General Effects on Agricultural and Social Development

Intervening with the right approaches will induce a better adaptation to change and faster results. Taking the agricultural sector as example, on the strategic level many measures could be taken by modifying the approach to ensure success, on the rural level for example farmers and workers still use traditional and old practices for agriculture, they could be introduced to new and more efficient practices, leading to an ecofriendly and more productive agricultural sector. On a structural level with new designs, by encouraging independent farmers to join efforts, buying assets all together, getting services at one time which will be cheaper. In addition, on the technological level, new methods and equipment would also improve the efficiency of this sector, letting farmers get familiar with those would lessen the cost, time and the food waste, getting proper harvest, selecting fruit quality for exportation norms or for further processing.

Attitude and fear will be perceived within the affected people knowing that some will hold on very tight to their ideas and traditions, that is where forums and seminars will intervene by answering uncertainty and fear, giving and explaining them their expectations relatively to their duties thus having a coordinated and harmonized plan in order to prevent disputes or conflicts in the future.

People tend to settle in their comfort zone using routine and familiar methods providing them with a sense of safety. Therefore, a resistance to change will take place, caused by those uncertainties, traditions, fear of loss, or believing

that change is inconsistent with their goals. However, with the stated methods and improving education, support and communication the change could be done successfully.

Youth should have actors on all levels, committees, on field representatives and or trainers, getting the youth a sort of “chain of activity” linking citizens, relevant institutions and the government which will imply a better analysis of the agricultural and food processing chain and in any other field, stating the Council of Youth in Europe, student committees in Universities, young professional networks, providing expertise for government and private entities, such as YPARD.

With this change done, youth will be also encouraged to work within the agricultural sector while being food secure and having a safe income relatively more independent from the political and socioeconomic situation thus more resilient in face of future challenges.

Economic Effects

Despite the fact that national or international migration is a strategy to improve household living conditions thanks to migrants’ tangible and intangible transfers and is a lever for local development, it also undermines the attractiveness of rural territories, especially for younger people. Besides, it deprives them of the human resources required for the agricultural and agro-food sectors. Therefore, with the encouragement of the agricultural sector and agro-industrialization and thus the development of youth abilities, migration could be prevented in certain cases and promote social balance and sectoral balance, which all have positive repercussions on the political level and prosperity.

Looking at the macro-political effect, boosting the knowhow and knowledge for this social and

cultural balance mentioned before, will lead us not only to more job opportunities but also to the improvement on a collective level knowing that the economic development is an integral part of the overall Human Development, through income distribution, community stability and the population and regional balance.

Looking at many developing countries, its issues mainly rely on having a high rate of immigration towards the cities which implies the creation of “shanty towns” caused mainly by an unproductive agricultural sector.

The importance of this strategic issue is the pros it brings toward stabilizing and balancing the different sectors, the political life and thus gets to a context where people can prosper and live outside the cities; getting to the point where this investment takes us to then perceiving prosperity and peace politically, socially and a great degree of security.

Reducing high flows of migration will lead to a recovery and withstand the micro-economy of every region, leading people to stay in their home areas where the purchasing power is greater, mitigating and even stopping migration toward the cities.

Moreover, one of the encountered challenges in many countries including European ones is the corporate domination of markets especially in the agricultural sector. Even though governments tend to support corporate entities for their high economic input, they should note that they will face negative repercussions on many levels. Effectively, the continuous support of corporate entities might benefit the country on a macroeconomic level however, on a microeconomic level we will witness deterioration and it will lead to the migration of rural population and young toward the cities, thus marginalizing the agricultural sector and its development.

Innovative approach through Education

The proposed intervention shows many potential outcomes planning Lebanon and Syria's future through education, internationally helping structure the steps of its revival after its still undergoing crisis, nationally boosting the Lebanese economy with the capacity building of both populations which will also encourage the return of refugees and hereafter revive the Lebanon-syrian relationships for Syria being the only bordering country which has historical relation including exchange of knowhow and goods. Syria will be better equipped looking to get back on track using more sophisticated and efficient technologies and practices in order to overcome problems like water issues and food safety while offering job vacancies and better life standards for almost half the population, working toward ending famine and moreover boost Syria's economy on its way to develop the industrial sectors and others.

According to WFP and previous reports, the conflict-attained countries are mostly relying on humanitarian aid to survive. Moreover, the educational sector in Lebanon is currently deteriorating and according to UNHCR, the average forced displacement period is 17 years, which many refugees and IDPs spend entirely in camps; this accounts to the emergence of a new generation within this context. Therefore, young displaced people, including refugees, and young Lebanese are the first cluster to be tackled considering their poor living conditions and inaccessibility to proper education. Gathered within camps around cities and mostly in dry-land or resource-limited areas, these young people will therefore be introduced to agroecology, new agricultural systems and crop varieties combined with sustainable practices.

Agroecology is an integrated approach that simultaneously applies ecological and social concepts and principles to the design and management of food and agricultural systems. It

seeks to optimize the interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment while taking into consideration the social aspects that need to be addressed for a sustainable and fair food system. (UNFAO) In other terms, agroecology looks into combining ten interlinked and interdependent principal elements citing diversity, sharing knowledge, synergy, efficiency, recycling, and resilience along with human and social values, culture, responsible governance and an enabling economic environment. Therefore, this principle is found to best suit the current situation in the region.

Integral to FAO's Common Vision for Sustainable Food and Agriculture, agroecology is a key part of the global response to this climate of instability, offering a unique approach to meeting significant increases in food needs of the future.

Moreover, both countries, especially Syria, are now at the primary stages of food systems known as the "agricultural stage", which in its turn is highly destabilized. The educational program is intended also to build capacities to transform the current food system and empower the community to attain more developed stages of food systems.

Agricultural education would kick start the development process for attaining the goals, with different intervention channels tackling people with seminars to introduce new practices, varieties, methods and raise awareness on the use of chemical-alternatives while also addressing the new generation, who have grown without acquiring agricultural basic knowledge.

Different outcomes are perceived as promoting gender balance, promoting sustainable agriculture, increasing soil quality with new crop varieties and livestock, sustainable use of natural resources including land, water, efficient management practices along with the introduction of technologies, increasing biodiversity and nutrition and raising awareness on healthy diets and food waste management.

Depending on the context and country, the program will include first the installation of facilities near each IDP camp for the education of the targeted people or simply introduced within school program or in any existing public building in non-conflict areas and collective shelters; second, a curriculum in alignment with the targets, outcomes and context of this process with both theoretical and practical parts for a determined period of time

Most SDGs are related either directly or indirectly, thus the initiative can relate with many, noting the first SDG aiming to end poverty in all its forms everywhere and the second SDG for ending hunger through achieving food security and nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture.

This project consists of an educational approach for the Syrian population, especially young people, in the sense that the project will mobilize the capacity of the people to achieve the goal of the initiative. It should be delivered by young professionals to provide capacities for production and nutrition.

People and the new generation of farmers will benefit from agricultural education following a curriculum up to their level of understanding and assimilation as per an FAO initiative entitled: “Do Good: Save Food”.

This will build their capacities in terms of acquiring basic agricultural knowledge, getting familiar with plant production, harvesting, maintenance and identifying different crop families and needs. Sustainable methods for the usage of natural resources and a high yield of eco-friendly production should also be tackled. The curriculum will contain refreshments courses on knowledge and physiology of crops and livestock, studies on the substitutes of pesticides, fertilizers and its implications on production, health and the environment. Moreover, courses on the use of natural resources including water management and irrigation systems clarifying the

needs and optimal time of watering crops through the introduction of new technologies. The focus will be on the new practices, varieties and available technology in agriculture, giving the farmers hope of good and effective sustainable production in those arid areas. In addition, tackling the fight against desertification will thus help farmers to perform crop and livestock production in those harsh conditions with a futuristic vision toward improving agriculture and agricultural land in their countries.

Young people will make use of interactive platforms, applications and other technology, which will promote and encourage their will in learning and agriculture; this new generation is very familiar and adapted with technologies and computers, by combining learning, agriculture and technologies (ICTs), they will have solid educational foundations and power to improve and disseminate skills, information and knowledge.

Nevertheless, in order to attain goals, attention should be also taken outside the farmer-consumer chain; by also raising awareness on food waste and loss, the new generation of farmers could understand and apply ways of reducing it and thus conserve soil quality and nutrients. In addition, educational programs will also involve courses on strategic thinking, building up the idea of joining forces, assets and information enhancing thus all outputs.

Expected Results

The intervention looks forward to providing education for people and increasing the human index especially the new generation preventing their coping in hazardous activities, promote economic growth based on agricultural entrepreneurship, promotion of healthy diets, reduction of the reliance on humanitarian aid while promoting sustainable agricultural practices and use of natural resources.

Through the program people will progressively gain the competency and capability to first meet their daily food demands following a healthy diet, without relying on agricultural inputs as fertilizer, pesticide and overcoming the natural resources quality and quantity deficiency, including water.

Second, it will educate them on the different channels of the agricultural sector preparing them to conduct successful start-ups in the future once the crisis ends, giving hope of a fast and promising agricultural sector and agro-industrial sub-sector, thus a boost for the Lebanese and Syrian economy.

In addition, it will raise people's awareness on food, environment and sustainability, health and gender imbalance by empowering women through their education.

Moreover, both countries will have the opportunity to get back in line on their way to meeting the 2030 global agenda, with this project working toward eight different SDGs out of seventeen.

Moreover, the project will work along three main deliverables, with the first being the development of a community of practice on agroecology by ensuring a targeted dissemination of relevant information, promoting interactions among young individuals, making use of technologies to promote interest in the agricultural sector for youth while promoting partnership among the community through different means as developing projects, and businesses.

Second, the promotion of agroecology will demonstrate environmental friendly behavior and healthy lifestyle using interactive platforms in the educational process.

Last, it aims to boost the national economy, especially the micro economic cycle and build resilience of communities by reducing food cost, reviving the first stages of the agricultural and

agro-industrial sector, promoting healthy livelihood and lifestyle and reducing poverty and food shortage.

Project According to Outcomes and proposed intervention

Now we will tackle the working mechanism and the implementation of this project citing some risk that might be faced and their mitigation.

The initiative shall be delivered in facilities near IDPs and refugee camps in safe or non-conflict zones especially the dry-land areas or, as detailed hereafter, where it applies in school through their curriculum. Education will be provided with minor adaptations to each case considering their living and operating context.

In one scenario, the project will be implemented by a team of young professionals' staff with a daily educational process including three different groups of age with group 1 being for people between six and ten years old, group 2 between eleven and fifteen years old and group 3 for people more than sixteen years old, considering that most probably they will be working during the days. Each age group will have a tailored curriculum adapted to their level of understanding and capacity of intervention as seen in previous initiative of FAO with "Do Good: Save Food" which tackles four different age groups

In another case, as per the previous scenario, the initiative will only differ by the implementation method where it will be delivered in schools and agricultural technical institutes.

Those two scenarios are designed to best suit the people and accommodate their activities to simplify the commitment and ensure quality results.

CONCLUSION: recommendations and guidelines

Finally, it is upon the United Nation Agencies, INGOs, NGOs and governmental bodies along with private entities to work on providing and delivering such opportunities. It is important to note that a good timing for intervention, mitigating the crisis impact on the vulnerable communities while taking a futuristic plan tackling the essentials for Syria's revival and Lebanon's survival are mandatory for a sustainable and successful initiative.

On another note, it is essential to consider adaptations, cultural and social aspects of each community or area, depending on each case. For instance, ethnical and religious factors are of high importance.

Moreover, it is recommended that the initiative would be delivered by young professionals to promote and encourage interactions between young people while motivating their involvement in the agricultural sector and its different channels. This way it will be delivered by young professionals to young people having a positive impact for both groups.

In conclusion, while such intervention provides great possibility of attaining social development and stability while promoting better livelihood and job opportunities for youth, external factors such as political developments might highly affect the feasibility of this initiative and its outcomes. Therefore, timing, funding and commitment are of high importance and are of significant correlation with the project's smooth implementation and success. Moreover, attention should be drawn to the most vulnerable cluster of people, targeting young people with high needs.

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