

Iraq Youth Empowerment –  
Challenges and Opportunities  
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Abstract

Iraq is considered to be a young country as its population pyramid base is expanding and youth constitutes around third of its population. It is also close to have the so-called "demographic window". Despite the gradual improvement in the education level of youth, this group is still facing many challenges, the most critical of which is the increasing of unemployment rates especially among females. Besides, the political changes in Iraq since 2003 had apparently affected youth and their aspiration.

The most challenges of youth development is related to the transition from planned economy to market economy, significantly affected employment trends and priorities.

This paper aims to discuss the possibility of youth empowerment through statistical analysis, and by using the most recent data available from surveys conducted by Iraq Central Statistical Organization.

Keywords: Youth Unemployment, Social Development.

**Youth demography**

Iraq has a population of approximately 34 million with one of the highest annual growth rates in the MENA region and the world of about around 3 percent. Young people make up a large proportion of the Iraqi population figure (1). In 2008, under – 14 years old accounted for 38.5 percent of the population. At the same time, the working age population (15 – 64 years old) increased its share from 48 percent of the total population in 1987 to 52.2 percent in 1997 and 56.1 Percent in 2011. The number of the young in Iraq is unprecedented - 20 percent of citizens are within the 15-24 age group. In 2008, the number of young was 6.1 million female and male youths. The number is expected to be 7.5 million in 2015.

Current and expected increases in the number of youth are closely related to fertility and mortality rates and to the sizes and flows of migration. The statistical forecasting shows that the relative percentage of youth will continue to increase over the next two decades before it starts to stabilize, and then decline.

The percentage of males in the aforementioned group was 20.2 percent in the same year compared with the percentage of females which was 19.8 percent with a gap of 0.04 percent.

The percentage of youth among citizens of working age (15- 64 years) was 43.5 percent in 2011. The percentage of urban youth among total urban inhabitants is approximately 19.8 percent, less than their percentage in the rural areas, which is approximately 20.3 percent of total rural inhabitants for the same year.

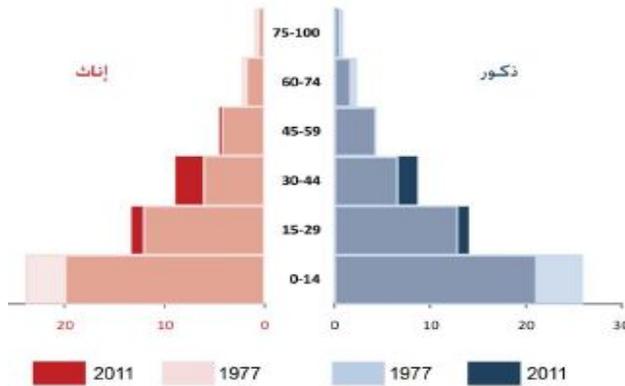


Fig (1): Iraq population Pyramid for years 1977,2011

The young (15-24) are among the most negatively affected groups in by the circumstances that assail Iraqi society. They suffered the terrible hardships of wars and conflicts; they were used to provide a livelihood during the wars; and they are the ones who have been locked into the predicament of unemployment since 2003. The youth are the hope of every society, they will be its productive and executive power, but at the same time, they are a source of great danger when they do not have employment opportunities and respectable life opportunities.

Youth want not only work opportunities, but the opportunities of life (education, training, work, entertainment, health, and more).

Their demands are the demands of society itself. Weakness in fulfilling these distinct demands leaves Iraqi society vulnerable to danger. The experiences of many countries show that when war ends, thousands of young fighters confront crisis when looking for new jobs. This crisis is exacerbated when the state is slow in finding suitable opportunities to contain it or to provide the youth with at least minimum services.

Iraq's youth problem can be summarized by saying that they form a very high percentage of the demographic pyramid, as they do in many developing countries. However, Iraqi youth have suffered from multiple problems— having been victims of irresponsible policies that pushed them through the hell of war, and then failed to find sufficient and suitable employment opportunities for them, then tried to place them in the framework of a normal public life. Furthermore, no policies have given them training, preparation, health and cultural services, and so on. In the 1990s, youth centers were neglected and the ministry responsible for youth was disbanded. With the spread of poverty, marginalization, long hours spent idle, and the withdrawal of training, the phenomenon of delinquent behavior expanded among the young as psychological and social defense against failure in public life. This has caused an increase in the number of prisons and rehabilitation centers and an increase in psychological diseases related to frustration, poverty, and other rightfully distressing conditions.

### Youth Employment

From a purely economic point of view, the sharp increase in the number of male and female youth in Iraq and their overall percentage present economic policy challenges: the need to provide them more educational services, infrastructure facilities, and proper work

opportunities. On the other hand, their numbers represent a latent capability that can be invested in national development programs.

The new economic and social changes, in addition to the changes in communications, have provided the young with opportunities to mature and achieve at a relatively early age compared to previous generations. At the same time, many essential needs go unsatisfied, especially among the unemployed. Furthermore, some groups have encountered difficulties getting married and establishing families, while others encounter limited opportunities to participate in free discussions and developing linkages with older generations.

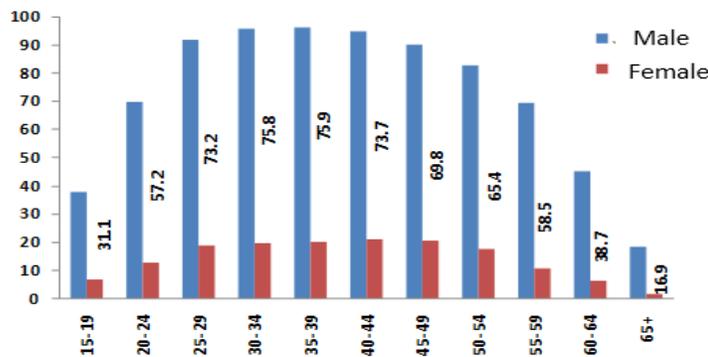
Therefore, it is not unreasonable to see the suffering of many youth as the result of isolation and a cause of their attraction to extremism and violence. It is important, therefore, for any future social strategy to guarantee opportunities for the youth to participate fully in the process of development and to target them with these strategies.

Table (1) and figure (2) shows a wide gap between male & female, especially youth group, in terms of the percentages of active, unemployment, and under employment.

Table (1): The percentage of active population, Unemployment rates, and under employment rates, by sex and age - groups, 2011

sex	15 - 29 years			15 +years		
	active	Unemp.	under emp.	active	Unemp.	under emp.
Male	63.4	15.5	35.7	73.0	9.2	32.0
Female	12.0	33.3	42.1	14.7	20.7	37.5
Total	38.4	13.8	35.9	43.8	11.1	32.2

Source: Central Statistical Organization: Iraq Knowledge Network survey, 2011



\* Source: Central Statistical Organization: Iraq Knowledge Network survey, 2011  
 Fig (2): Male- Female gap of active population rates for the age group (15+), 2011 (%)

### **Analysis of youth vision**

In order to explore the main factor which simplifies reasons behind the correlation coefficients between thirteen demographic; economic; health; and some other variables in terms of young people (15-29 years), factor analysis technique has been used.

Table (2) shows the results of the significant four factors controlling the relations between the thirteen variables. The results concluded;

With regard to the results of the multi-variate analysis (factor analysis) the results concluded;

- The relations variables placed thirteen research in both there the four is around 55%. This implies that 45% of the whole variance is belonging to there factors.
- Percentage variation unexplained factors four pan- [all] Iraq as well as rural 55% of the whole variance and the remaining 45% due to other factors, and in the urban it amounted contrast ratio overall factors five 61% of the whole variance and the remaining 39% belonging to other factors .
- The variables cognitive for parents and children (educational level of the mother, and educational level of the father; and the educational level of young people; the ability to use the computer; and the ability to use the internet) was the greatest impact in the formation of the first factor. Based on the component of this factor , it could reflects the harmonic knowledgment between parents and their
- Appeared impact consensus on marriage and childbearing in the variables (age-appropriate for marriage of boys, age-appropriate for the marriage of girls, duration appropriate between births) significantly in the formation of the factor second.
- The results also showed the impact of compatibility conviction of happiness and self-satisfaction of the variables (self-satisfaction at the present time, the feeling of happiness at the moment) in the formation of the third factor.
- Analysis results showed the impact of social harmony (relation of young with family, relatives, and friends; acceptance of using violence to solve problems; and desine to migrate) in the composition of the fourth factor.

**Table (2) : The main results of factor analysis technique**

Variables	loadings of first four factors*				Explained variance for each variable	variable unique variance
	1	2	3	4		
1 Ability to use the computer	0.774				0.709	0.291
2 Educational level of the mother	0.760				0.634	0.366
3 Educational level of the father	0.739				0.614	0.386
4 Educational level of young people	0.729				0.624	0.376
5 Ability to use the internet.	0.718				0.558	0.442
6 Male, age – appropriate for marriage		0.778			0.647	0.353
7 Female, age appropriate for marriage		0.777			0.647	0.353
8 Appropriate between birth of interval.		0.463			0.230	0.770
9 Self-satisfaction at present.			0.820		0.676	0.324
10 Feeling of happiness at present			0.816		0.673	0.327
11 Desire of migrate				0.634	0.471	0.529
12 Relation of young with family, relatives, and friends.				0.460	0.27	0.730
13 Acceptance of using violence to solve problems				0.393	0.327	0.673
14 Variation explained by factors	22%	13%	12%	8%		

\* Factor loadings less than 0.25 are being dropped from the table

## Challenges

The youth are the change-makers and a positive force when they live in an environment that allows normal mental, psychological, and physical maturation and that provides employment opportunities, participation, and security. But youth can also be the source of many hazards when they find themselves in an environment characterized by threat, violence, unemployment, and marginalization. Ignoring the situations of youth and marginalizing them increases their likelihood to engage in delinquency and crime with serious social consequences—and the possibility of engaging with terrorism imported from abroad. The result is an unstable and unsafe environment that enormously deters capital and foreign investment and leads to lost opportunities for development and reconstruction.

As well, the lack employment, especially for new graduates in the sciences, causes the educated young them look for opportunities abroad, increasing the migration of valuable Iraqi minds—a noticeable waste of human resources.

If we examine the challenges that are considered barriers to an effective investment policy to employ youth and reducing their unemployment numbers, we find the following as the most important challenges.

### 1. Wars and Sanction

Over the past 40 years, the Iraqi economy has witnessed tangible developments in general economic indicators such as GDP, national income, and fixed capital formation, though with ups and downs. This is natural in light of circumstances over the years, most notably nationalization of the oil industry in 1972, the first Gulf War in 1980-1988, the second Gulf War in 1991, international economic sanctions in 1991-2003, and the fall of the regime established in 1968.

These events directly affected development in Iraq. Nationalization of the oil industry and correction of its prices provided Iraq with sustainable financial strength, leading it to adopt an expansionary spending policy that energized economic activity, stimulated the production cycle, and raised consumption levels. The economy thus experienced high rates of growth, which were tangibly reflected in the Iraqi people's standard of living and allowed them to enjoy economic and social prosperity. At the same time, however, the spending policy of the 1970s caused a host of issues, including increases in the consumer price index and higher import rates. Overall, the final outcome of the 1970s appears to have been positive when evaluated using locally and internationally recognized economic and social development measures.

Between 1980 and 2003, Iraq suffered from long wars and severe economic sanctions. Development regressed as a result; economic policies were adopted, to support war efforts and resist sanctions, with no regard for progress in development, thus effectively ending the positive achievements of the 1970s.

The Iraqi economy was trapped in a vicious cycle that could only be broken by a shock. That shock occurred with the fall of the regime in 2003. However, the ensuing instability in economic, political, social, and security conditions threatened, and continues to threaten, development efforts, and the road ahead is still long and difficult.

### 2. Characteristic of Iraqi Youth

The Secretary General of the United Nations on the follow-up to World Programme of Action for Youth to the year 2000 and Beyond (2007) applies to the situation of young people in Iraq:

"It is though that the youth present have many features and benefits, they face economic environment and complex social and rapid development in the context of globalization which is imposing restrictions interfere with the national policies, at the time did not have when all countries the means to manage their integration into the global economy and provide social and economic opportunities to their citizens. Youth are exposed to vulnerability as a result of their lack of knowledge and skills necessary to adapt to a new economic and social environment.

### **3. Labor force participation - the weakest links in the Iraqi society**

The low participation of females in the workforce is among the key issues faced by developing economies, including Iraq. Whereas Iraq is a oil producing country, the rate of its workforce participation in the production process and its development is supposed to be raised in the current period witnessing high oil revenues compared to the past period in order to build human capacities capable of withstanding any future events and not depending on oil revenues, just like developed economies, which this is the result of the development of the human capital to enable it to serve as a key factor for the development of the local economy. Based on the foregoing, we will start by analyzing the factors affecting the non-participation of Iraqi women in the workforce, where females are deemed to have the lowest participation in the society.

### **4. Determinants of unemployment among young graduates between the age of 20 and 29:**

The proportion of young graduates in the age group 20 to 29 and holding a diploma or a higher degree is of 12% out of the total number of young persons which are currently not enrolled in education (the same percentage for both female and male). Young females represent about half of these graduates, since there are 263 thousand female graduates and 270 thousand male graduates. Whereas education is among the most important factors of development of human capital, therefore investment in education is supposed to constitute a key factor for raising labor force participation and protection from unemployment. However, initial indicators deduced from the Iraq Knowledge Network survey, 2011 show negative results for education in terms of protection from unemployment in spite of its importance in raising the level of participation in the workforce, especially for females. This is also confirmed by the very high unemployment rate of 44% among graduates of 20 -24 years of age, in particular female graduates with a rate of 55% against 34% for males, which constitutes a burden borne by young graduates seeking employment.

In the case of Iraq, the weakness of the private sector in terms of employment appears clearly in comparison to the public sector and in particular the government sector, and thus it appears that more than half of the existing jobs are in the government sector. With respect to the marked disparity between governorates or economic activities in terms of the structural composition of jobs, we try to link the forms of jobs to unemployment in order to determine the determinants of unemployment in terms of the structure of local labor markets in each governorate. Low unemployment in a given governorate gives us an indicator about the determinants that prevented the expansion of the circle of unemployed, and therefore help us to derive lessons for other governorates suffering from the scarcity of jobs and employment opportunities.

### **5. Spread of unprotected work:**

Protected work is one of the aspects of decent work, and this is one of the main trends of the government to provide protection for its population including workers. The different nature of the work in each governorate and the structure of local labor markets resulted in a difference in

the probabilities for workers to obtain protected jobs. The results mostly showed that women are more probable to obtain jobs with an official protected nature, and this is due to the fact that women are keener than men to obtain official jobs and this led to higher rates of unemployment, especially among female graduates.

### **Opportunities towards youth development**

According to the results of the analysis, we propose to adopt the empowerment approach in dealing with youth strategy. Coupled with the concept of empowerment of youth issues since 2001 through the report of the Secretary- General of the United Nation on the implementation of the Programmed of Action of the International Youth Year 2000 and beyond, and since then the concept of youth empowerment has become a central pillar for developing youth policies and strategies. The analysis propose to adopt the League of Arab States definition of empowerment in developing Iraq's National Youth Strategy which states that empowerment is the process of formation, development and employment of youth capacity for the production and distribution of life chances from the right of young people and commitment to equal opportunities for all segments, especially among males and females for the liberation of will to expand the options and initiatives that allows participation in the various fields. The fact that the essence of participation is a positive contribution in decision- making to determine the type and level of life chances possible and desirable for young people in areas of economic, social, political and cultural, and starting from family to state institutions and civil society organizations.

### **To achieve the objectives of youth development, the following means are essential:**

1. Diagnosing youth problems objectively and comprehensively through deep studies and building a comprehensive and updateable database;
2. Creating a set of comprehensive, correlated, and integrated goals and objectives for youth, both they are organizational and individual;
3. Finding all suitable ways to include youth in the life of their societies through opportunities to enable and employ them; building awareness of preventive and treatment programs;
4. Meeting the needs of youth to facilitate their building of families;
5. Finding educational and cultural facilities for youth who cannot enroll in schools;
6. Studying the education problems of the young, especially in the middle and preparatory stages;
7. Developing training centers according to the requirements of the labor market, in a way that provides wide opportunities for youth to participate society;
8. Supporting the role of the youth in cooperative activities, in a way that provides new employment opportunities;
9. Establishing psychological and social centers that can help solve youth problems;
10. Adopting programs that support the culture of dialogue, achieving peace, and rejecting violence;

11. Arming the youth with the knowledge, skills, and orientations that can help in finding peaceful solutions and support the culture of coexistence with others;
12. Continuing to support the roles of the family, school, and local society in bringing up the youth correctly, to prevent the occurrence and growth of youth drifting away from the values and standards of society;
13. Developing training centers that currently exist in the ministries by increasing the number of trainers and making the professions taught consistent with the requirements of the state and the labor market;
14. Increasing the number of job centers, especially in the provinces;
15. Making the youth aware of the necessity to participate in civil society;
16. Increasing the awareness of, and deepening the role of the family in taking care of the youth and guiding them.

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