Youth Engagement in the Middle East and North Africa
An ICMA Approach to Strengthening Local Governance

icma.org/international
ICMA (International City/County Management Association) is the professional and educational organization for chief appointed managers, administrators, and assistants in cities, towns, counties, and regional entities throughout the world. Since 1914, ICMA has provided technical and management assistance, training, and information resources to its members and the local government community. ICMA’s mission is to create excellence in local governance by developing and fostering professional local government management worldwide.

The management decisions made by ICMA’s members affect millions of people in thousands of communities—from small towns with populations of a few hundred, to areas serving several million.

In 1989, ICMA created ICMA International to leverage the experience of local government practitioners and experienced international consultants to further the ICMA mission. ICMA International works in the following areas:

- Accountable governance, leadership, and citizen involvement;
- Sustainable local economic development;
- Public safety and violence prevention;
- Transparent financial management, accounting, and budgeting;
- Efficient and effective municipal service delivery and environmental management;
- Performance measurement and program evaluation;
- Local government association management and advocacy;
- Policy analysis and development;
- Local government ethics and anticorruption facilitation.

Working within these areas, ICMA International has successfully designed, implemented, and evaluated more than 500 international projects, using a practical, hands-on approach to solving global challenges locally.

For more information, please visit our Web site at icma.org/international.
Executive summary

The Middle East and North Africa region is poised to take the next step toward positive change marked by a new bottom-up leadership process. It started with the Arab Spring which led to national leadership changes in many countries and a growing sense of optimism. Success in the region will depend on the emergence of strong local governments guided by engaged and involved citizens—particularly young people who provided much of the impetus for initial transitions and who must be at the epicenter of continued change.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, the region faces both challenges and opportunities including:

- Significant shortcomings in local governments that have historically relied almost exclusively on centralized national governments to define priorities and deliver services
- Lingering political corruption and distrust of government leaders
- Uneven economic growth marked by income inequality and sustained gender disparities
- School systems that offer poor-quality education, particularly in relation to job skills and job readiness
- Youth unemployment rates that are twice the world average.

The Arab Spring also awakened political awareness driven by possibilities and opportunities, including:

- A large and growing youth population whose energy and ambition can be engaged to stimulate economic growth and development
- A rise in civic and political participation and expectations of government
- An increased desire for political reform and elimination of corruption

Youth at the epicenter

There are more than 110 million young people between the ages of 15 and 29 in the Middle East and North Africa and 230 million under the age of 30, making up 60 percent of the region’s population. The numbers alone tell the story of the importance of youth in the region. The events of the youth-driven Arab Spring gave a hint of the potential of this emerging generation.

Despite the potential, the youth bulge is exerting severe pressure on education systems, labor markets,
health care, and natural resources in the region. High youth unemployment, in particular, is straining the region’s economies and placing a heavy burden on young people, their families, and their communities.

Harnessing the potential of the youth population is essential for stimulating sustained economic growth and building stronger communities. As future employees, business owners, and leaders, the youth population represents the economic potential of the region. There is a tremendous opportunity to redirect the momentum of the Arab Spring toward positive youth participation in shaping local initiatives.

ICMA’s experience provides a foundation

ICMA (the International City/County Management Association) has a strong commitment to and experience in building strong local governments and engaging citizens that provides an ideal entry point for strategic assistance to countries in the Middle East and North Africa. For more than a decade, ICMA has worked in the region to address traditional urban challenges through innovative and collaborative models. The experience to date provides both lessons learned and a model for achieving concrete results. From creating a state-of-the-art medical waste management system in Jordan to engaging hundreds of young interns in supporting municipal service in Jalalabad and Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan, ICMA’s collaborative model has strengthened the capacity for local governance and engaged and nurtured young leaders.

ICMA recognizes that it is essential to identify and leverage country and local successes, strengths, capacity, and momentum to ensure that investments are efficient and sustainable. ICMA’s approach is practical and prudent and creates the foundations for success: promoting inclusive, meaningful opportunities for citizens, particularly youth, and starting with local, short-term action and combining it with long-term institutional reform. Building on its connections to government practitioners from around the world and its experience strengthening local leadership in fragile and emerging economies, ICMA is well equipped to become an influencer and convener for promoting good governance.

And good governance is what the Arab Spring was intended to produce.

About this paper

This paper will suggest that the lack of civic engagement and citizen voice at the local level has rarely been connected to the region’s economic development agenda, and the challenge of inadequate local government systems has never been linked to youth economic opportunity. It lays out the necessity of linking these efforts and provides information about the countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, including statistics, research, perspectives, and current programs that lay a foundation for building local government capacity, harnessing the momentum of both the Arab Spring and programs already underway in the region, and engaging youth as vital resources and future leaders. Its purpose is to raise awareness of the needs in the region and provide a framework for action, drawing on ICMA’s long history of building local government capacity throughout the world.

Introduction

The democratic uprisings of the Arab Spring not only altered the political landscape of many countries in the Middle East and North Africa, but also exposed significant shortcomings in local government capacity. Municipalities that were accustomed to a centralized national government providing most services based on national priorities now must develop systems and capacities to identify and address local priorities and needs. The youth-sparked Arab Spring has created an opportunity for a bottom-up approach that emphasizes representative governance and citizen-directed action driven by meaningful and productive youth involvement.

Progress toward building representative and accountable institutions at the central and local levels varies by country. In many cases, the reform process has been slow moving, and efforts to build new political institutions have been fraught with tension. The opportunities are ripe at the local level to seize the momentum and focus on successful governance and community building at the level closest to the people.

Youth, who provided much of the impetus for the region’s transition, must be at the epicenter of these local governance and community building efforts. Their energy is a significant resource if it can be harnessed and directed toward positive change in their communities. Local governments have an important role to play in engaging youth, and ICMA, particularly through its CityLinks program, can be the catalyst for helping municipal leaders to develop approaches that work.

ICMA’s commitment to and experience in building strong local governments and engaging citizens and youth provides an ideal entry point for strategic assistance
ICMA’s history, experience, and success in the region, The importance of and strategies for engaging youth A framework for collaborative action involving ICMA The economic, demographic, and political dynamics supply and improve the overall health of its communities.

industrial waste that safeguard the country’s limited water for reduction, collection, and disposal of medical and waste management. Today, Jordan embraces new practices for environmental protection, and the Metro Waste Authority of Des Moines, Iowa, to promote effective local waste management. Today, Jordan embraces new practices for reduction, collection, and disposal of medical and industrial waste that safeguard the country’s limited water supply and improve the overall health of its communities. A state-of-the-art medical waste management system has been established through a partnership among the Jordan University of Science and Technology, the Jordanian Ministry of Health, and East Carolina University that now safely manages more than 60 percent of all medical waste in the country.

In Lebanon, a partnership established economic development advisory boards (EDABs) to help five Lebanese cities develop tailored, viable local economic development strategies. The ICMA team included a Lebanese partner organization—Information International—and a U.S. partner, the International Economic Development Council (IEDC). Each advisory board included representatives from the public and private sectors, labor and management, youth, education, municipal and national-level officials, and minority groups. It gathered information about the current local economic situation, including problems faced by current businesses and obstacles to attracting new business; developed strategic plans, informed by feedback from the community; assessed the viability of alternative strategies; and served as the key advisor and a sounding board to the council president and governing body for economic development issues and activities.

CityLinks is one example of how ICMA builds stronger local governance models in developing and decentralizing countries. As a nonprofit membership association established in 1914, ICMA differentiates itself from other international service providers by connecting local organizations in developing countries with its vast network of experienced local government professionals. ICMA members volunteer their expertise to address the challenges of urbanization through diagnostic assessments, program design, peer and results-oriented assistance, training and capacity building, technical assistance, and pilot partnerships. The goals of these international partnerships are to improve the lives of citizens, strengthen the quality of local governments, and foster democracy.

Today, CityLinks is hailed as a successful model for building stronger local governments, offering great potential for seizing the opportunities that have emerged from the Arab Spring and the resulting government transitions. High visibility of the ICMA CityLinks brand, combined with city-to-city partnerships, generates trust among governments and communities alike. With ICMA members working pro-bono alongside in-country professional staff, problems are solved and relationships created that last long after program funding has ended. ICMA’s experience has shown that municipal leaders are more likely to share...
concerns with international peers who face similar issues perhaps on different scales, ultimately forging bonds that produce sustainable local solutions, long-term partnerships, and competent and engaged local governments.

Drivers of local governance reform
There are three reasons why strengthening local governance is critical for the Middle East and North Africa region right now.
1. The need for sustained economic growth, which has slowed in recent years throughout the region
2. The growing youth population, which offers both immediate challenges and long-term opportunities
3. Post-Arab Spring politics, which have led to increased demands for government accountability, a rise in civic and political participation, and a widespread desire to eliminate corruption and reform national and local governance structures.

Historically, the international community has faced challenges when approaching Middle East and North Africa countries on issues related to accountability, transparency, and civic participation. The challenges emerge from
- Heightened sensitivity to these issues among the region’s leaders
- The geo-political importance of the Middle East and North Africa
- The region’s ongoing conflicts.

While most countries in the region have made progress on their economic agendas, performance on governance issues and civic participation has been sluggish at best. According to the Worldwide Governance Indicators compiled by the World Bank Group, all 17 countries in the region fall below the average mean on promoting voice and accountability. In addition, the development of local citizen groups and nongovernmental organizations has been hampered by rules that limit the ability to organize in local communities.

The following sections explore the three drivers of local governance reform in more depth.

Need for sustained economic growth
An approach to governance reform that builds the capacity of local governments can stimulate economic growth by improving the well-being of local citizens, addressing the concerns of businesses, and improving long-term employment opportunities.

In 2008, the Middle East and North Africa region experienced its best economic performance in decades, averaging 7 percent GDP annual growth. The global financial crisis slowed economic growth to 2 percent in 2009, but, compared with the world average of negative growth, 2 percent was encouraging. While countries in the region were able to weather the global financial crisis, their economies have taken a major hit since the Arab Spring, with prices rising and investments decreasing. Inflation rates on food and other household goods remained high and average consumer prices increased more than three times the world average.

Sustained challenges in the region that inhibit economic growth include inequitable distribution of wealth, inequitable access to and poor educational outcomes, and high youth unemployment.

An approach to governance reform that builds the capacity of local governments can stimulate economic growth by improving the well-being of local citizens, addressing the concerns of businesses, and improving long-term employment opportunities.

Inequalities inhibit economic growth  Income inequality in the region grew as a result of the global economic crisis with rural areas suffering disproportionately from higher poverty and lower educational outcomes. The percentage of the population living in urban areas ranges from 87.2 percent in Lebanon to 56.7 percent in Morocco. Nearly 70 percent of Yemenis and more than half of Egyptians live in rural areas. Many suffer from marginalization and inequitable access to basic services. While the international development community has seen a global reduction in poverty since 2005, there has been limited progress in addressing rural disparities where the needs are greatest, particularly in expanding access to education. This is especially evident in Yemen, one of the poorest countries in the region, where access to education is low in
rural areas, particularly for girls, who have the lowest educational outcomes of any group.\textsuperscript{4}

During the region’s period of high economic growth, countries in the Middle East and North Africa region were spending more on education per pupil than countries in East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Since the early 2000s, the Middle East has been successful in achieving universal primary enrollment. Statistics for Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, and West Bank and Gaza all demonstrate that young women are more likely to be enrolled in a university than their male counterparts. However, despite improving access to early education, some countries continue to experience low primary school enrollment rates, particularly for girls.

For example, Morocco’s secondary school enrollment rate is 60 percent for males and 51 percent for females.\textsuperscript{5} The educational disparity in Yemen is even more significant, with about half of female students completing primary school, compared to 73 percent of males. Many students in Yemen are overage, repeat grades often, and drop out early. Only 33 percent of Yemeni female students who complete primary school continue their education.\textsuperscript{6} In Iraq, where education levels once were relatively high compared with those in other countries, only 55 percent of girls and 74 percent of boys completed primary school in 2008. Security concerns have contributed to low attendance and completion rates because parents worry about sending their children, especially daughters, to school.

The quality of schooling in many Middle East and North Africa countries remains poor despite high investment in education across the region. Low scores from the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study demonstrate that, despite the investment in education, most students scored below average and many failed to meet the test’s lowest performance benchmark.\textsuperscript{7} Limited attention to encouraging critical thinking skills and continued reliance on rote teaching has created a classroom environment that limits creativity and inhibits job preparedness.

This lack of job readiness has led to disproportionately high unemployment among youth, particularly young women. In Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and West Bank and Gaza, youth unemployment ranged from 45 percent to 50 percent in 2007–2008. Several years after the Arab Spring, jobs are being generated at 2.1 million a year, which is barely half what is needed to accommodate new entrants to the labor force.\textsuperscript{8}

In the North Africa region, unemployment rates actually decreased during the same period.\textsuperscript{9} Lack of recent data, especially for Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, make addressing country-specific concerns around the transition from education to employment difficult. In Iraq, available statistics demonstrate that socio-economic and labor market outcomes are worsening over time. In Yemen, unlike its neighbors, the population faces not only high unemployment, but also challenges in all levels of educational attainment, particularly among women and all students in rural areas.

**Good jobs support economic growth** The challenge for countries in the region is not just creating jobs, but creating opportunities for decent employment and a good quality of life. Increasingly, countries across the region are confronted with both high youth unemployment and declining numbers of quality jobs for first-time job seekers. For example, using the International Labor Organization (ILO) standardized quality index, which takes into account earnings, type of workplace, access to social insurance, aspects of under- and over-employment, and job stability, the number of young men and women obtaining “good” jobs has declined steadily since 1965.\textsuperscript{10} Seventy-two percent of young Egyptians do not ever secure good jobs that provide a foundation for long-term economic stability. For 64 percent of successful job seekers, the good job is the first job, making it clear that a successful transition from education to quality work is a strong determinant of long-term economic success.\textsuperscript{11}

Building on these statistics, strong local governments can play a significant role in calling attention to the importance of quality employment, particularly in the informal sector where businesses are unregulated and many individuals are self-employed or first-time job seekers. By partnering with businesses, local governments can encourage development of vocational skills among young people and thus create new paths to career success.

These challenges have imposed high costs on Middle East and North Africa economies. While the region has experienced economic growth, failing to capitalize on the opportunities of a large youth population has limited long-term growth potential. Studies show that the cost of youth unemployment in terms of lost income in eleven Middle East and North Africa economies is $24 billion a year, or 2.3 percent of the region’s GDP.\textsuperscript{12}

The Arab Spring increased hopes for reform, especially among young people. However, failure to achieve high expectations for better living conditions and a
brightness of economic future can create substantial risks and new challenges, particularly if economic conditions worsen. For example, economies in Tunisia and Egypt have recently experienced declining growth rates as a result of decreased foreign investment, rising inflation, perceived insecurity, and increased unemployment.

Adding to the economic challenges these countries face are sustained gender inequalities in the labor market, particularly in the Middle East. While women have made advances in educational attainment, they are still falling behind in economic and employment outcomes. Unemployment rates are consistently higher for women in all countries. In the West Bank and Gaza, unemployment is twice as high for women even though more women are enrolled in universities.

Opportunities for women to participate in politics will affect how policies affecting gender equality and access play out. To ensure that local governments adopt inclusive approaches, it is critical to address these gender imbalances in economic outcomes, overall well-being, and civic participation.

**Growing youth population**

Local government operations that reflect and respond to the entire population are essential to advancing community-based economies. Because youth make up a significant proportion of the population in most Middle East and North Africa countries, local governments must be particularly attuned to the interests of young people and must develop strategies to engage them in local governance issues. Addressing youth issues through strengthened local governance will provide benefits on two fronts:

1. As future employees, business owners, and leaders, the youth population represents the future economic potential of the region. Their energy and ambition must be engaged to stimulate economic growth and development of strong and supportive communities.

2. The Arab Spring awakened political and civic awareness and youth engagement. As a result, there is a tremendous opportunity to redirect the existing momentum toward positive youth participation in shaping local initiatives.

One approach to building more representative and accountable institutions is to use a “youth-inclusion lens” to create policies that are sufficiently flexible to meet changing needs and visionary to take into account next-generation expectations. As such, incorporating the youth demographic is a critical part of the emerging governance system.

Because youth make up a significant proportion of the population in most Middle East and North Africa countries, local governments must be particularly attuned to the interests of young people and must develop strategies to engage them in local governance issues.

Today, the 15-to-24-year age group is the largest it has ever been worldwide. Of the estimated 1.5 billion youth throughout the world, most reside in developing countries. In the Middle East and North Africa region, the population between the ages of 15 and 29 is approaching 110 million. There are nearly 231 million people under the age of 30, which is more than 60 percent of the region’s total population.

Similar to trends worldwide, fertility rates in the region are slowly dropping but remain above the world average. For countries that have experienced conflict such as Yemen, Iraq, and the West Bank and Gaza, fertility rates are two to three times higher than the average regional and world rates and are expected to remain high for decades to come.

**Youth population pressures outpace opportunities**

Despite the potential of this population for spurring economic growth and development in the region, the youth “bulge” places severe pressure on education systems, labor markets, health care, and natural resources. Pressures include:

- School systems that offer poor-quality education
- Youth unemployment rates that are twice the world average
- A waiting time for first jobs that is measured in years rather than months
- Unaffordable housing
- Limited access to formal credit markets
- A growing trend of involuntary delays in marriage.

The pressures are most clearly defined when looking at the region’s labor market, with nearly 25 percent of
young people unemployed. In fact, the youth unemployment rate in the Middle East and North Africa region is nearly double that of the world and is generally concentrated among the urban educated. The emphasis on “credentialism,” in which degrees and diplomas are highly valued, has led to graduates with degrees but without the skills needed to compete in a rapidly globalizing workforce. For example, in Egypt, young people from urban backgrounds are slower to enter the labor market than their rural counterparts. In Morocco, nearly 76 percent of unemployed youth live in urban areas.

The burdens of chronic unemployment weigh heavily on young people, their families, and the communities in which they reside. This condition is worsened by cultural attitudes and socio-political class behavior that limit youth access to employment opportunities in both the public and private sectors.

**Piecemeal solutions limit results** Countries in the Middle East and North Africa have historically relied on narrow and piecemeal solutions to deal with the pressures of their large youth populations. Strategies have included remedial training to supplement knowledge that is missing in formal curriculums or programs that teach entrepreneurship and innovation to young graduates faced with limited available jobs. While these programs are valuable, they fail to address deeply rooted institutional and governance issues that contribute to long-term unemployment. The lack of civic engagement and citizen voice at the local level has rarely been connected to the region’s economic development agenda, and the challenge of inadequate local governance systems has never been linked to youth economic opportunity, especially at the community level.

The lack of civic engagement and citizen voice at the local level has rarely been connected to the region’s economic development agenda, and the challenge of inadequate local government systems has never been linked to youth economic opportunity.

**Post-Arab Spring politics**

The Arab Spring has had a discernible impact on the attitude of Arabs toward politics and their demand for political accountability. This is evident in two areas:

1. A rise in civic and political participation, especially among youth
2. The increased desire for political reform and anti-corruption practices.

Boosting civic participation and introducing democratic reforms at the local level can improve government accountability, transparency, and the rule of law while also allowing citizens to voice their concerns and identify their needs. Local government operations that are responsive to and reflective of the whole population are vital to advancing community-based economies.

The demographics and current political trends in the Middle East and North Africa demand a shift in thinking that considers institutional and governance issues. On the one hand, local governments must find new ways to engage citizens and integrate youth into local economic and political processes. This includes policy incentives for families, local businesses, nonprofit and community-based organizations, and youth to contribute to local development and participate in guiding and governing their communities. On the other hand, the international community must address the needs of countries by introducing an innovative, place-based agenda that speaks across governance and civic structures and focuses on priorities that improve quality of life.

**Citizen priorities and attitudes** Understanding citizen priorities in Middle East and North Africa countries is essential to ensuring that local governments are prepared to meet citizen needs. Ongoing challenges such as expanding employment opportunities remain high priorities for Arab citizens and are essential to growing regional and local economies. According to the 2011 Zogby Opinion Poll, issues related to democracy and government reform are among the most important issues to citizens in all Middle East and North Africa countries. Examples of priorities in specific countries based on the Zogby poll are:

- **Egypt**—Improving the health care and education systems as well as ending corruption rank among the top five priorities. One difference in priorities for 2011 versus 2009 is the increased importance Egyptians place on political reform, including a government
that is free of corruption and operates in an open and transparent environment.

- **Jordan**—Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was among the top priorities given the country’s history in the conflict and its large Palestinian population. Fighting corruption and the need for political reform also rank higher than before the Arab Spring.

- **Lebanon**—Addressing political reform, protecting personal and civil rights, fighting corruption, and advancing democracy rank among the top five priorities. There was a notable shift from 2009, when resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and combating terrorism were higher priorities.

- **Tunisia**—Advancing democracy, fighting extremism and terrorism, and improving rights for women closely follow expanding employment as citizens’ most important issues—which is not surprising given Tunisia’s long-standing focus on gender rights.

The Zogby poll also measures citizen satisfaction with the rate of progress and change in their countries. When respondents were asked how satisfied they are with their government’s pace of change or if they felt their country was on the right track, the majority of Egyptians, Jordanians, and Tunisians responded positively. In Lebanon and Iraq, the majority responded negatively about both the pace and overall direction of change. Political instability in Iraq, threats of sectarianism in Iraq and Lebanon, and limited or unreliable access to basic services in both Iraq and Lebanon may have contributed to negative responses. Table 1 summarizes satisfaction levels in five Middle East and North Africa countries based on the Zogby poll.

A survey of youth attitudes carried out by Silatech showed gains of five to ten percentage points on four community indicators: (1) having a cell phone at home; (2) improvements in the community as a place to live; (3) willingness to develop skills in a new career field, and (4) improvements in the overall economy. Figure 1 provides an average from all countries in the survey.

Survey results in Morocco, where partnership programs such as the National Agency for the Promotion of Employment and Competencies focus on capacity building and training at the community level, are even more compelling. For example, more than 80 percent of youth said they would be willing to start their own business if they were unemployed for more than six months, and 70 percent reported that community and local economic conditions are improving.

Attitudes are an important measure to consider when assessing how prepared local populations are to engage in development efforts. The survey results are an indication that the time is ripe for harnessing citizen awareness and readiness for change. At the same time, citizens’ ability to act on their readiness depends on the country’s capacity and its enabling environment. If the reform process is slow and expectations are not met, attitudes can quickly change.

### A framework for action

With ICMA’s support, countries in the Middle East and North Africa region can begin to reposition themselves to empower local leadership, which historically has had limited, if any, power. Despite the formation of governorates—administrative divisions similar to states or provinces—in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco, decentralization has tended to be more administrative than legislative or fiscal. In Egypt, the heads of governorates are typically appointed by the president, and the local popular councils, which are elected, have limited authority. In Jordan, village councils are selected by a Cabinet-appointed governor, and local decision-making is subject to the governor’s approval. In Morocco, a recent push for regionalization is focusing on decision-making at the provincial rather than the community level.

Given the push for reform, there is an opportunity for ICMA to capitalize on its technical network and international experience to support local governance by designing and implementing partnerships that promote...
Youth Engagement in the Middle East and North Africa: An ICMA Approach

ICMA recognizes that it is essential to identify and leverage country and local successes, strengths, capacity, and momentum to ensure that investments are efficient and sustainable. For example:

- **Egypt** has a well-developed infrastructure for tourism.
- **Jordan** has innovative examples of vocational training programs that help youth transition from education to employment.
- **Yemen** nurtures some of the highest early-stage entrepreneurial activity among its youth compared to the rest of the region.¹⁷
- **Tunisia** is a regional pioneer when it comes to female participation in high-ranking government positions.

But some strengths also have limitations or face obstacles. For example:

- Recent political unrest and change have hobbled Egypt’s tourism sector.
- Despite efforts in Jordan, foreign workers still hold more than 60 percent of the new jobs that were created from 2001-2007.¹⁸
- In Yemen, very few nascent entrepreneurs continue on to small businesses ownership.
- Female participation in public affairs in Tunisia was always state-driven, raising questions about whether women will continue to hold important positions in the country’s new political structure.

ICMA also adapts and builds on successful efforts already taking place across the region. For example, ICMA can replicate Jordan’s voluntourism—tourists doing pro-bono projects during their vacations—to support Egypt’s tourism sector at a micro level focusing on managerial opportunities. Research has shown that during times of economic and political unrest, mid-level tourism such as voluntourism and ecotourism are more effective strategies. ICMA can harness Egypt’s strength in the industry and give local communities a larger stake by bringing pro-bono volunteers to participate in tourist areas such as Basata, one of the more popular and affordable eco-destinations in Egypt.

**ICMA experience supports governance-building**

ICMA is well positioned to support local and national governments in the Middle East and North Africa as they move toward addressing sensitive and difficult state-building processes without neglecting social and economic priorities. Through its local capacity building model, ICMA is able to draw on its experience with fragile states and youth programming to leverage country strengths, introduce pragmatic and tested economic solutions using the youth-inclusion lens, and tailor its approach to the unique country context. Building on its connections to government practitioners from

---

**Figure 1. Making Progress: Growing Connectivity and Local Satisfaction in Middle East and North Africa Countries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home has a cellular telephone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community is getting better as a place to live</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>+6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to re-train in a different career field</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic conditions in community are getting better</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>+4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from The Silatech Index: Voices of Young Arabs, April 2011.
around the world and its experience strengthening local leadership in fragile and emerging economics, ICMA is well equipped to become an influencer and convener on how good governance should play out in the region.

For example, ICMA has supported youth involvement in local governments in Afghanistan, Panama, and the United States. In a water service project in Afghanistan, the role of young interns in meter reading, collections, and raising public awareness to increase revenues for public water utilities across the country can inform similar efforts among countries working to improve local public service delivery. This approach could be particularly useful in Lebanon, where meter tariff reform is a key structural priority for the energy and water sector. In Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, a region with high unemployment, donor-sponsored training of local staff on meter reading is already underway on an ad-hoc basis. A coherent plan that is both inclusive and long term can benefit the water utility serving communities in remote areas.

Building on its connections to government practitioners from around the world and experience strengthening local leadership in fragile and emerging economics, ICMA is well equipped to become an influencer and convener on how good governance should play out in the region.

In Panama, ICMA’s training of municipal officials who work with at-risk youth helped establish new opportunities for local authorities to engage young people in positive ways while also addressing rule of law and enforcement issues. This approach could be useful in situations where acknowledged corruption in the judicial system and governance structures has led to distrust of police and law enforcement.

Finally, the experience of including high school students on local municipal boards and commissions in many U.S cities can help inform the formation of new partnerships among public schools, municipal offices, and local elected councils to promote student engagement in Tunisia, which has made decentralization and youth involvement in politics a government priority.

Successful strategies for youth engagement

This section provides options for engaging young people in local development and community-building efforts. Drawing on youth strategies from ICMA’s membership network and experience around the world, the suggested interventions reflect existing successes and focus on practical measures that engage young people as both contributors to and beneficiaries of the development process. ICMA’s approach to successful youth engagement is based on three principles.

1. Be practical and prudent in approach and partner selection.

With the rush to do business, donors and implementing organizations need to ensure that they are building on existing strengths to deliver what is feasible in the current political environment rather than replicating what is already underway. ICMA is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that chooses like-minded partners with proven impact and credibility among its beneficiaries.
2. Promote all-inclusive, adaptable, and forward-thinking agendas that provide meaningful opportunities for citizen engagement, particularly youth. ICMA’s development model is place-based and presents a new approach to a region that has been centrally operated for more than fifty years. The model focuses on causes rather than symptoms behind development bottlenecks to create practical options that promote inclusive participation among all citizens, particularly young people between the ages of 15 and 29. ICMA encourages governments, business, and citizens to work together and promote a dynamic structure where all institutional actors can interact and understand each other’s language.

3. Start local and combine short-term solutions with long-term institutional reform. ICMA leverages local expertise and local strategies that not only address immediate needs but also increase understanding about broader signals and incentives that influence change. Because most policy programs operate at the national level, ICMA focuses on the local aspects of the reform as well as capacity building. The following youth-engagement strategies address short-term action.

- **Volunteer clubs.** Volunteering for extra-curricular activities promotes learning-by-doing and demonstrates the importance of contributing to one’s community. Popular in schools and universities around the world, volunteer clubs are effective platforms for community organizing and networking, especially among young people.

- **Youth councils.** The establishment of a youth council can be an important step in demonstrating both community and government commitment to engage youth while providing a streamlined feedback mechanism for young people to voice their concerns and priorities on policies and interventions that impact their future.

- **Internships.** Similar to volunteer clubs, internships enhance learning by engaging young people in meaningful work. An intern program would focus on bringing young people to work with local government officials on current or expected projects where they can provide innovative ideas and a fresh perspective.

- **CityLinks forums.** Having a coordinating mechanism that brings together local officials and community leaders from different cities and countries across national and/or regional levels will not only strengthen knowledge exchange but also enhance cooperation on tackling related challenges. ICMA’s technical and convening experience using CityLinks provides a good model for an annual forum to generate new ideas and develop cooperative action plans based on evidence and lessons learned from real experience. As part of this forum, a youth advisory committee can be formed to help lead the event as well as ensure the cohort benefits from recommendations emerging from the forum.

The following strategies address medium-term action.

- **Youth civic service corps.** As demonstrated throughout ICMA programs, the best solutions always come from within communities. An engaged citizenry is an effective way of building commitment to public
service. When a lack of mechanisms or capacity limits local governments from delivering quality services, young people can fill the gaps and learn from the experience. A nationally endorsed program facilitated at the local level can identify talented youth, match them with areas where needs are greatest, and link them to a pre-selected nonprofit or civic association for institutional support.

- **Recreational programs.** There are many benefits of youth involvement in sports, including maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle, building teamwork, and improving skills and confidence. In Evans, Colorado, an ICMA member implemented a “ball for all” initiative, which distributed 199 soccer balls and 87 volleyballs throughout the community and provided volunteer-led training sessions to develop skills and encourage community engagement. Leveraging its network, ICMA recommends training high school students in coaching, mentoring, and organizing so that they, with municipal support, can train primary school students in specific sports as well as the importance of sportsmanship.

- **Career development.** Harnessing a healthy career culture is essential to ensuring that countries can meet employment and human development targets. In Egypt, the Career Advising and Placement Services at American University of Cairo is a collaborative effort that brings together nongovernmental organizations and private partners to help reduce the youth employment gap. Initially incubated with the support of Nehdat El Mahrous, a youth-led organization in Cairo, the program now has four employability and career development centers across three national universities. Similarly, municipalities in the United States often run job centers as one-stop shops for the unemployed.

- **Streamlined business processes.** An enabling business environment is critical to growing economic opportunities for young people. ICMA can coordinate among local officials and private partners (banks, venture capitalists) to put in place systems that ease young entrepreneurs’ access to credit while mitigating risks of failures.

The following strategy addresses long-term action.

- **Youth monitors.** Involving young people as monitors of locally implemented projects promotes community participation and helps develop valuable job skills. ICMA’s achievements in Afghanistan have shown that improving services such as solid waste management, park maintenance, and road repair create jobs and increase access to markets. Building on the lessons learned, ICMA can implement a series of small infrastructure projects that will create jobs and improve service delivery with youth serving as program monitors.

**Conclusion**

To date, governments, civic organizations, and the private sector have undertaken many efforts that address economic and social challenges facing youth in the Middle East and North Africa. While some of these efforts have been successful, overall investments have fallen short of preparing the next generation for competing in the global market. Limited coordination across sectors, lack of documentation around program and policy monitoring and evaluation, and top-down and reactionary solutions have interfered with successful programming in the region.

Today’s political landscape is very different from what it was two years ago, opening up possibilities for testing new ideas and drawing lessons from other countries. There is widespread recognition of the need for institutional transformations through small-scale, measured successes. How this work unfolds in the next few years as countries undergo continued political transitions is yet to be seen.

The region needs a development framework that aligns smart economics with government accountability and broad citizen and youth engagement. ICMA believes it can build on CityLinks successes, drawing on its expertise in international projects, lessons learned, and experience engaging youth to advance the local governance and economic development agenda in the Middle East and North Africa. The city-to-city approach is unique in its vast network of expertise and technical resources—emphasizing linkages between practitioners, peer learning, and practical municipal projects with tangible outcomes that improve services and living conditions for citizens.

The Arab Spring opened the door of opportunity, and ICMA’s experience provides a viable framework for action.
Notes


2 International Monetary Fund Statistical Database.


5 World Development Indicators (2007).

6 World Development Indicators (2011).


9 International Labor Organization, Global Employment Trends for Youth, August 2010. Today, however, the job crisis is worldwide. According to a study carried out by CBS Netherlands Statistical Agency in the first quarter of 2011, most countries in Southern and Eastern Europe, face youth unemployment rates that exceed 25 percent. The agency measures youth between the years 15-25.

10 Dhillon, Navtej, op. cit.


13 Historically, increases in fertility rates have proven to be linked to conflict scenarios explaining such high rates in Iraq, West Bank and Gaza, and Yemen. With most countries in the region affected by the 2010 Arab Spring, it is still too early to tell how fertility rates will be affected by political events. However, the correlation between increases in fertility rates during conflict periods implies the possibility of another youth resurgence later in the century.

14 The Middle East Youth Initiative founded by the Wolfensohn Center for Development at Brookings and Dubai School of Government set this framework describing the ‘waithood’ period of young people across the Middle East and North Africa.


18 Dhillon, Navtej, op. cit.
The mission of ICMA is to create excellence in local governance by developing and fostering professional local government management worldwide.

To learn more about ICMA International, please visit
- icma.org/international
- icma.org/latinoamérica
- www.umcasia.org