

Microwork

Game-changing opportunities for youth employment in the Middle East and North Africa

By World Bank ICT Sector Unit



Youth unemployment is one of the most critical problems in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). However, new approaches to the labor market, enabled by information and communication technology (ICT), such as microwork, are providing a game-changing opportunity to empower youth participation in the labor force.

WHAT IS MICROWORK?

Microwork is a series of small tasks that have been broken out of a larger project, and can be completed via the Internet by any worker with computer and Internet access. Early forms of microwork emerged during the industrial revolution whereby subsets of larger tasks or processes were distributed to workers at manufacturing plants. The proliferation of information and communication technology (ICT) has made it possible to distribute such tasks among workers across the world, enabling greater cost efficiencies and job creation across geographic boundaries with significant implication for economic and social development

Microwork is a particularly promising area for digital earning opportunities by youth and women in developing countries. The microtasks can be performed by any worker with a computer, and access to Internet or mobile networks. The tasks are also varied and flexible as they cater to varying levels of skills – from basic to complexⁱ. Examples of such microwork include market research, data input, data verification, copywriting, graphic design, and even software developmentⁱⁱⁱ.

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Hence there have been rapid growth in the number of microwork aggregators and microworkers from various parts of the world. The aggregators include [Amazon Mechanical Turk](#), [ShortTask](#), [TxtEagle](#) and [Clickworker](#); who outsource microwork to anonymous users and provide supplementary income to global virtual workers. TxtEagle claims to have reached 2.1 billion people in emerging markets through using readily available mobile technology platforms for data collection for airtime compensation^{vii}. The median annual income of microworkers at Amazon Mechanical Turk overall is between \$15,000 and \$25,000—below \$10,000 for Indian microworkers, and between \$25,000 and \$40,000 for U.S. microworkers^{viii}.

ⁱ infoDev, Virtual Economy, p.23.

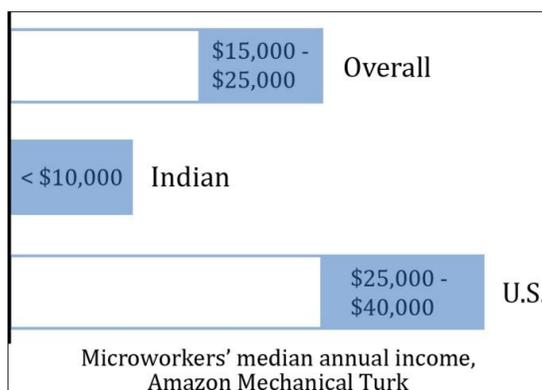
ⁱⁱ infoDev, Virtual Economy, p.23.

ⁱⁱⁱ Microwork write-up extracted significantly from infoDev report: infoDev 2011. "Knowledge Map of the Virtual Economy" Available at infodev.org/en/Publication.1076.html.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF MICROWORK IN MENA?

Microwork can have a transformational impact on job creation across MENA. The region suffers from high rates of unemployment, especially among the young population. A high-level brief recently highlighted job creation as the first priority for reform in the region^{iv}. The official unemployment figures across the Middle East and North Africa range from 9.2 percent in Syria to 35 percent in Yemen, of which unemployed youth form up to 83 percent^v.

It can create mass employment for disadvantaged youths and women in developing countries. Participation in microwork only requires users with basic skills, and a computer with Internet or mobile phone access. Somali refugees in Kenya, for example, were able to earn money as microworkers after [SamaSource](#)^{ix}, a non-profit aggregator provided them with the sufficient training and access to facilities, even though these refugees have never seen a computer before. The average age for a microworker at Amazon Mechanical Turk is 33 years, and over 60 percent of microworkers for Amazon Mechanical Turk in the United States are female^x.



It can contribute to GDP and export revenues of developing countries in MNA. Microwork is a high-growth area of the global virtual economy. A market study has also estimated that over one million workers have earned \$1-2 billion via microwork in the past 10 years worldwide^{vi}, and the market could be worth several billion dollars within the next five years.

Microwork can also contribute to the reduction of poverty in rural areas. It can help narrow the urban-rural disparity and reduce relative poverty through improving market access; creating new employment opportunities for rural areas; strengthening information service delivery at local levels; and helping to integrate new rural generations into modern society.

WHAT ROLE COULD THE WORLD BANK PLAY?

The World Bank can provide technical and financing assistance to develop microwork in various MENA countries. This includes the creation of enabling policy environment, facilitating private sector partnerships, mainstreaming microwork amongst youth, development of the necessary ICT infrastructure, and building capacity of local stakeholders to launch and scale microwork platforms in a sustainable manner.

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^{iv} "Creating jobs in MENA: A reform agenda". Manuela Ferro and Steen Jorgensen. World Bank. March 15 2011.

^v <http://pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/egypt/804/interview/extended.html>.

^{vi} Frei, B. (2009) Paid Crowdsourcing: Current State & Progress toward Mainstream Business Use. Smartsheet. http://bit.ly/smartsheet_report (Accessed March 15 2011).

^{vii} www.txteagle.com.

^{viii} Panos Ipeirotis, Demographics of Mechanical Turk, 2008.

^{ix} www.samasource.org.

^x Panos Ipeirotis, Demographics of Mechanical Turk 2 (New York University Center for Digital Economy Research) Working Paper (10- 01, 2010), available at <http://archive.nyu.edu/handle/2451/29585>.