Introduction: Born out of the desire of various countries to share best practices and other lessons, Communities of Practice (CoPs) have become an effective mechanism to link groups of practitioners to exchange operational knowledge for the design and implementation of social policies. The World Bank is now supporting and facilitating the establishment of the first community of practice in the MENA region in the area of employment and social safety nets. This community will provide a space where practitioners from MENA can share their operational experience, knowledge, and best practices on how best to improve delivery of social policy.

Background: Post Arab Spring, many countries in the region have begun to re-define, reform, and scale-up their social programs. Policy makers in MENA are eager to learn from each other and to change the rules of the game, while identifying best practices that can be adapted to their country’s context. This is urgently needed because despite significant investments devoted to employment and social protection, many countries in the region are not able to effectively assist the unemployed in finding jobs nor are they able to protect vulnerable households from economic shocks and poverty (World Bank, 2012 and Angel-Urdinola et al., 2012).

Communities of Practice as Agents of Change: One promising channel to improve the design and implementation of social programs is to foster south-south knowledge exchanges, which have proven to successfully contribute to reform of social programs and systems in other developing regions. These knowledge exchanges can take various formats; such as study tours, audio-conferences, workshops, and e-platforms. During a virtual event organized by the MENA Social Protection Department in partnership with the Job Knowledge Platform in January, 2013; Carolina Avalos, president of the Social Investment Fund for Local Development of El Salvador, noted the operational importance of communities of practice: “the expertise we obtained from practitioners from Chile, Brazil, and Colombia; was fundamental for the design, implementation, and evaluation of El Salvador’s conditional cash transfer program: Red Solidaria”. Other practitioners from Africa and Europe and Central Asia who were invited to share their experience added that active participation in their CoPs had contributed to also promote the “know-how” pertaining to the development of various technical tools, such as poverty maps.

The MENA Community of Practice: On January 16 and 17, 2013; a forum was held in Istanbul, Turkey, to kick-off the MENA community of practice on employment and social safety nets. The event benefited from the participation of 20 directors of social assistance and employment agencies from seven MENA countries: Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Iraq,
Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, and Yemen. This first meeting was an attempt to gather an initial pool of practitioners in the region to define the topics to be discussed by this new community during this first year, and most importantly, to define the tools that will be employed to help and facilitate knowledge exchanges. Prior to the event, participants filled out a short survey aimed at assessing their interest in the initiative and identifying the main technical topics the community would focus on (Figures 1 and 2). After this initial meeting, participants agreed to appoint one focal point per country and to remain in contact. They also agreed to hold by-monthly knowledge sharing activities. Participants expressed that they would like to use Arabic as the official language of the CoP. During the forum, there was also a consensus among participants on the importance of fostering Social Protection Systems – whereby social safety nets and employment programs would not work in isolation but rather constitute a coherent and complementary mechanism to reduce poverty, mitigate risks, avoid dependency, and – most importantly – help individuals and families become self-dependent though facilitating access to employment opportunities.

The role of technology: Technology constitutes a critical building block, providing tools that support community members in staying connected while acquiring/disseminating knowledge. Ultimately the goal is to create a social network of practitioners that can learn, ask questions, seek information, and access world-class experts, no matter where they are – using the internet and social media. Data collected though the survey given to MENA practitioners reveals that technology has the potential to serve as a mechanism to foster interactions and knowledge sharing in the region (Figure 3). The MENA community recently created a virtual network using the World Bank’s Collaboration for Development Platform. Through this platform, practitioners can stay in contact with each other, initiate discussions, ask questions, and share information on regional best practices. Anyone interested in joining the community can register at: https://collaboration.worldbank.org/groups/menta-community-of-practice/.
Roadmap and next steps: The Istanbul workshop was just the beginning of a series of activities the World Bank will facilitate throughout the year including bi-monthly virtual workshops, study tours, audio conferences, and development of a series of short operational policy notes on selected topics identified by participants. The MENA community will work in close coordination with many partners at the World Bank including the Human Development Network, whose role is to facilitate exchanges with other communities and access to world experts; and the Jobs Knowledge Platform, whose role is to provide technological and virtual platforms in order to facilitate social networking and information exchanges. This effort is led by MENA's Social Protection Department and is financed by the Middle East and North Africa Multi-donor Trust Fund ("MENA MDTF").

---

3 MENA MDTF is a World Bank administered technical assistance facility which provides catalytic support to countries in the MENA region that are currently undergoing historic transition and reform. Aside from the World Bank, funding is provided by Denmark, Finland, Norway and the UK.