

Recognition of Prior Learning in Egypt for Citizens and Migrants

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Context

The population of Egypt reached 106.45 million in June 2024. The population growth rate is currently around 1.7% according to the World Bank. This translates to approximately 3,000 births per day. According to current projections, Egypt's population is expected to be 119.8 million by 2030 and double by 2078. Egypt's population is equivalent to 1.44% of the total world population, and ranks number 13 in the list of countries by population. (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, n.d.-a)

Egypt's population has a broad base, indicating a large proportion of young people, with a significant working-age population and a smaller percentage of elderly individuals. Approximately 60% of the population is under the age of 30, and 40% are between 10 and 29. The median age in 2020 was 23.5 years. The working-age population (the 15-64 age group) constitutes the largest proportion of the population, with estimates ranging from 61.54% to 62.9% (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, n.d.-a).

Egypt's unemployment rate fell to 6.3% in the first quarter of 2025 from 6.4% in the previous three-month period. This marks the lowest jobless rate since records began in 1993. The official definition for unemployed used by (CAPMAS) in this report is: individuals from (15-64 years old) who are able to work and desire and search for it, but they do not find it. Individuals are considered unemployed by the research team, even if they had contracted for a job and set a date for receiving it later than the period of the research (the period of the research was one week). Also, individuals are included among the unemployed if they are suspended from work temporarily or indefinitely, as long as they are looking for a job, do not find one, and do not receive a wage except during the research week. The country's male unemployment rate fell to 3.6% in the first quarter, down from 3.9% the previous quarter and 4.4% a year earlier. The unemployment rate for women also dipped slightly to 16.4%, from 16.6% last quarter and 16.5% a year ago. Meanwhile, the labor force grew by 1.0%, reaching 33.447 million from 33.124 million in the prior quarter (World Bank, n.d.).

Total population of migrants and refugees

Historically, Egypt has been an area of international migration. In the past, foreigners came to Egypt, while Egyptians rarely migrated abroad until the mid-1950s. Egyptian people

include many races and ethnic groups, including Nubians, Berbers, Bedouins, Greeks, Armenians, Levantine Arabs, and foreign expats.

Currently, most of the international migrants and refugees in Egypt are from Syria, Palestine, Sudan, Iraq and Somalia. Given the large presence of irregular and undocumented migrants, the country is facing more complex migration challenges, and the size of migrant communities is unknown.

Despite the efforts of CAPMAS to monitor migration, it is difficult to accurately estimate the actual number of international migrants living in Egypt. The main obstacles for this are a low level of cooperation between data collection systems, high costs, and an absence of periodically updated data. (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, 2017).

The number of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt is estimated at 5 million of various nationalities, according to what Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi announced in his speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2016. This is the same number that official and semi-official circles have been referring to since 2018. The current estimated number of international migrants living in Egypt is around 9 million, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). This includes both refugees and other types of migrants from various countries.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) provides the most detailed and up-to-date information about refugees and asylum-seekers in the country. One of the limitations of these data is that UNHCR considers only individuals who are registered as forcibly displaced persons, who represent a minority of the total population of forcibly displaced persons living in Egypt. According to UNHCR, the number of registered refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt is more than 941,625 from 61 nationalities. Starting in October 2023, the Sudanese nationality has become the top nationality, followed by Syrians. Other relevant countries of origin include South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Yemen, Somalia, and Iraq (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.).

Labor market

Egypt is classified as a lower-middle-income country. Growth is forecast to increase from 2.4 percent in FY24 to 3.8 percent, 4.2 percent, and 4.6 percent in FY25, FY26, and FY27, respectively.

The informal economy constitutes up to 50 percent of the country's GDP (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, n.d.-b), employs about 50 percent of non-farm employment in Egypt (Enterprise,2017) (UNHCR, 2018), provides 68 percent of new jobs, and increases in size relative to the formal economy by 1 percent every year. The informal economy is defined as the absence of the characteristics of formality in any economic activity. This refers to activities related to the production or distribution of final goods or services, as well as to self-employment or the employment of others in a way inconsistent with the rules, laws and regulations of the state's institutions. It also includes unregistered enterprises and production units working without official authorization from the legal authorities.

According to CAPMAS, the total number of foreign workers in the governmental sector is only 1388, and in the private sector, 14,950 workers (2019). It should be noted that they are not refugees or asylum seekers; they are mostly experts (UNHCR, 2018). In fact, it is difficult for refugees to obtain permits to work in Egypt due to complicated bureaucratic procedures and the high cost of obtaining an official work permit. Moreover, there is a lack of enthusiasm among a large number of business owners to employ refugees (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, n.d.-c).

The informal labor market is the main destination for refugees in Egypt. Because of its huge size and the fact that it operates informally, it is very difficult to reach concrete data. (Singerman, 2009). In a study titled (Vulnerability assessment for refugees in Egypt by UNHCR 2018), the most common skills of the refugees in Egypt were as follow: esthetics and hairdressing skills (22 percent), cooking (18 percent), sewing (13 percent), social media (5 percent), internet use (5 percent), typing (5 percent), and embroidery (4 percent) (UNHCR, 2020).

Most, if not all, of this skill will find its way very easily to the informal labor market without the need for RPL processes or work permits. Further, they can be self-employed in a very short time, receive work orders, and arrange their work by mobile phone.

RPL IN EGYPT

In fact, until this moment, Egypt has not a comprehensive national RPL system. Currently, Egypt lacks legislation and regulations that enable institutions (either in the labor market or in the education sector) to develop mechanisms and arrangements for recognizing, validating, and accrediting non-formal and informal learning outcomes and competences. Only sporadic RPL processes exist. It includes mainly the Literacy certificate exam, the Leveling Exam, and the Skill Measurement Test (SMT). Some of the RPL practices are available for migrants and refugees:

Education sector

- i. Refugees' children (many nationalities) have unreserved access to school and are treated the same as Egyptian children. In school, they follow the Egyptian national curriculum. To determine the level or the class of education, they have to present a document indicating the stage and class of education reached (indirect assessment of document); those without documents can sit for a leveling exam before being placed in an appropriate class. Moreover, and due to problems like economic hardship and the need to work, overcrowded classes and difficulties in transportation prevent students from attending school classes. Instead, they attend classes in NGO-run or community centers in a culturally familiar environment with native teachers who speak a familiar dialect. They have the opportunity to sit for end-of-year and school leaving exams and have their learning certified. Although RPL practices in education are few, it seems to be effective for refugee children. The majority (86 %) of refugee children aged 6-17 years were attending school. Attendance rates were highest among Sudanese (92 %), Syrian (89 %), South Sudanese (87%), and Iraqi refugees (82 %). Comparatively, school attendance was

observed to be moderate among Eritrean (64 %), Ethiopian (54 %), and Yemeni refugees (52 %). In general, nearly 48% attended public schools, 45% attended community schools, and 8% attended private schools. Less than one per cent attended special needs schools or enrolled in home-based education and only attended final exams. Of the 14% of the refugee children not enrolled in school, nearly 54 per cent were male, and 46 per cent were female, as males are more directed towards entering the labor market to support their families (UNHCR, 2020). This may be due to a higher possibility of males to enter labor market due to family economic needs.

- ii. Literacy program for adults (from the age of 12 upwards): People should approach the relevant adult education department, where they can obtain information on adult education classes closest to their place of residence. If the applicants know how to read and write, they can immediately sit for the adult education certificate exam. If not, they must go through the 9-month adult education course, offered by NGOs, before they sit for and pass a final official written exam (conducted by a governmental agent). This certificate is essential to work in any governmental organization and is even a requirement for obtaining a driving license.

Labor sector

One of the very few RPL practices in the labor market is an official exam conducted by the Ministry of Manpower, known as the Skill Measurement Certificate Test. This certificate is essential for workers to work inside the formal labor sector. The applicants' skills are assessed regardless of how they acquired these skills (either in a formal, informal, or non-formal context).

Applicants who want to sit for the skills measurement test must submit, at a minimum, a literacy certificate. A request for the test requires submission of the applicant's identity card, and is submitted to the labor office. Applicants will then go through a technical test related to the professions for which they have applied for testing. Testing is conducted by technicians specialized in several fields and professions, under the direct supervision of the inspectors of the Manpower Directorate of their place of residence. According to the exam level the applicant is classified into a worker with limited skill who can perform work activities that require basic knowledge and mastery of the skills necessary to carry out simple, specific, and typical jobs under supervision and direction of a higher level or skillful worker (in Arabic Mahar) who can perform activities that require knowledge and skills in a wide range of technical activities that can be performed by multiple means. Some of the technical activities may be atypical or complex and require a degree of independence in making technical decisions. Workers who have a limited skill level may apply for the test again after three months to upgrade their skill level. The validity period of the certificate is five years. The exam fee is only 40 Egyptian pounds (less than one US dollar).

Current challenges and weaknesses in RPL processes in Egypt

The scope of RPL practice is still very narrow, which means a lot of skills and competences acquired in informal or non-formal contexts are still unrecognized. Many challenges and weaknesses can be seen in the current RPL processes in Egypt:

- Although Egypt has already begun the long road to implement its National Qualification Framework (NQF), many steps are still needed, such as policies for recognition, counselling services, a flexible education and training system, and a legal framework in action. Implementing the Egyptian NQF and its tools requires changes to educational and labor laws to overcome the conflicts between these laws and the goals of the Egyptian NQF. This is required to reach a sufficient degree of policy synergism. These steps necessitate experience, as well as a lot of funding and time.
- Process challenges: there are several systems or steps for RPL that differ from one practice to another. The processes take place through multiple steps, in different places, and without a link between these parties. In the absence of real guidance and support, the service applicant is completely self-reliant, and the matter becomes more difficult if the applicant is a foreign citizen and a non-Arabic speaker. The process needs to be individual – centered with adequate support and guidance.
- Institutional challenges: lack of information, along with a lack of cooperation and coordination among the various parties, create significant difficulties for implementation. Additionally, the size and complexity of the Egyptian legal system, characterized by conflicts between certain laws that are meant to work together, further complicates matters. At the institutional level, a great change is needed to effectively overcome these challenges.
- Cultural challenges: Great effort is needed to gain community confidence in the skills acquired outside the formal framework of education and training. Overcoming language barriers and cultural differences requires a lot of work for migrants and citizens at the same time.
- Lack of support for those interested in having their skills assessed. To be successful, they must eagerly seek out the available resources in order to benefit from them and enhance the quality of their life.
- Funding: Currently, funding is not a problem for applicants. The fee for SMT is only 40 Egyptian pounds (about 1 USD). Financial support is available for migrants and refugees through NGOs and international organizations. On the other hand, funding is challenging to secure while the system is still in development. Governmental support is needed to help the National Authority for Quality Assurance AND Accreditation of Education (NAQAAE) to develop the RPL system as a part of the NQF implementation. RPL funding for migrants and refugees is available because of cooperation between international organizations and NGOs (current situation). But it should be known that governmental support for migrants and refugees will help the recipient country to benefit from their abilities. In general, fees are needed to ensure the sustainability of the RPL system.

- Lack of trained and certified staff: assessors in Egypt are subject specialists and are trained only in their area of specialty. Assessors need preparation and training to understand the cultural characteristics, languages, and knowledge of international qualification frameworks/education systems. Recertification of assessors following initial training and continued development is lacking in Egypt.

The success of current and future RPL practices in Egypt is dependent on leaders taking additional steps to enhance the process. These next steps should start with educating and training those involved in the processes. They should understand how important their role is in serving not only citizens but also refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. The importance of this humanitarian role lies in supporting the rights of these groups—to access education, secure employment, and live a normal life—and in helping them overcome the challenges they've faced.

Many steps are needed to start with:

- Development of a national RPL system must be evidence-based and dependent on data collected from real situations in Egypt, not theoretical assumptions. Development must also include acritical analysis of data collected about migrants and refugees (age, sex, source country, educational level, etc.). Also, data about the Egyptian labor market, available training, and an exploration of future needs are important factors to include to support the policy-making process. Collection of this information will help us to reach evidence-based, sound decisions in order to make the best use of the available opportunities. Also, building an information system will provide applicants with the appropriate information to help them make meaningful decisions to make the best use of the available opportunities.
- Ensuring Legislative cohesion between developed policies for RPL and other policies covering lifelong learning, employment, migration, education, and training (without any conflicts between these policies) and a clear, shared vision of the Recognition, Validation, and Accreditation (RVA) system in the Egyptian context represents leading factors for the success of the RVA system. This point is missing in Egypt. Synergy between RPL and migration policies is missing in Egypt (the work permit policy may be a very good example of the failure of this synergy in Egypt), so the development of migration policies that address migrants' needs is needed.
- Development of assessment processes that are flexible, high-quality, and linked to the labor market: this is one of the areas in which great attention is needed. The system must be flexible enough to suit the needs of different categories of recognition seekers, especially refugees and migrants. RPL assessment methods and tools need to be developed in collaboration with stakeholders from different industries, and assessments must resemble what the learner will face in the labor market. Moreover, monitoring and evaluation of assessment practices to ensure that they meet the necessary standards and are regularly updated by specialized practitioners working in RPL, and pre-established opportunities to appeal must be in place.

- Finally, when setting assessment standards for the RPL process, we must emphasize the importance of regional mobility for the Egyptian economy. More than 10 million Egyptian's works abroad, many of them in the Gulf area. Remittances are one of the main sources of USD, reaching more than 30 billion USD in 2021. Therefore, education and training in Egypt should reflect the skills and competencies required in the Gulf region. This is critical as competition increases in the Gulf area labor market. Also, in the case of migrants, RPL processes must consider the skills and competences needed in their final destination or in their homeland if they plan to return to their homeland.

Toward building RPL in Egypt

Recently, many changes took place in Egypt that paved the way toward the development of the national Egyptian RPL system. These steps include:

- The establishment of Sectoral Skills Councils (SSCs). The Sectoral Skills Councils, according to their law (issued April 2023), assume many tasks and powers, which include:
 - Determine the skills, training, and professional needs of each sector based on labor market requirements.
 - Determine the requirements for implementing vocational and technical education and training programs for the sector and develop new professional and technical specialties required in the labor market.
 - Participate in preparing professional and technical tests for the sector.
- Establishment of The Egyptian Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Technical Education and Vocational Training (ETQAN). Cooperation between the two quality assurance agencies in Egypt will foster the development of the RPL system in Egypt.
- The interest of the Egyptian state in dealing with the issue of immigrants on Egyptian lands, the official number of immigrants increased to 9 million according to official Egyptian statements, and this was followed by interest in registering all immigrants in Egypt. The increase in the number of immigrants developing an interest in recognizing the skills and competencies they possess, and the push to register immigrants, represents an important step and helps facilitate their integration into education and the formal labor market.
- Establishment of the Supreme Advisory committee for Eg- NQF, which consists of 14 members representing 10 ministries and organizations concerned with NQF. This step is very important as it changed NQF into a state project rather than an NAQAAE project.

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