

Introductory Statement by Stelios Vasilakis, Senior Program Officer for Strategy & Initiatives

Thanks Andreas. This is a team effort, and many people have collaborated over the last six months, in order to get where we are today. I would like to thank all of my colleagues in the Foundation's Programs Department for their invaluable research on the issue at hand, and for the wealth of information and their suggestions, which provided a lot of food for thought and discussion. Many thanks to John Zervakis, who has been involved from the very beginning, participated in most of the meetings with our partners and collaborators, and played a critical role in putting the program together. As always, my colleague in the Public Affairs Department, Lenia Vlavianou, has been involved in every step, and is the voice of sanity and reason. An enormous thank you goes to Frank Pepe and Kathryn Louloudis, as well as Amalia Delicari, who did a great job in taking care of every single logistical detail.

When you deal with unemployment in general and youth unemployment in particular, you are dealing with a vexing, stubborn and overly complicated issue. Bringing the right people to the table requires someone with a deep understanding both of all the issues, as well as of the enormous research and work in relation to it. We have been very lucky from the very beginning to have had Adam Posen, the President of the Peterson Institute of International Economics as our partner and collaborator in this endeavor. Both he and Professor Danny Blanchflower of Dartmouth College have provided invaluable guidance since day one, and played an important role in putting the conference together. I also would like to thank the President of Johns Hopkins, Ronald Daniels, who has been overly generous with his time in engaging in lengthy and critical discussions about all the different variables one needs to consider and understand, and in providing a wealth of advice.

Finally, many thanks to all the main presenters, as well as panelists who have worked with us over the last few months in preparation for this conference, and, of course, many thanks to all of you in the audience who have joined us, some of you coming from as far as Australia and Israel.

Youth unemployment is emerging as one of the major economic and social malaises of the 21st century and is becoming fast the main focus of the public, the private and the philanthropic sectors alike, at a global level. We are all concerned, and rightly so, about massive numbers of unemployed and consequently restless, disenchanting and futureless young people in places like North Africa, and the Middle East, and about the significant potential for social unrest and explosion entailed in those numbers. But, we are beginning also to worry about the consequences of the increasing numbers of jobless young people in our own backyard.

Education, job-training and retraining, internships, and apprenticeships appear to be the main means and prescriptions through which we try to address the problem, and by we, I mean governments, businesses, as well as philanthropic institutions. But as a colleague of mine at another major Foundation put it recently during a conversation, “everyone talks about education when they talk about youth unemployment, but how do you really create jobs at a scale large enough to radically change the game?”

Over the course of the last year or so, a number of extended articles in both European and US media have identified and analyzed a developing significant trend in the realm of youth unemployment. Major corporations worldwide claim that they are unable to fill millions of jobs – the figure mentioned in relation to the US was 4 million unfilled jobs – because of a large gap between the skills required to fill jobs and the skills of the potential labor force. This is indeed an area of focus of numerous NGOs and Foundations that do important work all over the globe to address youth unemployment. But a recent article by Paul Krugman in the New York Times cited recent studies MIT (Economic Policy Institute) and the Boston Consulting Group which argue convincingly that the supposed skills shortages are misleading and overblown.

In a recent conversation between the top executives of two major American corporations, one of them posed to the other the issue of trying to address youth unemployment in a labor environment in which, due to technological advantages, companies do the same amount of work with 50 percent less workers. The answer was REDEPLOYMENT of EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES.

The vagueness of the term, in many ways attests to the complexity and great uncertainty that surrounds the issue of youth unemployment and how to address it effectively. We don't claim to have all the answers, and certainly we do not claim that the conference will provide solutions. But over the next couple of days, we do hope to be able to identify specific, tangible and realistic ways that can point us in the right direction.

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