



Abdulla Al Ghurair
Foundation



Catalyzing change: How philanthropy is supporting youth education and employment

This paper is based on a presentation by the Abdul Aziz Al Ghurair Refugee Education Fund at the 2024 conference of the British Association for International and Comparative Education (BAICE). The Fund presented findings from its research report, *From Learning to Earning: The Impact of Strategic Philanthropy on Vulnerable Youth in Jordan and Lebanon*.

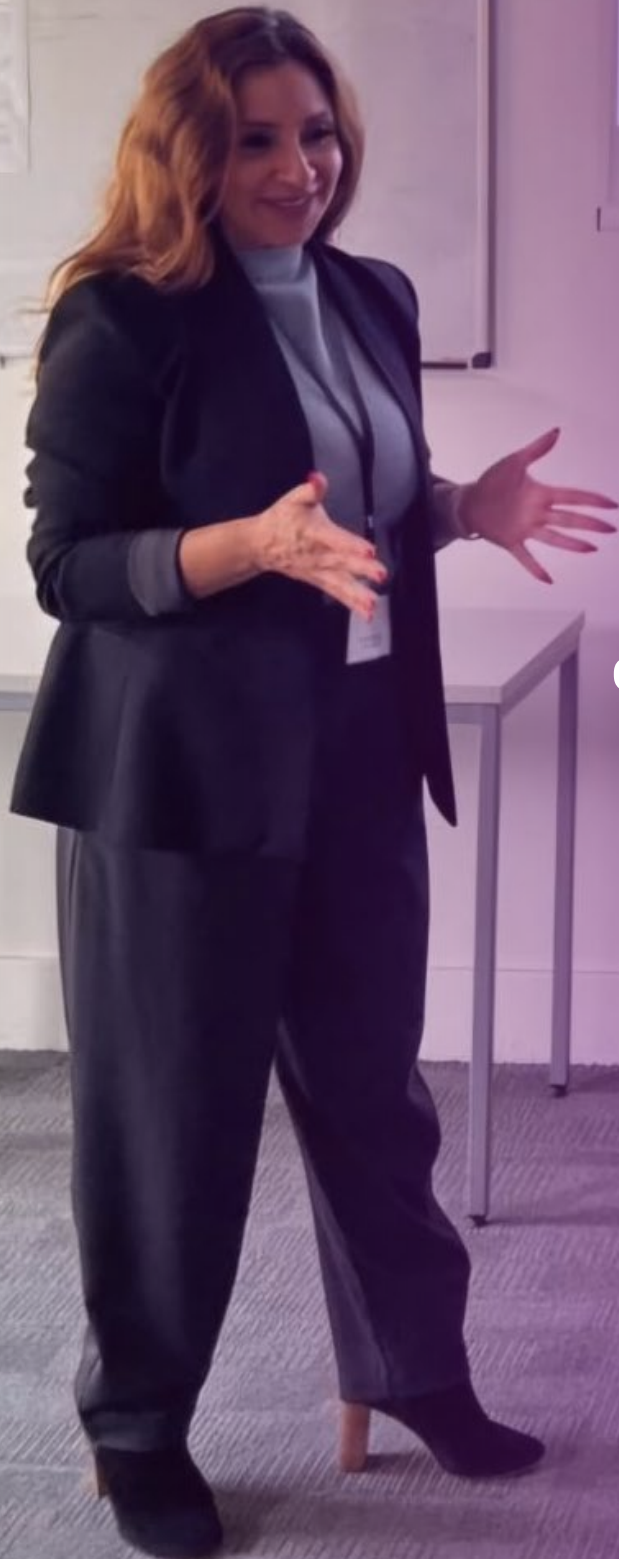
Driving development through philanthropy

Strategic philanthropy has transformative power to meet the education and employment needs of vulnerable youth. By championing flexible funding, strong partnerships, and sustainable skill building, the Abdul Aziz Al Ghurair Refugee Education Fund offers a scalable model for impactful change in crisis-affected parts of the Arab region.

Situated within the broader context of Islamic philanthropy, the Fund's work since its establishment in 2018 has drawn from Zakat and Sadaqah traditions, emphasizing economic redistribution and socioeconomic development as fundamental aspects of charitable giving. Zakat offers a socially transformative mechanism to reduce economic inequality by channeling resources to those in need, particularly through education.

The Fund's "Learning to Earning" model was designed to promote inclusive technical and vocational training (TVET) that is accessible, equitable, high quality, and relevant. This integrates collaborative and sustainable elements to create a holistic educational ecosystem, fostering resilience and long-term growth and impact. A central pillar of this approach is the Fund's support of and collaboration with various private, grassroots, and international non-governmental organizations.

A recent Fund report, conducted in collaboration with the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS), explores the impact of these initiatives. Drawing on extensive research, including case studies, in-depth interviews, surveys, and focus groups with stakeholders across Jordan and Lebanon, this work highlights regional challenges facing young people in accessing the labor market. The report offers valuable insights into the Fund's unique approach to improving livelihood opportunities for refugee and vulnerable youth.



“Strategic philanthropy is about having presence on the ground, connecting with communities to understand their actual needs, and scaling to drive meaningful change. It is about shifting to impactful, lasting solutions through partnerships with those who truly understand local challenges.”

– Malakeh El Haj, Vice President of Knowledge & Innovation, the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation

Barriers to learning and employment

Geopolitical conflict, climate change, and the aftermath of COVID-19 recovery have deepened labor market challenges in the Arab region, hitting vulnerable groups the hardest. In 2023, the overall youth unemployment rate in the region neared 28%.¹ In Jordan, the figure is over 40%, while Lebanon's youth struggle with unemployment close to 24% in an economy heavily reliant on the informal sector.²

To address these challenges, there is a need to build skills that are adaptable, sustainable, and resilient. This task involves profound financial, logistical, and other challenges; vulnerable youth continue to face daunting barriers in their pursuit of rewarding careers. Along with displacement and intense instability, there are stubborn economic, sociocultural, and legal barriers in place.

- **Economic barriers:** Many economic factors impede business growth and innovation. In Jordan, the market is highly saturated, with limited purchasing power, making it hard for businesses to thrive domestically. Operational costs lead many businesses to consider relocating to more favourable environments, like Dubai's free zones.

- In Lebanon, the ongoing economic crisis, exacerbated by factors such as high inflation, currency devaluation, a shortage of basic goods, and the recent conflict, has severely impacted businesses and start-ups. Access to funding, both local and international, has become more difficult, and many businesses struggle to survive, let alone welcome internships and apprentices.

Furthermore, inadequate infrastructure, including unreliable electricity and internet connectivity, poses challenges for start-ups across the region, especially those relying on online platforms.

- **Sociocultural barriers:** A deep-rooted stigma surrounding TVET persists. For example, most Jordanian school graduates favor academic paths, despite strong market demand for technical and digital expertise as well as English-language proficiency and other "soft" skills. There has been limited emphasis on training young people to become entrepreneurs, and a dearth of up-to-date research and data analysis on labor market needs and training.

For organizations on the ground, navigating the varied landscape of donor demands continues to be a challenge. Donors may prioritize numerical targets rather than quality, lasting impact, sustainability, and context-specific effectiveness. This can lead to unrealistic expectations and ineffective outcomes that encourage quick fixes over systematic solutions.

¹ "Arab States Employment and Social Outlook - Trends 2024, Promoting social justice through a just transition," International Labour Office, 2024.

² Unemployment, youth total (% of total labor force ages 15-24) (modeled ILO estimate) - Lebanon; Jordan. International Labour Organization. "ILO Modelled Estimates and Projections database (ILOEST)" ILOSTAT. Accessed June 18, 2024.

- **Legal barriers:** Frequent changes in laws and regulations hinder business growth and innovation in both Lebanon and Jordan. In Jordan, the lack of anti-trust laws contributes to monopolistic practices, limiting competition and potentially harming consumers. In Lebanon, the bureaucracy for registering a business is very complicated, especially for those in the huge informal economy. In both countries, restrictive work-permit, visa, and residency laws that regulate young people's access to the labor market create substantial challenges for both refugees and host communities.

Overall, the most prominent shared challenge remains the establishment of sustainable pathways to employment. Organizations continue to encounter difficulties in managing youth expectations and bridging the gap between their educational attainments and market demands. Incorporating practical, work-integrated learning opportunities into curricula can better prepare students for the workforce and address these skill gaps. In this, strategic partnerships between civil society organisations, donors, and government entities are vital.

This is the focus of the Fund's collaborative Learning to Earning model, which draws on the strength of multi-sectoral partnerships to build a more cohesive approach to youth upskilling.

Learning to Earning

The Fund promotes inclusive TVET through its Learning to Earning model. This holistic approach is aimed at creating educational opportunities and diverse, sustainable employment pathways. In partnership with local non-governmental and grassroots organizations, the Fund co-designs programs to equip young people with technical, vocational, and digital skills training.

These market-driven programs offer access to resources such as internet connectivity and transport assistance; training in English language proficiency and life skills; and ongoing career support through internships and mentorships. The aim is to provide young people with the resources and transferable skills to ensure success in a competitive, high-demand workforce, while contributing to community development and resilience.

Since its establishment, the Fund has invested over 158M AED (\$40M USD) to support more than 92,000 vulnerable youth across Jordan, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates.³ This commitment has provided numerous education and upskilling opportunities, leading to building sustainable livelihoods. The Fund has exceeded its initial target by over 72,000 youth.⁴

³ The Abdul Aziz Al Ghurair Refugee Education Fund's actual commitment is 144M AED in total, where 127M AED has been already disbursed.

⁴ As of October 2024.



“We aim to connect refugee and female developers from the Middle East to global opportunities, because they often have so much talent but don’t have the know-how to reach out to companies themselves.”

– Laura Jardine Paterson, Founder, CONCAT Tech & CONCAT Recruit, speaking at the 2024 BAICE conference

The power of partnership

The Fund's emphasis on partnerships is central to its success. Collaborations with strategically aligned organizations, universities, and local businesses have strengthened pathways to employment through internships, job placements, and entrepreneurship support, offering real-world experience alongside education. These connections help the Fund to remain flexible—able to meet emerging needs as changing insights are gained from the field.

These partnerships are underpinned by different models, including co-funding mechanisms, consortiums and regional planning, cross-sectoral collaboration, philanthropic networks, and knowledge sharing. This represents a transformation of the traditional donor-grantee dynamic. The Fund also works to build partner capacity, strengthening the wider ecosystem.

Such initiatives in Jordan and Lebanon involve collaborations with key partners, including:

- **Digital Opportunity Trust (DOT):** The Fund worked with DOT to deliver digital skills training across Jordan and Lebanon, from basic literacy to advanced coding.
 - **Spark:** The Fund partnered with this NGO to create and support small and medium enterprises in Jordan and Lebanon through the Skills Training Education Program (STEP).
 - **Borderless:** In Lebanon, the Fund collaborated with Borderless on a project focused on vocational training for Syrian refugees in fields where they could generate income.
 - **Unite Lebanon Youth Project (ULYP):** With the Fund, ULYP launched the For the Livelihood of Youth (FLY) program to provide online upskilling opportunities for students without other access to higher educational opportunities. This successful and impactful collaboration established ULYP as a suitable partner to administer one of the Al Ghurair Education Relief Fund projects to support Palestinian students abroad.
- Other organizations in the region can draw on the Fund's experience and recommendations to replicate the success of these collaborations.
- **Luminus Technical University College (LTUC):** This Jordan-based Fund partnership resulted in the establishment of the Abdul Aziz Ghurair School for Advanced Computing.

Key recommendations going forward

Based on experiences with partner organizations in Jordan and Lebanon, the Fund offers five key recommendations for other organizations involved in skills training in the region. These guidelines aim to strengthen the bridge between training and employment, creating opportunities for vulnerable and refugee youth in local and global job markets:

1

Take a collaborative approach:

Partnerships among all stakeholders are essential for addressing complex challenges. By leveraging collective resources and expertise, philanthropists can build sustainable milestones to change. Engaging stakeholders, including NGOs, businesses, and government entities in program design and implementation can ensure interventions are contextually relevant and effective.

2

Design a holistic model:

TVET is ineffective if it is not embedded in a holistic career journey: training alone is not sufficient without resources, practical application, life skills, a supportive employment environment that facilitates career development, and follow-up. Paid internships have emerged as a very important factor for success, as have soft skills such as English language proficiency.

3

Localize the knowledge base:

Research in the sector is sorely needed, along with more independent data collection and analysis. There is a lack of reliable data on TVET, hindering evidence-based decision-making and program design.

4

Create sustainable interventions for scalable impact:

Programs must aim for broader reach, while delivering well-targeted, in-depth initiatives that lead to sustainable employment and meaningful outcomes.

5

Create an agile and flexible operational model:

Stakeholders need to join forces to address evolving challenges and emerging needs with programs that are customizable, adaptable and relevant to the rapidly changing job market. Flexible program design can prioritize quick decision-making and resource reallocation.



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