

MEPI ALUMNI CONNECTION 2022 BIENNIAL SURVEY AND EVALUATION REPORT

MEPI Alumni Connection
رابطة خريجي ميبي



MEPI



U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative
U.S. Department of State

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Description of the Project	4
Survey Purpose and Methodology	5
Survey Purpose	5
Methodology	5
Data Analysis and Interpretation	7
Limitations	7
Profile of Survey Respondents	8
Gender	8
Age	8
Citizenship and Residence	9
MEPI Program and Graduation Years	10
Language	11
Employment	11
Survey Findings	13
Leadership	13
Professional Development	14
Entrepreneurship	14
Community Engagement and Philanthropy	14
Strengthening the Alumni Community	16
Lessons Learned and the Way Forward	18
Conclusion and Recommendations	22

Executive Summary

The MEPI Alumni Connection develops an active network of community and business leaders across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to advance stability and prosperity in the region. The 2022 biennial survey helps understand how alumni lives have changed throughout implementation of the MEPI Alumni Connection and to assess the impact of programming on alumni's personal and professional lives.

Of the 2,047 alumni who received the survey link, 274 submitted responses. Fifty-six percent (56%) of these individuals identified as female and 47% identified as male. Responses were submitted from all but two of the 14 eligible MEPI Alumni Connection countries, with alumni reporting residence in countries across the MENA region, as well as the United States, Canada, and Europe. Responses were obtained from alumni completing their MEPI leadership program as early as 2006.

Sixty-eight percent (68%) of respondents were employed, indicating that MEPI alumni were resilient against the unprecedented shock to the labor market caused by the pandemic. Men were more likely than women to be employed and were also more likely to hold executive level positions. International non-government organizations (NGOs) are the largest employer of alumni, although they work in a variety of sectors, including various levels of government, academia, and the private sector.

Sixty percent (60%) of alumni agreed or strongly agreed that MEPI Alumni Connection activities have helped them develop as leaders. In fact, alumni have taken on a range of leadership roles, most commonly in their professions. Meanwhile, 47% of alumni believed MEPI Alumni Connection activities had supported them to develop as professionals. Alumni are engaging in entrepreneurship, with 27% reporting having started a business or organization and 3% reporting that the program directly supported them in this endeavor.

Forty-seven percent (47%) of alumni reported conducting a project in their communities since January 2021. The MEPI Alumni Connection has played an important role in bringing alumni's philanthropic inclinations to fruition, with 53% of alumni agreeing to some extent that the program provided them with resources to improve their community. Alumni's projects have principally supported members of their communities who are marginalized or historically under supported, such as women and youth.

Forty-nine percent (49%) of alumni reported making a worthwhile connection with fellow alumni through the network. They also made connections outside of the MEPI network, with 42% reporting participating in a networking event or professional development opportunity organized by the U.S. Department of State (DoS) or a DoS alum. The closed MEPI Alumni Connection Facebook and LinkedIn groups were important in fostering a sense of community and belonging among the alumni. Overall, 69% of alumni felt a sense of belonging within the network. Importantly, women alumni feel supported and included and did not face any challenges within the network that were attributable to gender discrimination.

Going forward, alumni indicated a strong preference for in-person activities, 2–4-day intensive trainings, and where possible, for events to take place over the weekend or after working hours. Access to professionals with relevant experience, partners, and training were the most-cited resources alumni required to feel prepared to launch an initiative.

Description of the Project

The MEPI Alumni Connection, a program sponsored by the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) of the U.S. Department of State, and implemented by IREX, develops an active network of community and business leaders across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) that fosters long-lasting relationships, leadership skills, and opportunities to stimulate social entrepreneurship in the MENA region to advance stability and prosperity in the region.

The MEPI Alumni Connection focuses on creating local and regional networking opportunities, providing professional development, encouraging innovation through small grants, and providing tailored training and technical assistance to MEPI leadership alumni in coordination with U.S. embassies in the region.

Launched in 2017, the MEPI Alumni Connection has served a growing network of alumni across 14 countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Through the MEPI Alumni Connection, over 2000 alumni in 14 countries have implemented over 150 projects that have built professional and skills development, fostered greater equity and inclusion, promoted economic prosperity, and supported entrepreneurship in communities across the region. MEPI Alumni have expanded their network through in-person and virtual networking opportunities, including two Alumni Summits and regular virtual discussions with experts. MEPI Alumni have given back to their communities through annual MEPI Day of Service activities and been recognized by their network through the MEPI Alumni of the Year award.

“After living a tough life before MEPI, working day and night to graduate from college, growing up with divorced parents in a poor family of 10 members, I am now ... running my own company, free from whatever restrictions or limitations a person can have and it was all because of MEPI. MEPI was the most fruitful changing experience I have ever been through!”

Survey Purpose and Methodology

SURVEY PURPOSE

Starting with a needs assessment conducted in 2018, and every subsequent two years in 2020 and 2022, IREX surveyed members of the MEPI Alumni network to understand how their lives have changed over the course of the implementation of the MEPI Alumni Connection program; the extent to which program activities have fostered their personal and professional growth; and alumni's needs and aspirations for future programming.

Recognizing that the 2022 biennial survey coincided with the final year of program activities implemented by IREX, IREX expanded the scope of the survey to also constitute an endline evaluation. This evaluation aims to understand how alumni have benefited from the program since the last biennial survey, as well as over the last five years. Additionally, evaluation findings could inform the design and implementation of future alumni programming.

METHODOLOGY

IREX employed a mixed-methods, participatory approach to the survey and evaluation, comprised of a quantitative survey, key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs) and the collection of stories of most significant change (MSC).

The quantitative survey was emailed to all eligible members of the alumni network with a known email address through the survey platform Alchemer. To encourage responses, alumni who completed the survey had their names entered to be one of five recipients of a professional development honorarium. Six email reminders were sent to alumni to take the survey. IREX also posted to the closed Facebook and LinkedIn groups three times, including with a video of encouragement from MEPI's Senior Advisor for Outreach, Media, and Leadership Programs. Ultimately, online data collection occurred from April 22, 2022, to May 21, 2022, yielding 210 complete responses.

After the online campaign closed, to make the survey exercise as participatory as possible, IREX recruited and trained 12 alumni volunteer enumerators. From May 25, 2022, to June 30, 2022, volunteers conducted phone interviews using the same questionnaire with alumni in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Yemen. After duplicate or incomplete responses were removed, alumni enumerators conducted 64 interviews, bringing the total number of quantitative survey responses to 274.

To contextualize quantitative findings, IREX conducted key informant interviews with alumni who were awarded community project funds through the MEPI Leaders Grants (small grants of up to \$3,000) and Alumni Venture Funds (grants ranging from \$5,000–\$10,000 to start projects, open a businesses or organization, or launch initiatives) (Table 1). These individuals were selected for their ability to offer feedback on the strengths and areas of improvement for two of the MEPI Alumni Connection's core program elements (grants). IREX also sought to hear from 'inactive' alumni who — according to program records and the most recent biennial survey — had not taken part in MEPI programming in the last two years. These individuals were selected for their ability to offer feedback on how to encourage greater participation in program activities.

Further, IREX conducted focus group discussions with active alumni (as determined by program records); women alumni; Alumni of the Year Award (AOYA) winners; and members of the Alumni Summit Advisory Committee (ASAC) (Table 2). These individuals were selected for their ability to offer feedback on the program’s impact and opportunities to improve the program.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS		
Discussion Type	Total Number of Participants	Total Number of Women
Active Alumni	11	2
Women Alumni	4	4
AOYA Winners	5	3
ASAC Members	4	2

Table 1: Focus Group Discussions – 2022 Biennial Survey

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS		
Key Informant	Total Number of Interviews	Total Number of Women Interviewed
MLG and AVF Awardees	6	3
Inactive Alumni	6	1

Table 2: Key Informant Interviews – 2022 Biennial Survey

Finally, IREX collected stories of most significant change from alumni. Through Alchemer, alumni were sent a form asking: “What is the MOST significant change you have experienced because of your participation in the MEPI Alumni Connection program?” and “Why is this story significant to you?” From April 12, 2022, to May 16, 2022, alumni submitted 24 responses. Over the course of four meetings, IREX staff read these stories, selected the seven strongest narratives, and then ranked them from least to most significant change. Collecting stories of most significant change was important to qualitatively assess how participation in MEPI Alumni Connection activities impacted alumni as well as their communities. Further, these stories allow for an understanding of what alumni value, so that the design and implementation of future programming may align with alumni’s needs and aspirations.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Data were analyzed using IBM's Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). They were disaggregated by gender, age, citizenship, MEPI program and graduation year. Unless otherwise stated throughout the report, there were no notable differences in responses based on these variables.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the outreach campaign, and the incorporation of alumni volunteer enumerators, responses to the survey this year fell short to previous years. Ultimately, IREX did not achieve the minimum number of responses necessary for the findings to be considered statistically representative of the larger alumni population. Thus, findings presented in this report and references to "alumni" should be understood to refer solely to survey respondents.

Profile of Survey Respondents

The survey was sent to the 2,047 alumni with known contact information. Altogether, 274 alumni responded to the survey, representing 13% of the network with contact information.

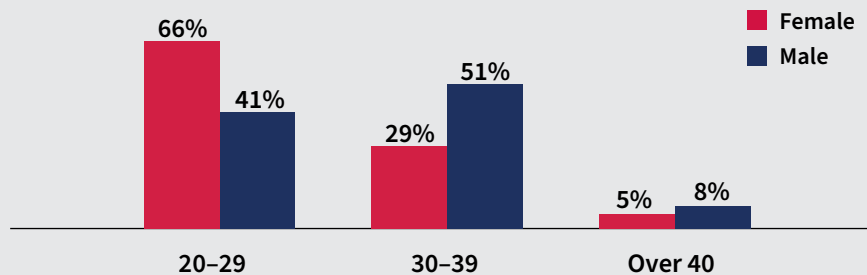
GENDER



Fifty-three percent (53%) of the respondents to the survey identified as female, closely reflecting the 55% of the females known to be a part of the network. Forty-seven percent (47%) of the respondents identified as male and less than one percent identified as another gender.

AGE

Respondents' Age in Years



CITIZENSHIP AND RESIDENCE

Respondents hailed from 12 countries and territories across the MENA region: Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, West Bank, and Yemen. The greatest share of respondents were citizens of Lebanon (23%), followed by Jordan (17%) and Morocco (16%). Meanwhile, a sizeable portion were citizens of Tunisia (12%) and Yemen (10%), with smaller percentages in other parts of the Gulf (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait — 7%), Algeria (7%), Iraq (6%), and the West Bank (<1%). No responses were received from two countries: Egypt and Syria.

Approximately 17% of respondents lived outside of their home countries, taking up residence in other parts of the MENA region, the United States, Canada, Kenya and across Europe (Figure 1)¹.

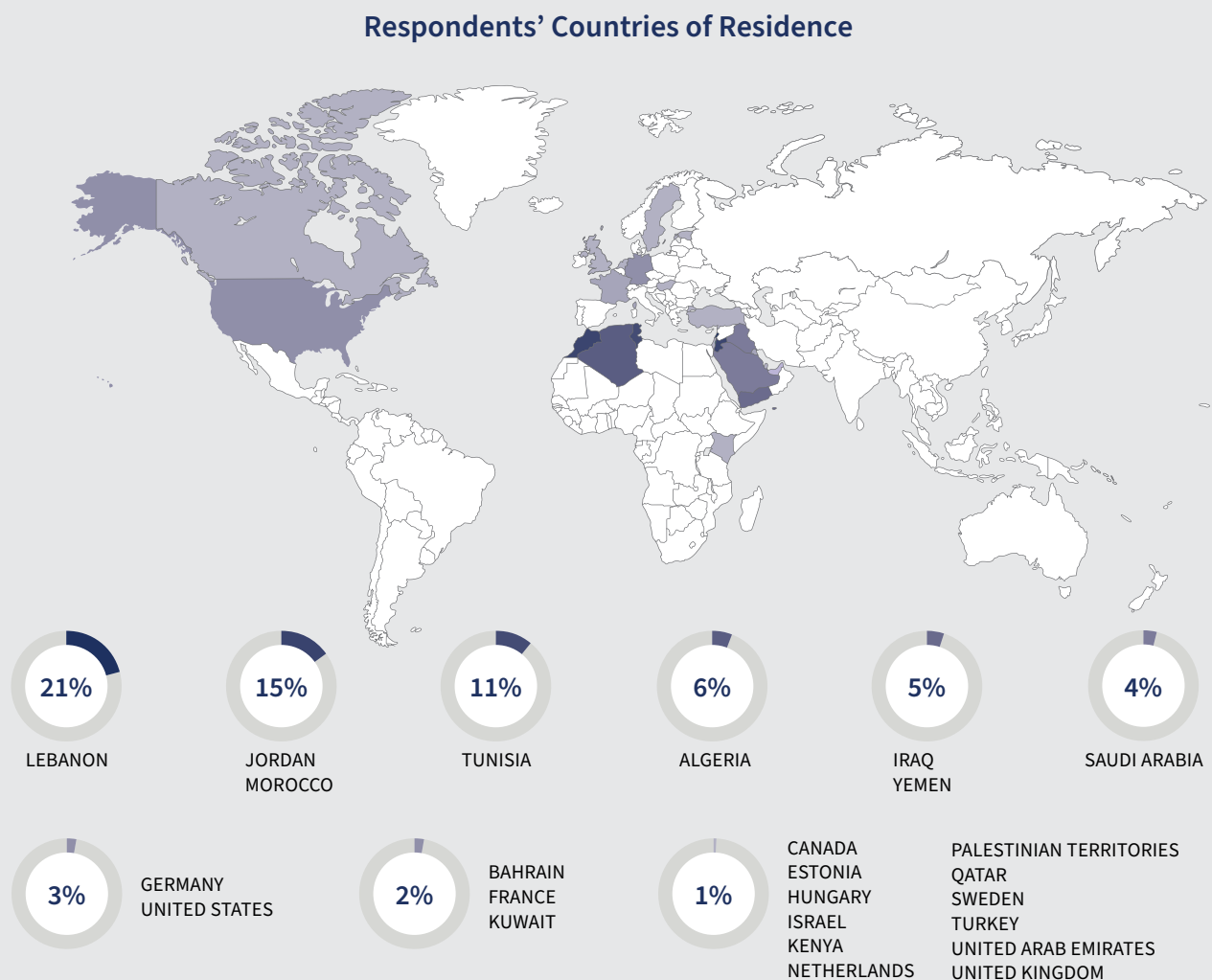


Figure 1

¹ Totals do not equal 100% due to rounding.

MEPI PROGRAM AND GRADUATION YEARS

Alumni of all expected MEPI leadership programs were represented in the survey. Most respondents were alumni of the Student Leaders Program (39%) then the Leadership Development Fellowship program (34%) with the remaining 27% of responses from alumni of various Tomorrow's Leaders programs. Less than 1% of responses came from Civic Education and Leadership Fellowship alumni, which is consistent with their choice to engage with the MEPI Alumni Connection.

Alumni similarly represented a wide range of program years. Responses were obtained from alumni who graduated as early as 2006 (the first MEPI class graduated in 2003), with at least one alum answering per program year since then. The willingness of alumni to take part in the survey and MEPI program activities after so long speaks volumes to the commitment alumni have to each other, as well as MEPI and IREX. While alumni from nearly all program years answered the survey, most respondents were graduates of programs ending in 2016 or later (Figure 2).

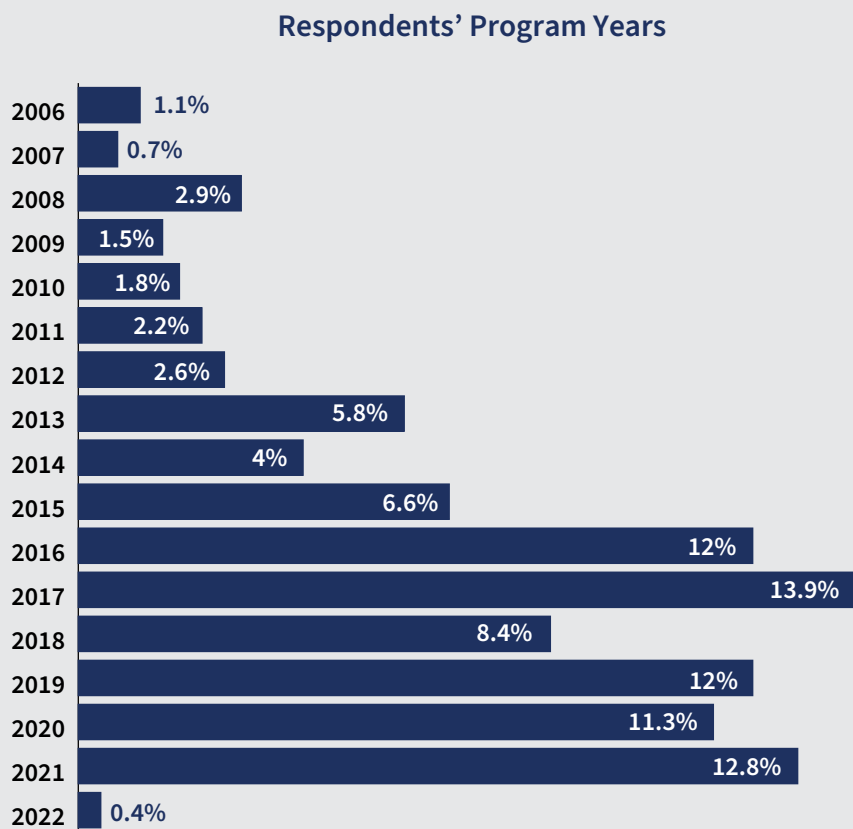


Figure 2

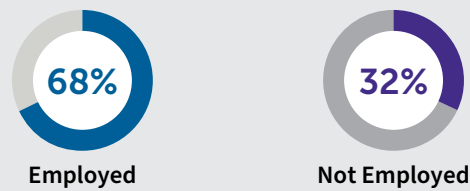
LANGUAGE

Most respondents (63%) chose to take the survey in English, with 37% taking in Arabic.



EMPLOYMENT

Around 68% of survey respondents were employed. This is slightly higher than the percent of alumni who reported being employed in the 2018 survey and substantially lower than the percentage who reported being employed in the 2020 survey. Ideally, the employment rate among alumni would increase after two years; however, given the toll of COVID-19 on [youth employment](#) across the region, it is encouraging that MEPI alumni have largely maintained pre-pandemic levels of employment.



A greater percentage of men (73%) reported being employed compared to women (64%). Among those employed, roughly 40% work in mid-level positions, 30% work in executive level positions and 20% work in entry-level positions (Figure 3). Disaggregating employment level by gender reveals some noteworthy disparities: women (30%) were twice as likely as men (15%) to hold entry-level positions, while men (42%) were far more likely than women (25%) to hold executive level positions.



Figure 3

International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) were the largest employer of alumni, with 25% reporting working for one. A nearly equal percentage of alumni indicated working for the national government (18%) or a large business with over 200 employees (17%), while 16% reported working for a local or national NGO.

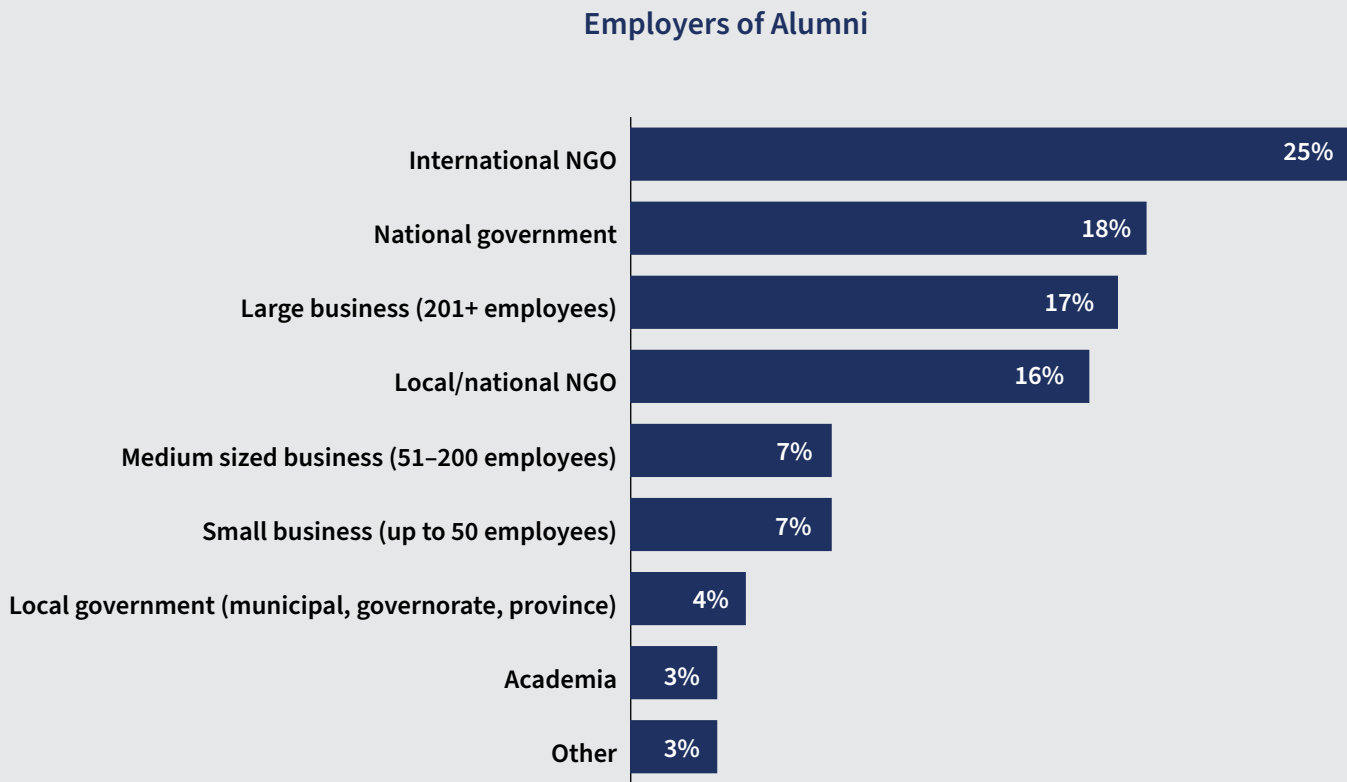


Figure 4

Leadership Development Fellowship alumni were most likely to hold positions at the executive level, while alumni of the Student Leaders and Tomorrow’s Leaders Undergraduate programs were most likely to hold mid-level positions. Alumni of the Tomorrow’s Leaders Gender Scholar Program, meanwhile, were most likely to be working entry-level positions.

Survey Findings

Program Outcomes and Results

LEADERSHIP

The MEPI Alumni Connection program is fostering a generation of empowered young and community leaders with the knowledge, resources, and opportunities to positively impact communities across the MENA region. It does so by offering an alumni-informed and evidence-based suite of activities, including grants to implement community projects or take professional development courses, trainings on a wide array of subjects, and networking sessions.

Sixty percent (60%) of alumni agreed or strongly agreed that these activities have helped them develop their overall skills as leaders. Less than 10% disagreed to any extent, while the remainder (30%) held a neutral opinion. Since January 2021, alumni have served in a range of leadership roles, the most common of which being professional leadership (53%). Men (59%) were more likely than women (48%) to report taking on this form of leadership. Alumni were also likely to serve as leaders in their communities, with roughly 47% of respondents indicating as much, regardless of gender. Overall, 41% of alumni served as academic leaders (44% of women and 38% of men) and roughly 33%, regardless of gender, served as leaders in public service.

When prompted further, 40% of alumni felt that the MEPI Alumni Connection program supported them to serve as a community leader and 30% indicated the program supported them to become a leader in their profession.

“I participated in everything that IREX offered to us and I acquired several skills that enabled me to run in the elections for the people’s councils. I won two terms of office and the national one in which I got third place out of 394 candidates. I also developed the work of my scientific association, which is active today with the Ministry of Youth and Sports directly through the project of scientific entrepreneurship. The educational institution that I run has obtained the best centers in academic achievement because I changed my thoughts from the head of an institution to a leader ... MEPI helped me not pay attention to the obstacles that prevent me from achieving the goals.”

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

When asked if MEPI Alumni Connection activities helped them develop as professionals, 47% agreed or strongly agreed, 36% held a neutral opinion and roughly 12% percent disagreed to some extent. *“The program provides many opportunities that help alumni develop their skills like the virtual webinars and the online courses that the program manages or funds for alumni to take the best courses in the world.”* Specifically, the program supported 10% of respondents to find paid employment and supported roughly 8% to find mentors. *“What we have learned in our MEPI exchange programs is expired now and I think what the MEPI Alumni Connection does is keep us up to date with the world’s needs. I recommend that IREX keep developing their content and their opportunities based on the needs of alumni.”*

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The program also encourages alumni to start and maintain their own ventures. Indeed, 27% of alumni who took the survey (32% of men and 25% of women) reported starting a for-profit business or non-profit organization since January 2021²; and 3% reported that the MEPI Alumni Connection directly supported them to start this venture.

“With the assistance of the Alumni Venture Fund, I launched the website for Waraqa for Translation, and we were registered as business with the Ministry of Trade, afterward, we established an office, and we secured long-term partnerships.”

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PHILANTHROPY

While the MEPI Alumni Connection supports alumni with resources for personal and professional development, alumni are also expected and encouraged to capitalize on these resources and the lessons they learn to improve their communities. Forty-seven percent (47%) of alumni reported conducting a project in their communities since January 2021. Of these, 49% were women and 44% were men. When asked to select the thematic area(s) their projects related to, 27% selected youth engagement, making it the most popular thematic area. Meanwhile, 22% reported their project related to education and a nearly equal percent indicated their project related to civic engagement and professional skills — 20% and 19%, respectively. Roughly 15% conducted projects related to gender equity and social inclusion.

The MEPI Alumni Connection has played an important role in bringing alumni’s philanthropic inclinations to fruition, with 53% of alumni agreeing to some extent that the program provided them with resources to improve their community. For many alumni, *“providing funding is the number one support, as without it [they] would not be able to start projects.”*

In qualitative interviews with alumni who conducted community projects — particularly those in volatile contexts such as Yemen — participants spoke about the challenge obtaining financial support for their nascent and small-scale projects, given donors’ reluctance to fund what some perceive as a risky or low-yield investment. Therefore, MEPI was often the first financier of alumni’s initiatives.

² Given the percent of alumni who reported being self-employed in the survey, it would appear that more than half of these 27% are not paid for this work.

“In 2019 I started my own organization working with youth and women on topics related to peace building, since Yemen is a country with rich history of conflicts and disputes. As a community project, it was hard to find a donor to finance or support me in the beginning. The small grant I received from MEPI was my first.

The grant was 5,000 dollars, and frankly, it helped my organization to rise and grow. Then, when I would go to another donor and say that my initiative was MEPI funded, they trusted me more. Today, two years later, I have eight international partners. This community project has been a turning point in my life.”

Alumni spoke highly of the results they were able to achieve. They were able to support members of their communities who are marginalized or historically under supported, such as women and youth. As one alum who conducted a community project targeting women entrepreneurs and small business owners noted, *“the change [my project achieved] was clear from the post-evaluation. Women increased their income, were better able to define and set targets, and better able to market their products through social networking sites.”* Another grant awardee recalled, *“I communicated with [program participants] after the project to ask about how they are doing. They said they are making more money and providing for their families. So, I consider this a great success and great result of my project. This girl is supporting herself and her family, so, I’ve contributed to a decrease in the poverty that people are living in.”*

These successes did not come without challenges, however. Some alumni implement projects in countries where the mere receipt of U.S funding puts alumni and their projects at heightened risk. Meanwhile, the context in which some alumni implement projects are volatile. As an alum from Yemen recounted, *“the first challenge is the current political situation in Yemen and the war, where we don’t feel safe, but I thank MEPI for making exceptions and allowing us to not use its logo on our projects. Another challenge was the internet, as we don’t always have internet connection [to complete activities].”* Another alum who implemented a program in Yemen echoed this sentiment, adding that *“Yemen is a conservative country governed by customs and traditions. Sometimes when I enter mediation between conflicting parties, I am disregarded because I am a woman.”*

Other challenges pertained to navigating U.S. Government donor regulations. One alum noted that MEPI timelines were “sometimes inconvenient for the implementer, requirements for an eligible application were high, and the requirements for onboarding were sometimes hard.” This, in conjunction with other feedback from alumni, and some of the experiences of the program team –including delays in receiving required documentation and reports from alumni — points to a need for future programming to continue to train and prepare alumni for the stringent requirements of the United States Government and other large donors.

Despite these challenges, alumni reported learning a great deal through the implementation of their projects. Alumni described enhancing their project management skills and their resilience and composure in times of hardship.

“Implementing the project is different than planning for it. Through implementing my projects, I was able to learn new skills and improve other skills. When I opened my own business, it was not a successful one because I did not have the proper skills. But when I took training MEPI offered me and when I implemented projects funded by MEPI, I was able to recognize so many mistakes and I started to learn from them. Most importantly, I was able to improve my leadership and management skills. Now, I can implement a project from A to Z.”

Importantly, alumni are also working to ensure the sustainability of their programs after their MEPI-funded grants by seeking out third-party funding. In some cases, alumni are even being approached by funders: *“there are several local and international organizations approaching us and asking us to apply for a fund from their own organization. Our plan is to close this fund successfully so we can evaluate our work and apply for bigger funding in the near future,”* one alum noted about the future of their project.

In addition to implementing their own projects, alumni also work with existing institutions in their communities. In fact, roughly 80% of alumni who responded to the survey reported leading an event or activity in collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs) to promote specific issues and awareness. On average, alumni conducted nine events with CSOs.

Alumni also show a willingness to share what they learn with others. When asked, 16% reported acting as a mentor since January 2021, with 15% reporting that the MEPI program helped them become a mentor. Further, when asked if they had shared something they learned through a MEPI Alumni Connection activity with others, 48% had done so with community members, 44% had done so with colleagues or a professional network, and 28% had done so with classmates or an academic network.

STRENGTHENING THE ALUMNI COMMUNITY

Another core component of the program is to strengthen ties between alumni from various MEPI as well as other Department of State (DoS) programs to build networks, team spirit, and collaboration on projects serving alumni’s communities. According to survey results, the program has largely achieved these ends.

When asked, 49% of alumni reported making a worthwhile connection with fellow alumni through the network. Women (52%) were more likely to hold this sentiment than men (46%). Since January 2021, respondents formed an average of four relationships with alumni they did not previously know. As noted, the goal is also for alumni to connect with participants from a range of DoS programs, not just MEPI. This was indeed the case as 42% of alumni (47% of men and 37% of women) reported participating in a networking event or professional development opportunity organized by

the DoS or a DoS alum. Meanwhile, 23% reported working with MEPI or other DoS alumni to start or run a community project or initiative; 16% reported acting as a mentor to a MEPI or DoS alum; and 10% reported being mentored by a MEPI or other DoS alum. Ten percent (10%) also reported partnering with a MEPI or other DoS alum on a MEPI Day of Service event. Finally, 7% of alumni reported starting or running a business with a MEPI or other DoS alum. *“In my first project I had a partner who was a MEPI alum. I met her during our MEPI exchange experience in Lebanon and she provided technical support for my project. I have another partner and we’ve been applying for State Department [funding] the last three years, and this year they told me that my project was accepted. I am still in touch with them both and I truly love that I have partners so we can cooperate. I also like to be a partner with new people to expand my knowledge and meet new people from the MEPI Connection.”*

In qualitative interviews, participants were asked the extent to which they felt that the MEPI Alumni Facebook and LinkedIn groups are a safe space to share diverse ideas and opinions. Overwhelmingly, alumni expressed a strong sense of welcome and comfort in sharing their perspectives and experiences with other members of the network. As one alum explained, *“the groups are very safe, everyone is welcomed, all ideas are respected. The groups actually increase the sense of belonging. It is very beautiful.”*

As another alum explained, *“there are many things I cannot share on my personal Facebook account due to the current situation in Yemen. For instance, the projects I implemented through MEPI or any other projects from State Department, I cannot share them on my personal Facebook unless I hide the logo. So, I feel safe when I share my work on our MEPI Facebook group. I share, I see others’ responses and we interact with one another. I feel it is a safe platform to share my ideas and so on.”*

Between networking events, the alumni Summit, Day of Service initiatives and the myriad other opportunities alumni are afforded to connect with one another, MEPI Alumni Connection activities have fostered a strong community of alumni that, for some, feels like, *“a big family that supports, motivates and helps alumni to do better things”* and *“a safe space at all times.”* It is no wonder, then, that 69% of alumni reported feeling a sense of belonging within the network.

“I not only feel a sense of belonging within the network, but I am so loyal to the network and MEPI. MEPI provided me with great opportunities, I have participated in other networks, but they never had the opportunities MEPI provides us. This is why I feel I belong, and I am so loyal to MEPI and recommend people to apply for MEPI, including my husband.”

As an alum was quoted saying earlier in this report, women regularly face discrimination or attempts to have their voices and contributions minimized in their home communities. Meanwhile, 53% of survey respondents were women and at the time of writing, women constitute roughly 55% of the alumni network. It is therefore important to understand and address the unique experiences and needs of women participating in the program.

To this end, IREX conducted two focus groups with women alumni. Overwhelmingly, the women interviewed as part of the survey indicated not facing challenges that they believe are rooted in gender discrimination. When prompted further as to whether there were any ways MEPI or IREX could better support the unique needs of women within the network, some alumni indicated *“there are lots of things to do to support women. Coaching, empowering them. So, there could be a specific program for women that has various training.”* Another suggested *“providing sessions, psychological and other types of sessions which can help women.”*

LESSONS LEARNED AND THE WAY FORWARD

Alumni-Identified Areas of Improvement

At the end of qualitative interviews, alumni were offered an opportunity to provide candid feedback on the program and suggestions for improvement. Communication was an often-cited concern, whether it be with MEPI, IREX or other alumni. Regarding communication with MEPI and IREX, some alumni — albeit without providing much context — expressed a desire for “enhancing transparency.”

Regarding communication with other alumni, some interview participants expressed a desire for new mediums through which to connect. Alumni have suggested that they no longer use Facebook in their personal lives and therefore do not necessarily log on to be able see activity that is happening in the MEPI Facebook group. Another participant noted that *“Facebook is not the best platform to communicate, [and suggested that alumni] should have an application that can be downloaded on phones, [preferably via a software or service] that is more secure.”* The diversity of social media platforms in the past years through which individuals may connect may continue to be an ongoing challenge for streamlining alumni networking.

Though certainly a factor of global pandemic as well as the vast number of countries from which the alumni hail, alumni have expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities for in-person interaction. As noted in more detail later in this report, alumni have a strong preference for in-person networking events in the future, especially for alumni within the same country or city.

Perspectives from Inactive Alumni

IREX made a concerted effort to connect with alumni who had not been active in the program in the two years preceding the survey. When prompted as to why they were not taking part in activities, responses ranged from a genuine lack of interest in the types of opportunities on offer, to scheduling and other life priorities that precluded participation in MEPI activities. One alum interviewed reported not being able to participate for regulations regarding the involvement of Syrians.

Several inactive alumni indicated the opportunities the program offered were not tailored well enough to their career stage. Mid and late-stage career professionals were particularly likely to hold this view, saying that they would be more engaged if there were opportunities for those who have been in their fields for more than five or even ten years, as opposed to those who are recent graduates. This is a challenge with a network this size, as the majority (70%) of employed alumni reported working mid or executive level positions, yet 54% of respondents were ages 20–29 and can reasonably be assumed to still be in education or in the early stages of their career. In addition, the diversity of the network makes it challenging to target activities for specific career fields rather than topics that can benefit a more diverse group of alumni. Nevertheless, more opportunities that account for the fact that some alumni may be looking for more advanced and nuanced training and professional development are recommended for future programming

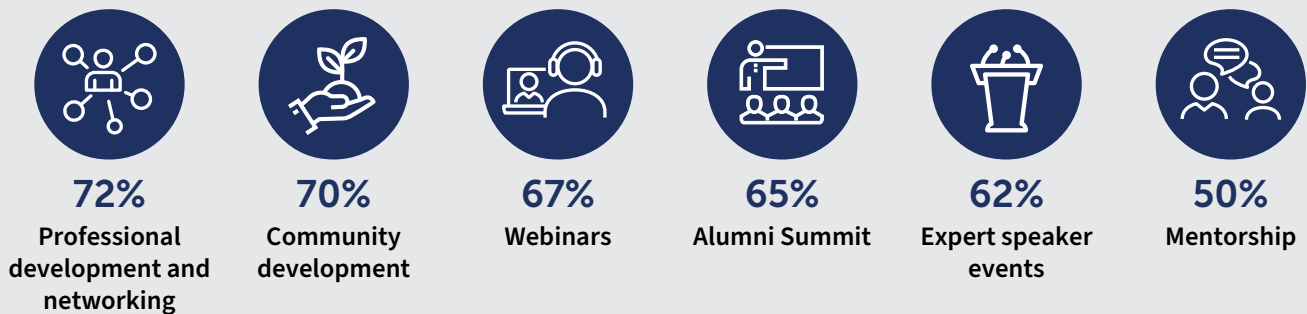
Moreover, as noted previously, NGOs are the largest employer of alumni; however, they are not the sole employer. Alumni work in a diverse set of industries and the opportunities that are offered to them must appeal across wide-ranging professional interests and areas of expertise. One inactive alum indicated as much in saying that he was not active in the program because he felt most opportunities were catered to those working for NGOs, which he does not.

Certainly, most opportunities were selected to attract the greatest number of alumni. However, two challenges arise from this utilitarian approach – albeit it reasonable and admirable. The first challenge is when opportunities are general (like project management), additional work may be necessary to communicate the value of the opportunity to people across sectors and levels of expertise. Otherwise, alumni may – as this survey has revealed – miss out on valuable opportunities. The second challenge emerging from selecting opportunities that appeal to as many alumni as possible is that it may fail to meet some alumni where they are. While prioritizing opportunities with broad appeal maximizes the efficient use of resources, certain opportunities that may benefit a small segment of alumni could still be made available. This is not exclusionary or an inefficient use of resources, if the result is that alumni who are otherwise not active find utility in the alumni network and begin to participate. In the same vein, as alumni learn and develop professionally, opportunities should likewise become more advanced to keep pace with their ever-evolving needs.

It is important to note several additional findings regarding inactive alumni. The first and most important of which is that inactive alumni’s lack of participation in program activities does not always equate to total disengagement from the network. In fact, inactive alumni interviewed reported regularly reading emails and viewing the content posted in the closed social media groups. Some were even active in group chats that had been established by alumni of a particular program or graduation year. The second is that inactive alumni interviewed, while not taking part in program activities, did appreciate their value, just not for themselves. Finally, most inactive alumni – the aforementioned Syrian³ a notable exception – regarded the network as welcoming and inclusive. The confluence of these findings underscores some inactive alumni may not be wholly unwilling to participate in MEPI Alumni Connection programming but simply require opportunities that better speak to their needs and aspirations.

Alumni Preferences for Program Activities

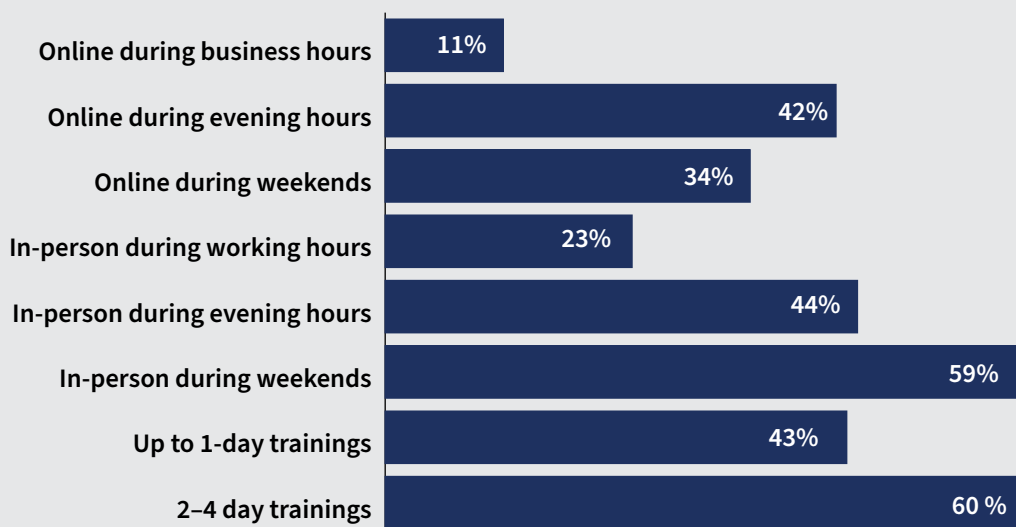
With respect to the types of activities they would like to see for future alumni engagement, the two most selected activities, each at 72%, were grants for professional development and networking opportunities. Other popular suggestions included grants for community development (70%), webinars (67%), the alumni Summit (65%), events featuring expert speakers (62%), and mentorship (50%).



³ For the 2017–2022 MEPI Alumni Connection, Syrian alumni were eligible, however, due to situations outside of program control, during some years there were restrictions on the eligibility of Syrian alumni well as alumni from West Bank/Gaza.

Regarding the format and timeframe they would like for future events, most alumni (60%) selected 2–4-day intensive trainings. Alumni also strongly preferred events to take place in-person over the weekend (59%). Alumni were also amenable to events that took place in the evening hours, regardless of if they occurred in-person (44%) or online (42%). In qualitative interviews, a significant number of participants suggested that the future hold more in-person networking opportunities. This could, for instance, take the form of meetups for individuals within a particular country or city, as a few alumni suggested.

Format of Events and Trainings



When asked what type of non-financial resources or opportunities would help them feel prepared to launch an initiative, a great percentage of alumni (81%) indicated access to professionals with relevant experience. Partners (61%) and access to training (58%) were also strongly preferred.

The three most cited skills alumni said they need to further enhance their community and professional leadership included communications/public speaking, leadership, and project management. These are broad terms, however, so it is worth delving further into alumni’s responses. As it relates to communications and public speaking, alumni’s answers indicate they may appreciate additional training on managing social media pages (this is a component of many alumni’s community projects) and English language proficiency. Regarding leadership, alumni may be interested in training related to design thinking, critical thinking, and training of trainers. Meanwhile, on project management, alumni may respond well to training opportunities related to fundraising, proposal writing, strategic planning, and risk management.

MEASURING OUTCOMES AND DETERMINING SUCCESS

As the program is designed around the needs and aspirations of alumni, it is fundamental that alumni be at the forefront of determine how it is evaluated for success and what it means for the program to be successful.

Going forward, one alum suggested that an effective way to measure the program's success would be to assess the impact of the alumni's projects on their communities more rigorously. He went on to emphasize a sharper focus on assessing the extent to which alumni have obtained new skills. These suggestions are worthwhile. The first given alumni are not formally required to monitor and evaluate their programs in a way that aligns with best practices. This means the full impact of their work is potentially lost, as is a valuable opportunity for professional development by learning a skill that is required for any well-run program or initiative. The second suggestion is also important, as assessing whether alumni are strengthening certain skills, and which ones, will help determine which trainings are most effective and when it is time to offer more advanced training to keep pace with alumni's advancement, as suggested earlier in this report.

When asked what how they would know the program is a success, alumni's answers generally indicated that this is when *"it helps or pushes alumni to achieve their professional goals."* They said a 'successful alum' for this project *"is one who is being active and connected with their communities."* Objectives, activities, and indicators to these ends could be incorporated into future programming.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Survey findings show that MEPI Alumni Connection activities have helped alumni to become leaders in their workplaces, communities, as well as academic institutions. Program activities have also supported alumni to develop as professionals and engage in entrepreneurship. Meanwhile, alumni have shared what they've learned with other members of the alumni network and those with whom they work, go to school, and live. Overall alumni feel a sense of belonging within the network and regard the implementation of the program to be a success.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ALUMNI PROGRAMMING INCLUDE:

- Hold alumni who receive community project grants to the rigorous standards set out for traditional sub-grantees. Train and require alumni to prepare project workplans; monitoring, evaluation, and learning plans; budgets; and detailed donor reports. This will continue to prepare them for the stringent requirements of the US Government and other large donors.
- Curate opportunities that appeal to the needs of intermediate and advanced professionals. Monitor and continuously re-assess alumni's professional development to ensure that trainings and opportunities align with alumni's ever-evolving needs. Consider opportunities that may appeal to a minority of alumni (for example, those who do not work for NGOs) to attract otherwise inactive alumni into program activities.
- Continue to offer alumni opportunities to meet, collaborate, and develop partnerships with other alumni and seasoned professionals. Consider opportunities that will improve alumni's effective and confident communication: verbally and via social media. Incorporate training on emerging strategies and approaches to leadership and offer trainings enhancing alumni's ability to start and run both nascent and mature projects and businesses.
- Incorporate trainings, discussions, resources, and opportunities that address the unique needs and challenges of women alumni. Consider offering safe, dedicated spaces for women to network, address challenges and launch initiatives. Regularly assess the extent to which women feel a sense of belonging within the network.
- Facilitate more personal connections among alumni by prioritizing in-person activities whenever safe, reasonable, and feasible. To the greatest extent possible, activities should occur outside of working hours and on the weekends.
- Evaluate the success of the program based on changes in alumni's knowledge and skills, as well as their real ability to apply these skills in their personal and professional lives.

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