

Good morning. It is great being here today.

Young people in the Middle East and North Africa region currently account for nearly half of the region's population and have the potential to become agents of change, acting for a more prosperous and stable future for themselves and their communities. If one in five people in the (MENA) is an adolescent, this offers a window of opportunity to bolster economic and social development. Nevertheless, the MENA region has been unable to develop its human capital to full potential. Unleashing this massive potential requires urgent and significant investment to create opportunities for meaningful learning, social engagement and work, all of which are currently limited, particularly for young women and the most vulnerable.

When we look at the situation in Lebanon, we know that there are over 1.7 million adolescent and young people, who can become the driver for change. Ensuring that their social and economic rights are met is what will give them the opportunity to bring about change for themselves and their communities. And, in the context of Lebanon, it is important to reflect on how social and economic rights need to be met at the same time, meeting these is important to achieve positive youth development.

Nowadays the situation for youth in Lebanon is difficult, they were the most affected group by the impact of Covid, with the loss of employment, limited access to education and to future employability opportunities. This was further exacerbated with the deteriorating situation and the socio-economic collapse. Some of the key barriers for youth positive development include:

- **Limited access to learning opportunity and lack of appropriate foundational skills and transferable skills for the school-to-work transition.** In addition to the **Mismatch between skills-market needs.**
- **Increased unemployment of Youth in Local and Regional market, and high informal employment or employment in informal sector.** Youth unemployment has been increasing, and the situation is even worse for the most vulnerable, girls and women and refugees.
- **Over the last few years, globally and across the region, we have witnessed a significant increase in the mental health issues among adolescents and youth,** in addition to increase in negative coping mechanism and risky behavior (use of drugs, alcohol, high violence and suicide rate, child labor and early marriage), and
- **Increase in disempowerment and disengagement** among adolescent and youth in civic life and decision making

To answer to these challenges, UNICEF in Lebanon has put the issues of adolescent and young people, at the fore front, and over the last few years, together with young people, national partners, government institution and in partnership with the broader UN family and private sector we have been ideating solutions for adolescent and youth fostering positive development by providing youth with sustained opportunities to engage socially and economically within their

communities. UNICEF approaches young people from an assets-based perspective, convinced of their promise and focusing on their strengths.

Some example of such approaches include:

- **Strengthening the system and engage the government** to ensure inclusive policies, legislations, accountability, technical and financial capacity is in place to enable a supportive environment for the youth . Example of these include the recent adoption under the Prime Minister Office of the National Youth Policy Action Plan.
- **Focusing on how to reduce the impact of the economic crisis for youth**, by increasing access to decent employment and earning opportunities in Local and Regional markets, through promoting market based cash for work initiatives, matching skills building and market needs, developing social entrepreneurship to promote individual and group business, engagement with the private sector to increase workplace based learning and long term employment. Unicef , together with partners has been focusing on the learning to earning pathways, enhancing market driven skills, support cash for work for youth and we have been focusing on social entrapneruship, to support youth to become their own job creators, whether this is in the agritech business or in the gig economy.
- **Improved mental health status among adolescents and youth** to address negative coping mechansims. UNICEF has been raising the awareness of such negative coping mechanism with youth.
- **Ensure Vulnerable youth are empowered and engage in civil life while accessing meaningful participation and decision-making opportunities**, advocating to ensure rooms for participation, develop social cohesion and community development youth skills, involve youth in decision making, provide them opportunities to contribute to the development of their communities, to access their right. An example of this is the youth volunteering platform, Nahnu, which will connect youth with opportunities to engage and volunteer, developing new skills whilst contributing to their community.

Empowered youth, whether this is by accessing key skills and competencies, access to opportunities for engagement, employment or having their voices heard, have the power to advocate for their rights and the rights of their peers as well as influencing their peers in the community to ultimately lead positive changes.