

YOUTH PARTICIPATION, EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Case study: FORSA Portal for Education



FORSA (www.for9a.com/en) is an online portal that improves the chances of young men and women across Middle Eastern countries to access the labour market by addressing gaps in education, skills and experience. Each week there are dozens of new opportunities posted on the platform specifically targeted at youth. FORSA offers not only information but also internships, jobs for new graduates, online courses and vocational training.

FORSA's potential for educational impact is substantial, and its development is a key strategic priority for Oxfam partner Leaders of Tomorrow in Jordan. This case study examines the evolution of FORSA, its business model and its effectiveness so far, and the lessons learned by the Leaders of Tomorrow team as they work to expand its reach.

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This case study was written by Dr Sami Hourani, CEO and founder of FORSA portal for education, Leaders of Tomorrow (Oxfam project partner).

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email Rula Aburub (raburub@oxfam.org.uk).

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Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

THE EMPLOYMENT CONTEXT IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Education systems across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are unable to meet the demands of a growing youth population and a rapidly modernizing job market. Across the MENA countries, citizens under the age of 30 make up nearly 60% of the population.¹ However, foundational skills for success in the 21st century – critical thinking, emotional intelligence, teamwork, creativity – are overlooked in favour of rigid rote curricula that are often poorly aligned with what the market needs. As well as career skills, young people lack information about and access to paths of entry into the job market. This includes internships, scholarships and entry-level jobs that pave the way to more formal long-term jobs. A 2019 World Bank publication found that many college graduates in MENA countries are not adequately prepared to enter the workforce.² One result of this skills gap is that youth unemployment in the region has for years persisted at higher rates than in any other region in the world.³

A range of NGOs are working on youth-focused programmes to address these skills gaps; however, there is little coordination between them, which makes programmes short-lived and ineffective. Youth from across the MENA region often express feelings of hopelessness and point out the need for alternatives. Oxfam partner **Leaders of Tomorrow (LOT)**⁴ decided to create the FORSA online portal to address these challenges. LOT is a youth-led organization focusing on social innovation. It was founded in Jordan in 2007.

WHAT IS THE FORSA PORTAL?

FORSA (www.for9a.com/en) is an online portal that improves the chances of young men and women across Middle Eastern countries to access the job market by addressing gaps in their education, skills and experience. At its current stage of development, FORSA is a one-stop shop for educational and capacity-building opportunities in the MENA region, with dozens of new opportunities posted every week specifically targeted at youth in the Arab region.

FORSA for information and skills

The LOT team saw an opportunity in the larger challenge of employment, and created an integrated online platform providing users across the region with access to three things:

- non-formal educational opportunities;
- free skills development, internships and entry-level jobs; and
- personalized career counselling.

‘Lack of experience, training and practical skills are major obstacles to employment.’ ‘To get a job, you need experience; but to get experience, you need a job.’ – Views from youth stakeholders on the FORSA online platform

FORSA products and services

- Scholarships
- Fellowships
- Networking opportunities
- Trainings
- Conferences
- Seminars
- Contests
- Awards
- Grants
- Exchange programmes
- Internships

(Provided in partnership with Oxfam, UNESCO, Drosos Shoman Foundation, AIESEC and HTU and other universities)

'FORSA users can find information about all opportunities in Arabic, English and French, allowing each user to learn about the opportunity, its key instructions, eligibility, application, dates, etc. in their own language, thus mitigating the information asymmetry existing between the elite and rest of the society.' – Dr. Sami Hourani, founder and CEO of the FORSA platform



FORSA 2.0 outreach

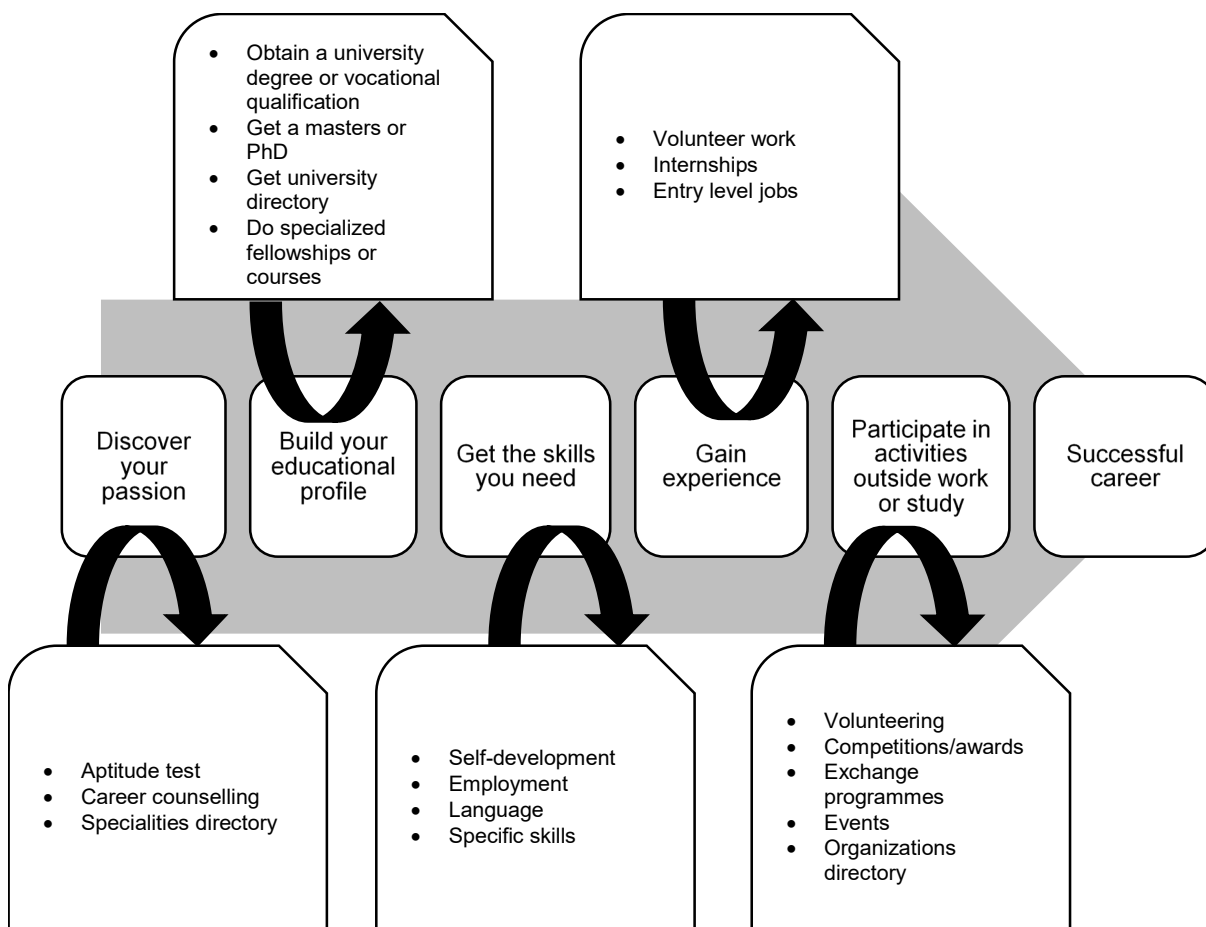
- Approximately 500,000 users from across the MENA region have registered since 2015, when the second iteration of FORSA (FORSA 2.0) came online.
- Featured over 3,000 opportunities from institutions and organizations.
- 60 new opportunities posted every week.
- Social media reach of up to 1 million followers with minimal marketing and promotion.
- Approximately 1,500 new users register on FORSA each day.

The online platform also provides practical and user-friendly English and skills development courses in preparation for formal employment. FORSA is aiming to shift the education paradigm in the region, giving young people the means to overcome the skills gap and compensate for deficiencies in their educational experience.

WHAT IS THE 'FORSA PATHWAY?'

The strength and innovation of this model is found within a dynamic known as the 'FORSA Pathway'. This is a positive feedback loop in which FORSA users improve their professional skills over time by cycling between self-led e-learning materials and real-world educational experiences. This pathway is made possible through free access to high-quality learning materials, as well as information and instruction on how to apply for alternative educational experiences – scholarships, trainings, conferences and more. For instance, a user can develop English language and employment skills such as application writing through e-learning materials, which they can then put into practice to apply for an exchange programme. This programme further advances the user's professional capacity, allowing them to benefit from a higher level of e-learning upon completion. Each stage builds skills and broadens horizons in preparation for the next stage, until eventually the user has built enough professional experience and credibility to successfully enter the labour market. By following the FORSA pathway, youth in the MENA region have a chance to take control of their own professional destinies (Figure 1).

Figure 1: FORSA career pathway



HOW HAS FORSA EVOLVED OVER THE YEARS?

FORSA's potential for educational impact is substantial, and its development is a key strategic priority for LOT. FORSA started life in 2008 as a blog about educational opportunities, and was officially launched online as a platform in 2010, but LOT always aspired to expand it beyond simply providing information on opportunities to include solutions to address skills gaps among Middle Eastern youth. For example, while some users are easily able to find opportunities on FORSA, many others may not even be able to submit an effective application, and for these users access to information is not enough on its own. Thus, the vision was to offer high-quality e-learning materials to help young men and women starting from a weak foundation to develop their English language skills, their employability skills and their personal skills and knowledge, in addition to helping them discover their passions and offering career counselling. Developing these new components within FORSA will allow LOT to capitalize on the portal's key resources:

- a community of users already active on FORSA and hungry for more capacity building;
- a network of educational institutions who partner with FORSA and who can post their own educational materials; and
- broad outreach and brand recognition among Arab youth in many countries.

FORSA currently offers not just information but also internships, jobs for new graduates, online courses and vocational training. It also contains directories of organizations, specialities and information on skills that will be in demand in the future.

Through this project, LOT proposes to add further crucial components: high-quality Arabic language e-learning materials via the **Ta'alam** platform,⁵ easily accessible ways for users to identify areas of interest, introductory courses for users to see if they want to pursue a particular career, and career counselling resources. By offering this content online, the platform will make it significantly easier for users to employ the FORSA Pathway methodology to build their capacities and ease their transition into the labour force. This project takes the existing tool and makes it a more effective and comprehensive way to serve young people in need of personal and professional development.

WHAT IS FORSA'S BUSINESS MODEL?

The team behind FORSA has always aspired to offer a comprehensive suite of services to tackle youth unemployment in the MENA region. Over the years, FORSA's offerings have evolved with the help of grant funding from various organizations, including UNESCO, Drosos Shoman Foundation and Oxfam. In the early days, operating as an NGO meant that FORSA did not have to concentrate on making a profit, but financial sustainability was always a challenge. The leadership felt that creating an income-generating unit was crucial for the portal's growth and continued existence, and in 2016 took a decision to shift its operations to a social enterprise model, registered in Jordan as a limited liability company (LLC). In this new legal form, the company is now investing in a strategic and business development division and is expected to generate revenues of between 20% and 30% of its operating expenses from content providers (employers, universities, etc). Users will not be expected to pay for the services and their access to courses and other services will be free of charge, cross-subsidized by other revenue sources. The plan is for the model to become self-sustaining through eventual economies of scale and increase revenue through further commercial ventures.

WHAT HAS WORKED WELL AND WHAT HAS NOT

FORSA has been successful in growing its user base and continuously expanding its services. The following are some of the areas where it has been extremely successful.

- **Keeping itself up-to-date with the tools and channels that young people use**, such as Facebook, and maintaining a heavy presence on social media has proved to be a successful approach and has contributed to FORSA's wide reach on social media.
- **Investing in mobile applications and 'gamifying' its processes** have been important to keep it close to youth.
- **Attracting young talent to join the team** and empowering them to take advantage of new opportunities, learn new skills and break social barriers has made FORSA agile and resilient.
- **An active content creation team** has been contributing to the development of content for the past eight years, thus increasing the number of opportunities posted. FORSA has also developed its systems to encourage organizations and opportunity providers to publish their opportunities via its portal.

The following are areas where FORSA is continuing to work to further improve its offering.

- **Investing in strategic and business development to increase outreach.** Despite the number of opportunities that FORSA is receiving directly, the number of providers using it is still limited. Currently FORSA is investing in a business development department that will increase the number of opportunities posted directly by organizations. It will also provide incentives for organizations to use the portal.
- **Developing an income generation plan** that will ensure FORSA's sustainability and growth. FORSA is trying to raise money from institutions and potential employers and use it to cross-subsidize the participation of youth.
- **Access to institutional funding** is one of the main challenges to have hindered FORSA's expansion and growth, and it is working on this area.
- **Creating an in-house technical team** was important, as more than five years of reliance on web development companies and freelancers inhibited FORSA's technical development and growth. Since 2016, FORSA has invested in creating an in-house technical team that has contributed immensely to its growth and has introduced high-tech development to its infrastructure. This has included using artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning in matching opportunities and aptitude testing.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Having an in-house technical team is a must** for any social enterprise whose core activities are web-based or mobile-based.
- **Having a feedback loop** and rapid learning have been important to the success of FORSA.
- **Financial sustainability is crucial for the enterprise's growth and continued existence.** This has been a challenge for the initiative since the project's inception. In the initial days as an NGO, FORSA did not have to concentrate on making a profit. However, in 2016 the management decided to change its registration to a social enterprise registered as an LLC, which also played a big role in changing the mindset of staff and leadership when thinking about future strategies and investing in sustainable business models. The portal is now expected to cover up to 30% of its costs through service fees (Figure 3).
- **Being specialized and tightly focused has been fundamental to the success of FORSA,** and its leadership has been careful to stick closely to its original mandate for the eight years of its existence.
- **The constant ability to update services has been crucial to staying on top of the game** as the needs and preferences of youth tend to change rapidly, as do the technological environment, tools and methodologies required to reach them.

Figure 3: FORSA’s plan for generating revenue from institutions

Service packages	If your organization has one opportunity per year		If your organization offers several opportunities per year	
	Basic	Premium	Multi	Deluxe
Organization profile	✓	✓	✓	✓
Data report	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dedicated account manager		✓	✓	✓
Opportunity posts	1	1	6	12
Opportunity promotion on social media	1	4	6	36
Featured opportunity in weekly newsletter		2	6	12
Brand awareness on 'good morning' posts		3	4	36
Social media graphic posts		3	4	24
Social media video posts		2	3	12
Live talks on Facebook		1		3
Premium branding on Instagram stories		3		12
Featured in 'organizations you should follow' section			✓	✓
Total cost	390 JOD	1,280 JOD	1,600 JOD	7,500 JOD
Estimated regional reach (for full package)	12–16,000	220–280,000	340–400,000	1.8–2.4 million

Note: costs are given in Jordanian dinars (JOD).

Additional resources on this topic

For more information about the MENA youth bulge and skills gap, please see:

International Labour Organization. (2014). *ILO: Youth in Jordan face difficult transition from school to decent work.*

http://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS_249778/lang-en/index.htm

World Economic Forum. (2015). *How can the Middle East close its education gap?* <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/05/how-can-the-middle-east-close-its-education-gap/>

OECD. (2016). *Youth in the MENA Region: How to Bring Them In.*

https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/youth-in-the-mena-region_9789264265721-en - page1

NOTES

- 1 United Nations Development Programme. (2016). *Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality*. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/arab-human-development-report-2016-youth-and-prospects-human-development-changing-reality>
- 2 World Bank. (2019). *Expectations and Aspirations: A New Framework for Education in the Middle East and North Africa*. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/527931542039352771/pdf/Overview.pdf>
- 3 International Labour Organization. (2016). *Youth unemployment on the rise globally, remaining highest in Arab States. World Employment and Social Outlook 2016: Trends for Youth*. http://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS_514537/lang--en/index.htm
- 4 Leaders of Tomorrow website: <https://www.leadersot.org/>
- 5 An online platform where young people can receive information and advice in Arabic on developing their skills and careers, as well as access e-learning materials. The platform is funded by the Drosos Foundation and managed by Leaders of Tomorrow. <https://drosos.org/en/projekte/taalam-vocational-counselling-and-skills-development-for-young-adults/>

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