



# PLAN 2022

**spark**

Getting fit for growth

25 October 2017

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## Introduction

This is SPARK's 3<sup>rd</sup> Multiannual Strategic Plan, a document with SPARK's goals and new ambitions over the period 2017-2022 and will provide the overall framework for the annual plans.

In order for this newest edition of SPARK's Multi-Annual Strategic plan to be developed, extensive desk research has been completed on the changing world of education, work and technology. More than 70 reports have been reviewed for input and 15 stakeholder interviews have been conducted; questioning them on their vision on SPARK as an organisation, SPARK's position and the vision on the field (annex 5). In addition, numerous staff members have been consulted in several meetings and bilateral sessions. All the input has been reviewed and used to conduct a SWOT Analysis (chapter 3) and Business Model Canvas (annex 3).

## Mission and vision

Colleagues, beneficiaries, partners and donors see SPARK as an ambitious, courageous and result-oriented organisation. A leading organisation in the niche of higher education, entrepreneurship and MSME development in FCAS with the following core values: ambition for results, courage, transparency, value for money and promoting diversity in adverse circumstances. SPARK's culture is characterised by a can-do mentality that combines active problem solving and actionable attitudes in order to get the right results. SPARK also promotes a strong value for money proposition.

Transparency is central to the work of SPARK in order to explain the complexity of our work, show lessons learned, as well as mistakes, and how these are integrated in future programming. This contributes to a learning environment that in turn contributes to the effectiveness of our work. Furthermore, SPARK is organisation that values diversity as an important asset and strives to have this diversity reflected within its own organisation and staff. SPARK recognises its staff as its human capital and provides opportunities to young people to grow within the organisation. It remains politically neutral in the complex environments it operates in.

In 2022, SPARK will have established itself as a highly agile INGO and a leading player in the niche market of higher education and MSME entrepreneurship development in FCAS. In 2022, financiers proactively request SPARK to design and deliver results through programmes creating jobs or improving high education, which have strong learning and/or innovation elements in FCAS.

SPARK will have a strong focus on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the vast majority of offices will be situated there. SPARK will run fewer, but larger programmes in less countries and thus focus its efforts and increase results. In Sub-Saharan Africa, SPARK's presence with a few field offices continues, but only in places where sustainability of prior results can be enhanced through new larger programmes. Offices with a limited portfolio will close. In these locations SPARK will continue to operate, but through other organisations that have a presence on the ground.

An organisational model will sustain the afore-mentioned lesser number, but more sizeable field offices, reducing organisational complexity. A couple of centrally located field offices will function as regional hubs that will facilitate financial control, M&E, programme acquisition and project management processes. These will serve several offices in their (sub) region, and through delegation of decision-making, will increase the speed of decision-making.

In 2022, SPARK will have a financial turnover of about 25m per year, but will have reduced its complexity by working in less locations on larger programmes. This growth and consequential growth in overhead are a precondition in strengthening the in-house expertise and innovation capabilities on the one hand and investing in internal management and control mechanisms on the other.

SPARK's mission is "to develop higher education and entrepreneurship to empower young ambitious people to lead their conflict affected societies into prosperity" and continues to reflect the organisations *raison d'être*, through higher education, entrepreneurship and MSME development.

Within the above mission and vision for 2022 **five main ambitions** or objectives can be recognised:

#### **Ambition 1: Leader in niche market**

Within 5 years, SPARK will be a leader in its own niche market of economic empowerment through Higher Education Development, entrepreneurship and MSME Development in FCAS, focused on the MENA region.

##### *Capabilities ambition 1*

1.1 20% of SPARK's staff will have the capability of recognised expertise higher education, entrepreneurship and MSMEs.

1.2 SPARK's acquisition team develops the capability to ignite innovation among SPARK's three largest programmes.

1.3 SPARK develops the capability to position itself as an expert player within the field.

1.4 SPARK develops the capability to drive innovation throughout the entire organisation and all key activities.

#### **Ambition 2: Value for money**

The coming 5 years, SPARK will maintain its strong value for money.

##### *Capabilities ambition 2*

2.1 SPARK's MT develops the capability to have its operations work in the most (cost) efficient way.

#### **Ambition 3: Financial growth**

Within 5 years, SPARK will realise an annual turnover of Euro 25m, generating an annual amount of Euro 3m required to sustain programme management, facilitate continuous innovation, expertise development and supports the operational model.

##### *Capabilities ambition 3*

3.1 SPARK's acquisition team increases SPARK's overhead and general income resulting in a growing annual turnover of Euro 25m in 2022.

3.2 SPARK's acquisition team develops the capability to attract donors for un-earmarked funding and innovation funding.

#### **Ambition 4: Focus**

SPARK focuses geographically (primarily the MENA region) and thematically (higher education, 75% MSME development and 25% aspiring entrepreneurs), in order to secure accurate programme implementation and become an expert player within these markets.

##### *Capabilities ambition 4*

4.1 SPARK's acquisition team focuses 90% of its capacity and new wins within the set priorities (geographically and thematically).

#### **Ambition 5: Operational Model**

Within 5 years SPARK will implement an internal operational model which decreases complexity and is fit for growth and scalability and ensure proper implementation of the programmes.

##### *Capabilities ambition 5*

5.1 BoD develops the capability to structure delegated programme management.

5.2 SPARK develops a management team next to the BoD, to participate in SPARK's daily management and take independent decisions.

5.3 SPARK develops the capabilities to implement SPARK's key activities (formulated in the BMC model, annex 2).

5.4 SPARK will ensure implementation of its set priorities, through its new management team.

## **Chapter 1. Context in which SPARK works**

The challenges our world faces today are somewhat similar to from the ones it faced during the development of the previous Multiannual Strategic Plan: climate change, migration, demographic shifts, and political instability. Intertwined and inseparable, we find that they are often at the root of major global conflicts.

With the adoption of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals<sup>1</sup>, as well as the Paris Climate Change Agreement<sup>2</sup> in 2015, there appears to be a newfound urgency to address the aforementioned issues. In fact, we have witnessed a bandwagon effect of governments, multinational companies, and organisations alike, seeking to embrace and promote sustainability, a trend in compliance with consumer expectations.

Despite today's political climate - which has caused increased uncertainty among humanitarian and development organisations - every new crisis or conflict signifies a new opportunity for aid organisations. While it is impossible to predict where the next crisis will occur, it is clear that volatility in the regions where SPARK operates, namely the EU, Sub Sahara, Kosovo and Middle East, will continue for years to come. This is already having a knock-on effect on European politics, as the continent is facing long-term migration. Beyond Syria, the rising number of non-Syrian refugees and economic migrants from Africa and farther afield that are increasingly using the North African route is likely to grow in significance. It is expected that, like in Turkey, more so-called 'safe zones' will be established in countries bordering Europe where SPARK's services will be in high demand. As a result, continuing volatility and shifting European priorities present SPARK with opportunities for further growth.

SPARK's current focus is tackling the root causes of extremism and migration, with higher education, entrepreneurship and MSME development in FCAS. By framing SPARK as an organisation that tackles these root causes through the provision of higher education and employment, SPARK can effectively address current and future donor concerns and priorities, as well as remain relevant in this field. SPARK has acknowledged the value of investing in innovation within these domains in order to distinguish its actions from those of its competitors.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://unfccc.int/paris\\_agreement/items/9485.php](http://unfccc.int/paris_agreement/items/9485.php)

The SWOT analysis, staff surveys and internal context SPARK currently operates within show that many staff experience high work pressure. This seems particularly notable for colleagues working for (relatively) new programmes that are in the beginning phases. As these employees are already going the extra mile to execute programme deadlines, this may limit their involvement with the envisaged changes that this multiannual strategic plan sets forth.

Compensating for this by recruiting additional staff is financially not realistic, nor sustainable, as the start-up workload is temporary. It is more likely that mitigating measures should be based on a combination of a temporary workforce and being cautious to task those staff additionally that are scaling a new programme.

### **Market definition**

SPARK is active in the market for International Humanitarian Aid and Development in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS). This market is driven by institutional donors and a smaller, but growing number of sizeable private donors, philanthropists and corporate foundations.

Within this overall market, SPARK focuses on the higher education, entrepreneurship and MSME development sectors in FCAS. This represents a niche market where SPARK's ambition is to further strengthen its position. In order to get a better overview of the needs, a competition scan will be conducted of other organisations within this market. This will also increase the opportunities to collaborate with likeminded organisations, to enlarge impact.

### **Key trends towards 2022**

#### *General trends*

1. Increase of migration: International migration increased by 41% between 2000 and 2015. The world is witnessing the highest level of forced displacement in decades (40 million+ persons displaced within countries, 24 million+ refugees and asylum seekers). Netherlands new government policy focuses on job creation and education for Syrian refugees in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon;
2. Europe to continue outsourcing migration policies (new negotiations with Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Ethiopia), also deals reportedly coming up with Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and others;
3. More forced returns (increased controls in Europe, United States, Australia, as well as repatriation programmes being enforced in Pakistan and Kenya);
4. Vast majority of refugees continue to be hosted by developing countries, particularly those that are proximate to the refugees' countries of origin;
5. Most forced displacement globally still occurs within countries' borders (end 2014 estimated 38 million IDPs);
6. Increasingly important for companies to invest in innovation and innovation in humanitarian aid is sporadic.

#### *Programmes*

1. Increasingly important for companies to invest in innovation. Innovation in humanitarian aid is sporadic;
2. Job creation: Technology is influencing job markets and jobs of all variations are being replaced by automation and technology. While this is a global trend, it is of course a smaller trend in FCAS;
3. Education: Current education systems no longer fit (fragile) society's needs and blended learning is the upcoming education format.

## **Chapter 2. Analysis on current position**

In order to determine SPARK's position within the field of development aid, a SWOT Analysis has been conducted with contributions from staff, external stakeholders and the BoD. An inventory has been made on SPARK's current strengths, weaknesses and its contextual opportunities and threats.

### **Strengths**

SPARK is a flexible organisation that has earned its reputation for being a cost effective organisation with a strong track record. It has become a market leader in providing economic scholarships for Syrian refugees in the MENA region. It has a strong presence on the ground in the main countries relevant for the Syria response, as well as in North Africa and the Horn of Africa, which are both strategically positioned with regards to the North African refugee route. SPARK has developed good relationships with several types of donors and governmental agencies, establishing an increasingly diverse donor network. The organisation consists of motivated and dedicated staff, with a balance between local and Western people. SPARK maintains its focus on entrepreneurship and higher education, and collaborates extensively with its local partners. SPARK has a competitive edge when it comes to obtaining funding, based on its thematic focus, with an effective tender department and sales support in the Belgrade office, as well as strong push from Yannick du Pont in unsolicited fundraising.

### **Weaknesses**

SPARK's current operational model is complex and insufficiently adequate to maximise impact or to respond to threats and opportunities in a highly dynamic and equally complex environment. Division of responsibilities and roles often remain unclear and the organisation is overly dependent on a narrow top-management layer formed by the BoD for decision-making. No management team is in place. A role that needs to be implemented is that of Donor Account Management in order to ensure continuity and enhanced donor relations. SPARK lacks an embedded and comprehensive HR strategy, which has contributed to difficulties in employing qualified local staff, staff development and obstructs increasing the level of relevant expertise and capabilities of the organisation. In addition, SPARK staff are overstretched and not provided with possibilities for career progression. This has resulted in a high staff turnover rate which deteriorates into lost institutional knowledge and expertise. SPARK is unable to offer country specific market expertise due to a lack of in-house specialisation. Training programmes and other solutions or tools have not been made marketable and ready for up-scaling yet. Albeit (external) evaluations and output measurements do take place, in regards to M&E, SPARK is insufficiently measuring the impact of its interventions, such as on employment and migration, de-radicalisation and stability, as well as the link between its programmes and future reconstruction efforts. There is insufficient cooperation with academic institutions, and new programmes are not benefitting effectively from previous lessons learned. Lastly, learning and innovation is insufficiently integrated into SPARK programmes, with programmes not using their budgetary possibilities sufficiently. The large number of countries and programmes SPARK is active in creates overstretch.

### **Opportunities**

SPARK operates in a growth market where every new (and ending) conflict is a potential opportunity. Current crises have resulted in renewed donor focus on refugees & diaspora and the effects of migration. There is a keen focus on structural measures to prevent displacement. A paradigm shift has taken place amongst donors who now view education, entrepreneurship, and job growth as key to development. This is an opportunity for SPARK, as donor policies and priorities are a strategic fit with SPARK's narrative and propositions. SPARK also has a competitive edge over other organisations with its 'boots on the ground' and willingness to work in risky and highly volatile environments. This is especially interesting for private sector players who are in need of partners with local expertise. The growing importance of social media, Big Data, and AI are further opportunities for SPARK.

### **Threats**

As an organisation entirely dependent on short-cycle funding by donors, several threats flow from donor policy changes, changeable behaviour of governments, as well as development aid budget cuts that lead to loss of funds. Policy cycles are short term, making innovation difficult. In addition,



overheads are increasingly under pressure from donors, leaving less space for own policy and innovative programme development. Within SPARK's field of education and entrepreneurship, the organisation faces strong and increasing competition from other organisations (and the private sector) vying for the same sources of funding. Working in unstable, fragile states that lack strong governance also means that SPARK faces an increased risk of interacting with corrupt agencies and officials and being exposed to physical risks.

## Chapter 3. Jobs to be done

The five main ambitions for the coming five years reinforce each other and one cannot be fully implemented without the other.

SPARK wants to create a new internal operational model that is fit for growth and scalability, as the current model is lacking this potential. If this is in place, SPARK wants to take up a clear and strong market position, by innovating within the programmes and becoming an expert in the field of tackling the root causes of extremism and migration, through higher education, entrepreneurship and MSME development in FCAS. In order to become this expert, SPARK will need to focus geographically and thematically and realise financial growth, which in turn can be used for programme innovation and increasing internal expertise on these domains. Budgetary scale is also a precondition to financially sustain an adequate operational model. Furthermore, it will be important to prioritise changes that result in time efficiency from which programmes benefit directly, e.g. introducing faster decentralised decision making in programmes.

### Ambition 1: Leader in niche market

With SPARK's expertise becoming increasingly relevant, SPARK wants to take up a stronger market position as an expert on higher education, entrepreneurship and MSME development in FCAS. In order to reach this goal, SPARK will need to take on more in-house expertise on higher education, entrepreneurship and MSME development in FCAS, cultivate this expertise amongst all of its departments, improve its marketing and improve the internal documentation for the continuity of its experience and expertise. The ambition to introduce a fitting operational model, to focus and to realise financial growth will be the basis for this. Simultaneously, realised financial growth and un-earmarked funding will propel expertise development and innovative pilot activities.

### Ambition 2: Value for money

SPARK has a good reputation on delivering on its ground programmes and spends donor money with care and efficiency, always keeping in mind that we're spending public money that is meant to empower youth in FCAs. Therefore, it is our aim to continue to work cost efficiently. By maintaining a clear focus on the return on investment, we are confident that we can reach our goals to the fullest while maintaining our tradition of delivering the best value for money.

### Ambition 3: Financial Growth

While SPARK's annual turnover has been growing, this growth remains fragile. SPARK is a project-driven organisation with limited human capital and mostly short-term project contracts. With the exception of a few programmes, no specific innovation budget for new activities has been allocated; all income is earmarked for specific programmes and deliverables. This complicates the implementation of the ambition to become an innovative expert with a strong focus and future-proof operational model. It also limits SPARK's chances to improve and further develop existing programmes. If based on current (overhead) sources in programmes with institutional and private sector funding, SPARK would have to scale to a turnover of about 25m Euros per year.

This growth would be realised by [1] seeking out un-earmarked finances (very ambitious), [2] scaling existing programme funding (most feasible), or [3] applying for innovation funding. This could potentially allow SPARK to finance expertise development and pilot innovative activities also when the overall budget has not yet grown to Euro 25m.



#### **Ambition 4: Focus**

To minimise organisational/structural complexities and in order to become the expert player and attract funding, SPARK will have to reduce stand-alone activities and acquire an increased geographical and thematic focus. Simultaneously, SPARK will remain flexible to start-up in a new FCAS should a significant opportunity present itself. Resources in developing expertise/innovation and growth/acquisition will focus on the MENA region. Three regional hub offices are envisaged in the MENA region. Moreover, own field presence outside MENA is possible if significant funding can be obtained, or will be scaled down through participation in consortia and using field operations of consortia members (i.e. > 500k annually). By the end of 2018, SPARK will reduce its own field office network to 10-12 to reduce complexity of the organisation and increase impact. With a focus on the MENA region, downsizing office infrastructure is expected in Sub-Saharan African countries primarily, where involvement through consortia is still possible.

Thematically, SPARK's focus will be on access to higher education, entrepreneurship and MSME development in FCAS, resulting in the employment of youth.

SPARK will be holding back in the first year (2018) with new pilots and programmes, thereby creating space to implement the other ambitions. Only then will SPARK be able to strengthen its expert niche reputation of a capable specialised development organisation, delivering impact through tailored interventions, and able to share relevant contextual knowledge through its fields of operation/competency (including market specific expertise). This, in addition to SPARK's track record and obtained expertise, will in turn make the organisation more attractive to donors.

#### **Ambition 5: Adequate operational model**

Despite the organisation's ambitions to grow, SPARK's current operational model is not fit for growth and scalability, nor is it fit to gain a stronger market position. Examples that indicate these operational weaknesses include inefficiency, complexity, high staff turnover rate, and the organisation's strong dependency on the BoD, which results in discontent amongst overstretched staff members.

In order to achieve SPARK's goal of becoming an expert player and for accurate implementation of the programmes, SPARK requires a new operational model that facilitates growth, scalability and innovation, as well as faster decision making on the ground and flexibility towards field operations. SPARK will therefore invest in the robust growth of central key functions: HR, finance & admin, communication, acquisition, donor/account management and innovation. It has also been decided to decentralise and create regional hubs in Amman, Gaziantep, Tunis and Kigali, with on-board expertise of all departments. The introduction of a management team and the operational model in general is among other things to facilitate quick decision-making with less dependency on the Board of Directors. For the instalment of this ambition, SPARK will receive advice of McKinsey. At this point in time, the organisational complexity, inefficiencies and insufficient robustness of critical support functions (HR, Legal, M&E, Finance & Admin etc.) represent a burden and impede key staff to manage the desired changes in terms of expertise, innovation, and project development/financial growth. Therefore, during the first two years of the Plan 2022, priority is given to developing an adequate operational model.

#### **Financial Considerations**

*Estimated costs for the realisation of Plan 2022*

1. Based on budgeting by the finance department to realise the envisaged activities in Annex 1 of the Plan 2022, a cash investment is needed of 110k Euro annually over a period of five years. Costs include the ERP, legal and organisational advice, marketing material development and a contingency.

2. The execution of the Plan 2022 in Annex 1 involves a significant work load carried by staff and is estimated at 1,250 work days. The majority of this work load involving HR, Communications, M&E, Finance, Acquisition and ICT. Tasks for realisation of the Plan 2022 will be integrated into daily work (plans) of management and officers, already making indirect time in these departments so as not to

represent an additional cost for Plan 2022 realisation. However, it would be realistic, to count on about 50% of the total workdays, which would represent an additional cost. If based on actual costs (such as salary, pension, taxes etc.), this would come down to an additional 50k Euro per year for 5 years.

Therefore, a total estimated real cost would be 800k Euro, or 160k annually.

*Financial sustainability of the operational model SPARK*

For the implementation of a new operational model (11 SPARK offices including Amsterdam, Belgrade and three enhanced hubs), a budget is required of around 3m Euro per year. If this were to be generated from programme budgets, this would imply SPARK would have to grow to about 25m Euro per year if the current realistic mix of 5-8% overhead and day fees is maintained. Whilst such scaling is aimed for, SPARK will also develop a strategy for un-earmarked funding.

## Annex 1. Focus Formulation 2022

Objectives	Focus Areas <sup>3</sup>	Activity Sub areas <sup>4</sup>	Geographical Area <sup>5</sup>	SPARK facility	Target Groups	
De-radicalisation	MSME development and entrepreneurship	Business Development services	FCAS or Migration-relevant countries: <b>MENA, Horn of Africa and Europe.</b>	Country offices	Existing MSMEs	75% min
Prevent forced migration	Higher Education	Incubation services	FCAS or Migration-relevant countries: <b>Western Balkans</b>	Consultancy only	Aspiring entrepreneurs	25% max
Reconstruction		Access to Finance	FCAS or Migration-relevant countries: <b>West Africa</b>	Consultancy only	Cooperatives/farmers groups	
Economic develop		Access to Markets & Value Chain	FCAS or Migration-relevant countries: <b>East Africa</b>	Consultancy mostly, with a hub in East Africa <sup>6</sup>	Refugees/IDPs (Young)	
Stability/ Peace		Scholarships / Access to Education			Youth	
		Education 4 Reconstruction			Women (Young)	
		Business Enabling Climate (CB)				
		Curriculum Development (CB)				
		Participation Decision Making				

<sup>3</sup> For the BoD Focus provides direction in terms of acquisition, programme development, expertise development and innovation, ultimately leading to a span of control that is manageable for an organisation of SPARK's size. Areas that fall beyond our Focus may, by exception, be considered should they represent a unique opportunity for the realisation of SPARK's mission. The Focus does not exclude that partnerships can be established in consortia that propose a programme which also includes other non-focus areas such as media, or health care, for as long as SPARK's role in the programme would be restricted to SPARK's Focus (sub-)activity areas.

<sup>4</sup> We have chosen not to mention which areas are not part of our Focus. This would become an endless list of areas. Thus, certain areas which may in practice or in theory have a connection to SPARK objectives and activities fall beyond the focus formulation, e.g. human rights, media, good governance, employability, livelihood/self-subsistence, reconciliation. Regarding target groups, the same would count for local corporations. The Strategic Plan 2022 should just mention our focus areas.

<sup>5</sup> Consultancy only implies that SPARK will close office infrastructure, maintain a local registration if needed and would restrict its role to out-of-country consultancy including coaching, expert, trainer roles. And refrain from any role that requires a local office/legal presence. For example, by participating as a (junior) consortium member in tenders and other funding schemes. Geographical expansion in focus areas (FCAS or migration relevant countries in MENA, Horn of Africa and Europe) becomes possible after shutting down (office) infrastructure in West and East Africa. Due to on-going acquisition in East Africa, which will most likely lead to new programmes, a hub will be needed in East Africa..

<sup>6</sup> Due to on-going acquisition in East Africa, which will most likely lead to new programmes, a hub will be needed in East Africa to cover the Sub Sahara as a whole.

## Annex 2: Business Model Canvas



## Annex 3: What partners suggest

### *Programmes*

- Incorporate psychological support into higher education programmes
- Increase focus on integration of refugees in host communities; consider including Turkish (local) students in leadership programmes
- Create opportunities for refugees to engage with local students and create friendships, i.e. student board or student activities
- Introduce volunteering requirement; require students to assist local host communities
- Provide conversion courses
- Operate in more stable environments
- Track & measure number of students who got jobs, and whether jobs relate to their education

### *Operations*

- Achieve sustainability → potential investment model = Partial-loan repayment
- Take the lead on a longitudinal study to measure the impact of its higher education programmes on integration, de-radicalisation, and the rebuilding of a region
- Establish Advisory/Trust board consisting of important stakeholders from the MENA region
- Partner with local and regional trusted institutions (i.e. the Islamic Development Bank)
- Create an advocacy team to support BoD; increase advocacy for refugees
- Increase investment in SPARK staff
- Simplify SPARK website
- Further decentralisation

### *Finances*

- Establish acquisitions team to diversify SPARK funds

## Annex 4: Report interviews

SPARK conducted interviews with a number of donors, advisors, and partner organisations to gain their perspectives on SPARK and its position in today's world. The interviewees were posed questions under four general categories: global context, perspectives on SPARK, future of SPARK, and what is needed to get there. From these interviews, a number of recurring messages become clear and a few key messages regarding the organisation and focus of SPARK were expressed.

### Global Context

We are facing a new world order. The events of Brexit, the election of Trump, the migrant crisis, as well as rising populism within Europe, are a cause of major uncertainty for organisations reliant on governmental funding. This volatility is set to continue within the regions where SPARK operates, namely the MENA,<sup>7</sup> and consequently we are looking at a sustained migration problem for Europe. Tackling the root causes of extremism and migration are key priorities for European policy makers, with the provision of education and employment opportunities seen as primary solutions. Despite the large increase in focus on higher education in recent years, it is important to note that there has not been a similar increase in funding for education efforts.

There was a general consensus in regards to the reconstruction of Syria and the fate of Syrian refugees; while many had previously held the belief that Syrian refugees would eventually return to Syria, there now appears to be a general consensus that this is becoming increasingly unlikely and that we are looking at a sustained Syrian diaspora. The implication of this is a new focus on permanent migration and the integration of Syrians in their host communities. There is also a general understanding that Syrian refugees are not the worst off, with Palestinian refugees in Jordan, for example, being afforded far fewer opportunities. It was recommended that organisations look at a set of vulnerability criteria for *all* refugee communities in host countries, not just for Syrians.

### Current Perspectives on SPARK

There was a general consensus that SPARK's mission encompasses the provision of education and entrepreneurship opportunities to youth in (post) conflict settings. Despite this consensus, some interviewees expressed uncertainty concerning SPARK's focus, questioning whether education took priority over entrepreneurship, and whether there exists a defined and relevant link between the two. Nonetheless, the majority of interviewees stated that SPARK should not change its mission.<sup>8</sup>

SPARK's biggest strengths were deemed its flexibility, its presence on the ground, its qualified and dedicated staff, as well as SPARK's ability to scale. The general perception was that SPARK is a reliable and trustworthy organisation that has found the right balance between influencing situations at grassroots-levels as well as at higher, policy-levels. While a number of interviewees praised SPARK for not coming across as a Western/Dutch organisation, other interviewees found this to be a big point of critique, with one interviewee stating that SPARK's biggest problem is that it's perceived as being part of a Western, hidden agenda.

Other cited weaknesses include: lack of staff, SPARK giving the perception of being spread too thin, funding being too dependent on SPARK Director, Yannick du Pont, local field offices depending too much on Amsterdam HQ, which affects local initiatives and proposals, and that SPARK has not got a plan in place for graduates upon completing their degrees. Interviewees pointed out that while education is in and of itself extremely important; it is an entirely futile investment if students do not have job opportunities to move onto after graduating. Therefore, one goes from a population of 20,000 uneducated and unemployed youths to a population of 20,000 educated youths that remain unemployed. Questions were posed whether SPARK truly prevents brain-drain and migration, and whether SPARK can ensure that its beneficiaries contribute to reconstruction efforts. It was also said that SPARK's scaling has resulted in funding being taken away from smaller, sometimes local and possibly more innovative initiatives. A lack of coordination with other organisations has led to a less-than-optimal spread of resources and potentially to missed opportunities to benefit of and assist new and innovative ideas. SPARK was also warned not to grow too fast and not to overpromise.

SPARK stands out from other, similar organisations due to a number of factors: the quality delivered, cost efficiency, its tailor-made programmes, its willingness to go where others do not, and its passion.

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<sup>7</sup> 100% of the interviewees predict the MENA region to remain volatile over the course of the next five years

<sup>8</sup> 62.5% of the interviewees did not feel that SPARK's mission needed to be altered

SPARK was advised to promote itself further as a niche organisation that tackles the root causes of extremism and migration through higher education and entrepreneurship programmes and to share this knowledge with others. Unlike other NGOs, SPARK has gone beyond the classic NGO model and is more like a development agency; it brings funding, controls its own finances, has political backing, and it has experience on the ground. It also focuses its efforts purely on youth, an important distinction from other organisations. And while SPARK prides itself on being able to develop education and entrepreneurship programmes in any newly emerging conflict state, one interviewee questioned this ability. Can SPARK effectively transfer the experience it has gained in the Balkans and Somalia to effectively apply it in new conflict states?

Regarding SPARK's expertise, the overall consensus is that SPARK may need to contract some experts but that lack of expertise isn't entirely negative as it makes the organisation flexible. One interviewee noted that foreign expertise is no longer relevant and that SPARK should focus on local expertise instead. Alternatively, the fact that SPARK has a Western employee in each field office may also serve to enhance SPARK's relationship with donors, as they have a clearer understanding of Western donor interests and priorities. Potential experts that were suggested that would add value include an expert in higher education and university systems, as well as an in-house economist that forecasts the labour market in the coming years and links these labour market demands to relevant education while also providing a regional perspective.

#### Future perspectives of SPARK

When asked in which direction they would take SPARK, a recurrent proposal was that of SPARK achieving its own sustainability by including a stronger business component.<sup>9</sup> A 'partial-loan repayment' model was suggested as a potential investment model. Several interviewees noted that SPARK's higher education programmes are not enough and that relevant programmes need to be added. One suggestion was to implement a psychosocial programme to assist SPARK beneficiaries in treating the psychological impact that they face as a result of FCAS. An increased focus on integration would also serve this purpose; by engaging local university students and providing platforms for further integration in host communities, students would have additional forms of support. The reality is that universities are not ready to educate their students while also facilitating their integration into their host societies; this is an area that SPARK should help facilitate. Other suggestions regarding SPARK's internal structure included: an advocacy team to support Yannick, increased investment in SPARK staff, simplifying SPARK's website, further decentralisation, and establishing an Advisory/Trust Board consisting of important stakeholders from the MENA region.

Specific suggestions for SPARK's current projects were also made: introducing a volunteering requirement whereby students are required to assist their local host communities, providing conversion courses, increased engagement between refugees and locals. It was suggested that SPARK stay up-to-date on migration trends and frame SPARK's narrative as having the ability to provide solutions to the root causes of migration. This is increasingly relevant, as permanent migration has been accepted as the new standard, with Syrian refugees looking less likely to return to Syria.

The most critical result that interviewees expect of SPARK in the coming five years is that the organisation take the lead on a longitudinal study to measure the long-term impact of SPARK's (higher education) programmes on integration, radicalisation and the rebuilding of a region.<sup>10</sup> They believe SPARK has the capacity and ability to effectively monitor and measure this 'social cohesion' and it would provide evidence to claims that are currently anecdotal (i.e. higher education increases integration). To achieve accurately measured and consistent results, one interviewee suggested that SPARK operate in states that are easily accessible, secure, and have a solution to the conflict in sight. This raises a question of priorities: does SPARK prioritise its reputation as a nomadic, daring organisation that operates in states where many do not, or should SPARK maintain a long-term, expert focus on relatively stable states to achieve long-term and academically credible results? There is also an expectation for SPARK to track and measure the number of students who got jobs, and specifically whether they got jobs in fields that relate to their education. Other results that are expected from SPARK include: increased international advocacy for refugees, sustainability, and successful PR.

#### What is needed to get there?

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<sup>9</sup> 50% of interviewees recommended outright that SPARK should have its own sustainability as its main goal.

<sup>10</sup> 50% of interviewees emphasized this necessity, while other interviewees assumed that this research was already being conducted by SPARK.



A number of interviewees noted the necessity for SPARK to have the right delivery mechanisms in place to accommodate its growth. SPARK has grown rapidly in recent years and this has raised concerns about the potential for SPARK to oversell itself and make promises it cannot fulfil. One interviewee warned SPARK not to fall into the same trap as other organisations that lost their ability to deliver as a result of uncontrolled growth. Interviewees emphasised that SPARK needs to ensure it has the right mechanisms are in place in order to deliver on promises. This will also require stronger M&E to effectively evaluate and highlight SPARK's successes and failures. Other key suggestions include the need to establish an team that would diversify SPARK funds, to further decentralise SPARK operations from HQ to field offices, and to increase coordination with other organisations to prevent redundancy. Several potential partners were recommended, including university academics that could oversee the longitudinal study.