

## THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT’s AEMS Podcast

Transcript for Episode 16:

Well-being and Youth, Part 1

Guest: Mara Kronenfeld from International Youth Foundation (IYF)

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Host: Amina Derbi

**Amina:** Welcome everyone, you are listening to Third Space Thoughts to Policy, the official podcast of AEMS, the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program at IIIT, the International Institute of Islamic Thought.

You can listen to this podcast on Stitcher, Google Play, Spotify, iTunes or Apple podcasts, CastBox and Messy.FM as well as Podcast Mirror. The observations and conclusions featured in this podcast represent the speakers’ own personal views not the organization’s. The theme for this season is wellbeing.

[Music]

**Amina:** We are thrilled to have Mara Kronenfeld on the show with us today.

**Mara Kronenfeld** is an international development specialist with over 15 years of experience designing, implementing, and leading youth development programming in the Middle East and North Africa, a region where she has lived and worked in for many years. Mara has extensive leadership experience in youth workforce development, with a strong focus on program design and development, organizational capacity strengthening, and multi-sectoral partnership cultivation and collaboration. She currently serves as Regional Director of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) programs at the International Youth Foundation (IYF) where she has worked for close to a decade. As Regional Director, Mara oversees a diverse portfolio of youth education, employability, and empowerment programs in collaboration with partners such as the World Bank, USAID, OCP Foundation (Morocco), Hilton, Samsung, JP Morgan, Saudi Aramco, the King Khalid Foundation, and hundreds of local NGOs and community based organization across the Middle East and North Africa.

Before joining IYF, Mara served in the Business Development department at AMIDEAST where she managed corporate, foundation, and individual fund-raising efforts and was also a manager of the Fulbright scholarship program for students from the MENA region. Mara was a U.S. Fulbright grantee to Syria herself between 2001 and 2003 and while in Syria, also managed a U.S. State Department funded teacher training program and UNRWA’s English Language Club for Palestinian vocational students. She has also worked for the American University in Cairo. Mara brings Arabic language skills and a deep knowledge of the MENA region to IYF. She holds a Master’s Degree in Near Eastern Studies from New York University and a Bachelor’s Degree in Anthropology from Stanford University.

So, welcome Mara! We're so excited to have you on the show with us today.

**Mara:** Thanks, Amina! I’m really excited to speak with you.

**Amina:** Wonderful! So we're going to go ahead and dive right into the questions that we have for you.

**Mara:** Great.

**Amina:** So, you currently serve as Regional Director of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) programs at the International Youth Foundation (IYF) where you have worked for close to a decade. Can you tell us a little bit more about the International Youth Foundation's mission and work?

**Mara:** Yes, absolutely and I'll first start out by saying that my oversight has actually recently changed, slightly expanded actually. So, I'm serving as the regional director for Middle East North Africa, and also our Eurasia programs. Right now, that means in practice really, one major program we have in Kazakhstan with support from Chevron. So, I'm still the MENA director but I'm also operating programs in Eurasia under my purview. So, really happy to talk with you today and talk to you about IYF and what we've done particularly in the Middle East and North Africa region, and our thoughts on youth development in that part of the world and globally. To start, I'll tell you a little bit about International Youth Foundation, also known as IYF.

So really, we, IYF, stand for, by, and with young people. We were founded in 1990, so we're coming upon our 30th anniversary — still young by many definitions! We're a global nonprofit really working with local partners in over 100 countries over the last 30 years, to connect young people to those opportunities that will help them transform their lives as well as the lives of those around them. We really believe at IYF that educated, employed, engaged young people have the power and ability to address and, hopefully, solve some of the world's toughest problems. And we work towards that goal through three interlinked strategic objectives, and those are 1: unlocking youth agency, 2: driving better and more economic opportunity to young people, and 3: helping to make systems that affect young people more youth inclusive and youth responsive. So, that's a quick overview of IYF, as we continue our discussion I'll talk a little bit more in detail about some of our tools and approaches, particularly around highly experiential and high quality life skills curricula, around demand-driven workforce development programs, and hopefully we'll talk a little bit also about networks to accelerate youth entrepreneurship in the MENA region and beyond.

**Amina:** Wonderful. Thank you so much for explaining that to our audience. So, as Regional Director, you oversee a diverse portfolio of youth education, employability, and empowerment programs in collaboration with partners we listed earlier in our program. And thank you also for sharing with us the expansion of your current role and having the responsibility for the Eurasia portfolio as well. For today, though, we're going to ask you currently, in your opinion, what are some of the largest struggles and successes in those areas within the MENA region?

**Mara:** Sure, sure. So, having worked in the Middle East and North Africa and, just on a quick personal level, having married into the region one can say — my husband is Moroccan and my kids are “nus-nus” or half-half in English (half Moroccan and half American) — it's been such a pleasure and, really, work that has been a personal passion because of some of the really impactful times I've had living in the region and traveling back and forth. And as you described in the beginning, I've spent significant time in Syria, in Morocco, as well as in Egypt. So, while I talk about some of the

challenges, it's always important, for me especially vis-a-vis an American audience especially in this day and time we're living in, just to talk about the great experiences I've had in the region and the great potential for the region, particularly in its young people. And I've seen that across MENA, from Morocco to Saudi Arabia. So, just really happy to be here today and talking about the region, both some of the challenges and some of the great potential.

In terms of some of the challenges, I think probably the number one, from the perspective of youth development and development generally, is the gap between education and employment that a lot of young people face. So, basically, they're graduating from school without those skills and competencies that are demanded by the private sector, and a lot of young people are expecting jobs still in the public sector, that's been kind of the social contract of MENA region governments with young people. But it's changing. There just aren't enough jobs in the public sector, the public sector's shrinking, and there are different skills and competencies that are needed in the private sector. And also needed, frankly, for entrepreneurs who will be important as new job creation becomes more and more important, and it's already very important in the region.

So I wanted to talk about education first and then maybe, later on in the conversation, return particularly to that skills gap. So, an interesting very recent World Bank report on education in MENA, I just found it very interesting, it talked about three kind of core paradoxes which define the region's education systems. One is that the MENA region has the highest intergenerational mobility in terms of education, i.e. more and more young people are going through more years of education than their parents and grandparents. But at that same time, the intergenerational mobility in terms of income is low. So, more education, yet the impact and outcomes of that education is much lower. Another core paradox is the region's average spending on education is above the world average, yet in spite of that, again, learning outcomes are the lowest. And then, finally, another core paradox that's just really some food for thought, for us and for others, as we think about some of the challenges is that girls by far outperform boys in learning outcomes in MENA. And this is something that many audiences, perhaps outside of MENA or even within MENA, may not be aware of, that girls are doing much better in terms of academics than boys are. And actually, the degree to which young women outperform young men is greater in MENA than in any other region. Yet, at the same time, the region has the lowest female labor force participation in the world.

So, those are some of the core paradoxes, and I'd be happy to go into depth, Amina, on one or two or three of those. What would be most interesting for you?

**Amina:** I think they're all fascinating. The first one that you talk about, where the MENA region is one of the ones that has the highest monetary investment for education and yet has had some of the lowest achievement levels — I think that would be one that we could definitely go into. I'd love to hear your thoughts on that just because, for IIT part of the reason that we have launched the Advancement of Education in Muslim Societies program is recognition of that. And we're not just focusing on the MENA region but some of the countries that we surveyed do come from there, and our view is that there's the first space of education reform research, which focuses on education for employability and more utilitarian purposes, and then there's the second space that looks at education in terms of civic education and engagement. But then there's the third space, which acknowledges the first two spaces and sees the value in those, but also looks at the "softer" skills or subjects, so the socio-emotional or spiritual aspects of the individual which looks at empathy, forgiveness, and sense of belonging. So, we had a Mapping the Terrain study that involved around 25,000 participants and 16 countries, and we're going to have an event at American University on

November 19<sup>th</sup> to launch the State of Education report that's written by Dr. Ilham Nasser where she'll present the findings of that study. I think these are very important areas to look at, but part of the reason that this program started is in response to the recognition that there has been a lot of money poured into the region and "Muslim societies" but there haven't been as many increases in the educational achievement that one would like to see. Or, as you mentioned, there is the other contradiction of a high number of very well-educated people but then they're not finding the jobs that they need. So, I'm just happy to hear your thoughts.

**Mara:** Yeah, great. Everything you just said really corroborates all the research that we've been involved in in the region and our practical experience on the development side. I think, at a foundational level, there are a couple of challenges and needed reforms, and then maybe I'll work towards that soft skills, life skills, and civic engagement piece that you mentioned, which is so, so important.

And so just to kind of start at a broader level just looking at K-12 education in general and even at the university level, I think the region is — and a lot of this comes from the World Bank report as well as just years of our experience IYF and my personal experience working in the region and working on education-related challenges — one core identifying feature is that historically there's been a focus in the region on education serving for credentials (i.e degrees) as opposed to skills or academic/learning outcomes. So, you get a degree, you get a good one, and then you kind of ideally go into the public sector. But, again, that public sector is shrinking, and the private sector has specific skills and competencies that are needed that just aren't being taught. And, again, we'll get to that, a lot of that is that life skills, soft skills piece. And then also, there's — I don't need to say this, especially to you or to those who have familiarity with the region — but in MENA and other places around the world there's a more didactic, lecture-based teaching methodology which is more about knowledge sharing, I would say, and less about knowledge creation. So, there's less engagement of young people in the learning process, it's more top-down. And teaching people to think critically, to use creativity, to learn how to learn, is not always as present as factual knowledge. That is also very much related to that soft skills piece.

Also, at the same time, there is often more centralized control in terms of learning objectives, whether from the central governmental authorities or regional authorities, but at times teachers, principals, deans of colleges, university presidents have much less autonomy to think about the curriculum they're going to develop in response to the needs of both young people and the labor market, or to control finances, or to be involved in really hiring the right kind of teachers and developing the right kind of incentive structures and salary scales that are going to support high quality teaching. So, those are all some of the challenges which do have some potential interventions that would make them better, but it is a complex system and has to be thought of in that holistic fashion, taking all of those elements into consideration. Just also to say that we can't forget that the region has been rattled by violent conflict and protracted crises for years. And that although the MENA region is home to just 6% of the world's population it hosts 35% of the world's refugees — from Iraq, Palestine, Syria — and 30% of the world's conflict-related internally displaced persons. You know, of course, Lebanon has hosted many of these refugees, and Jordan, and Turkey, and the challenges of education in that environment are even more manifold. And we can't forget what a challenge it has brought these host countries as they try to serve the young people who have been refugees.

And, so, to kind of get at this what is most important in terms of reform, I think, at IYF we really are looking at ensuring that young people come out of their education and training years with the kind of skills and competencies that are relevant for the private sector and essentially bridging that gap between education and employment. So, that's often where we come in, and it is an integrating, high quality, highly experiential life-skills training into demand-driven technical training. And everyone has different terminology for these life skills. We call them life skills at IYF because we see them as part of not just skills that are important in school or in work, but in life, giving young people hope for the future and agency — but also, we see these skills as part of a process of lifelong learning, that they give you the basic ability to continue to learn as you face new challenges as a young person and growing into a mature adult. And others call them socio-emotional skills, of course, transversal skills, there's a whole host of names but we're all really speaking about the same set of broad skills that we think are really important for academic success, for work success, and for success in life. And I'm so glad, Amina, you talked about that citizenship angle too. IYF has been partnering closely with UNICEF's regional office out of Jordan on a life skills and citizenship education initiative. It is now something owned by all of those organizations, including UNICEF, IYF, and many others working in the space across MENA, and we were really honored to be part of the initial team doing the research, both an assessment of the life skills across MENA and then building what we call conceptual, programmatic framework for delivering high quality skills in the classroom and in the informal training space. And what we all can —

**Amina:** That's very fascinating, I'd love to read more about that.

**Mara:** Yeah, and we'd be happy to share and share more with the audience. And I think one of the key findings there, and this was getting ministries of education together with implementers together with UNICEF and other relevant stakeholders, was that it's not just these personal skills, but the importance of being able to live together and think about tolerance and think about how you interact with your community and how you respect diversity, that's been a key component of this life-skills and citizenship education initiative. And one that IYF has been proud to talk about and think about as we do our work across the region.

**Amina:** Wonderful. Thank you. That's really interesting and I'm curious to see, because I know IYF is really concerned with life skills, how that will be incorporated into the program with these education ministries. I'm very fascinated in learning more about that.

**Mara:** Sure, sure! Well I think a good foundation for — well, let me just say, we've been involved in strengthening the capacity of local organizations across MENA to deliver high-quality life-skills training to young people for approximately 15 years, really, since 2004. And we had a grant from the GE Foundation to develop our own life-skills training program, it's called Passport to Success, and over these 15 years we have implemented that program in 40 countries. It's been adapted into 20 languages and, just the people we can count ourselves, we've served well over 250,000 young people, but if you think about us having strengthened the capacity of thousands of orgs around the world that number is actually much, much higher. This process of just organically rolling out the curriculum, seeing what works/didn't work has really allowed us to refine the curriculum and really get it to the place it's been most effective, and what we've been able to see is our curriculum is just one of many high-quality programs — I want to state clearly, there's not only one kind of answer to these needs. But I think one thing that is really important about Passport to Success is it's not just the curriculum per se, but it has a whole teaching methodology. When we train trainers to provide this training to young people it's all about how they engage young people, how they make them the

center of learning the communicative process, the project-based learning, the instrumental learning how to do not just how to think, it is really important and...

**[Music fades in]**

**Amina:** Unfortunately, that's all the time we have for today, but you can definitely catch the rest of our interview with Mara in our next episode coming next week!

As mentioned last season, IIIT is currently accepting applications for its Advancing Education in Muslim Societies Master's degree program in partnership with American University. The International Training and Education Program – Advancing Education in Muslim Societies – also known as ITEP–AEMS – is a unique opportunity to earn a Master's degree in international education and training with focus on Muslim societies from a reputable university like American University. This program can be completed in one year and it is thirty credits!

For more information or if you are interested in applying, please visit [www.iiit.org](http://www.iiit.org), then you can scroll to the bottom and you'll find the announcement.

Thank you all for listening. To stay up-to-date on everything happening with the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program, otherwise known as AEMS, please follow IIIT on Twitter (@IIITfriends) and Instagram (@iiit\_insta). You won't want to miss our next episode. If you have any questions for us, or would like to join the conversation, please reach out to me! My email is [amina@iiit.org](mailto:amina@iiit.org). As always, we look forward to working together towards transformative education advancing holistic human development. Salaam!