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# Macro talent management theorizing: transnational perspectives of the political economy of talent formation in the Arab Middle East

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## ABSTRACT

Challenging dominant Global North trajectories, we critically explore the complex terrain of global talent debates. We contribute new theoretical insights to the Macro Talent Management (MTM) field by examining the complexity of Talent Management (TM) through a transnational and political economy of skill formation lens. We provide a macro assessment of TM processes, at different scales (i.e. Local, National and Transnational) and explore the myriad partners in devising TM strategy that existing scholarship has not sufficiently examined. We explore the complexities of economic organization and highlight that TM theorising would benefit from spatialized accounts, and the politics of location in shaping TM logics and ideas, embedded in the geographies of transnational organizing. We take the Arab Middle East as a case in point to highlight the deficiency of current Macro Talent Management models and proffer a new multi-level model at global, national and local to reflect the dimensions of Talent Management realities in the Arab Middle East, and indeed other developing regions. We are driven by a concern that Talent Management theorization is rooted in a neoliberal ethic and rarely considers how the local becomes global, and how the global is articulated in the local.

## KEYWORDS

Macro Talent Management; Global South; transnationalism; political economy of skill formation; Arab Middle East; human development

## Introduction

Global talent management (GTM) is a relatively new field that has emerged over the past decade as a key theme in International Human Resource Management (IHRM) research and practice (see Al Ariss et al., 2014; Caligiuri et al., 2010; Crane & Hartwell, 2019; Sparrow et al., 2016; Stahl et al., 2012; Tarique & Schuler, 2010). Attracting and retaining the right talent, specifically high performing executives, and in the right

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places is considered by GTM scholars as one of the key success factors for multinational corporations' (MNCs) in the competitive landscape of a global economy (Bonneton et al., 2019; Collings & Mellahi, 2009). While there remains some debate as to the precise definition of GTM, Vaiman et al. (2012, p. 926) characterize GTM as '*all organizational activities for the purpose of attracting, selecting, developing, and retaining the best employees in the most strategic roles [...] on a global scale*'. This definition recognizes the importance of human resources in global competitive scales, and in a far wider sense than of global elites, whom scholars often identify as the focus of GTM processes (Farndale et al., 2010; Reiche, 2007). Further, Collings et al. (2019) suggest the increasing complexity and dynamism that characterize the current global business environment, and the continuing global talent challenges (Farndale et al., 2010; Tarique & Schuler, 2010; Tung, 2016), require richer and more detailed accounts, that incorporate a broader range of organizations involved in forming GTM agendas.

Numerous commentators have also argued that the formation of GTM is being influenced by a number of different institutions, including inter alia: NGOs, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Economic Forum (WEF) organization (Khilji et al., 2015; Sparrow et al., 2019). Policy specialists have argued that MNCs in the Global North are not always key drivers for TM and provide little understanding of the ways countries themselves are building talent structures to support national talent development (Farndale et al., 2008; Metcalfe, 2011, 2019; Sparrow et al., 2014). This is important as many governments have focused on devising national human capital plans to respond to skill shortages, diaspora and talent flows, and are creating enabling environments to nurture innovation, and involve partnerships with many organization actors (Lanvin & Evans, 2018; WEF, 2016, 2019; World Bank, 2019). In China, for example, the role of the state and social policy address broader skill issues in national planning *via* the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security.

There still remains the view, however; whatever the organization, that TM refers to the 'top talent'. There is thus, a lack of clarity about the constitution of talent, and its organization in both GTM and Macro TM (MTM) writings. Our discussion, thus *problematizes* 'talent', as only representing elite executives in MNCs, which homogenizes talent as an 'elite object' in an MNC, and one premised on Global North neoliberal logics. There are only a few accounts that evaluate TM and *different* labour categories in diverse organizations in different territorial domains, for example 'migrants' in city states, and/or NGOs (Dickmann & Parry,

2019). Further, scholars have recently acknowledged the differences of TM in developed versus developing economies (Vaiman et al., 2019). They suggest that features of macro approaches, such as governance arrangements and education provisions, and the remit of these institutions in supporting macro aspects of economic and social development need further unravelling when conducting nuanced studies of TM in different geographic regions (See Khilji & Schuler, 2017).

Our aim in this paper is, therefore, to examine the complexity of GTM through a transnational (Chaudhary & Moss, 2019; Vertovec, 1999) and political economy of skill formation lens (Ashton et al., 1999; Green, 1999; Mayer & Solga, 2008; Solga, 2014). In doing so, we advance current theorization of MTM by exploring the myriad MTM actors, over several scales, in defined spatialized settings, and broaden out the roles of MTM actors and the boundary of current MTM writings and models (See Sparrow et al., 2019). We further question the embeddedness of neoliberal orthodoxy predominant in TM writings, and open out the debate of the social, ethical, human, and sustainable development aspects of progress that also drive GTM and MTM agendas in the Arab Middle East (AME) region (UNDP, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; WEF, 2019). This leads to the conceptualization of a *multi-level* and *multi-actor* MTM model operating at global, state, and local levels, that would be relevant to the Global South and the AME region more specifically. To define our model, we guide our work by the following research questions: (1) Who are the multiple actors involved in designing and building TM imaginaries, at multiple scales, and the complex relationalities that span this multi-level form and myriad of inter and infra networks? (2) How does context matter to fully appreciate the politics and economics of place and location, and how is talent identification, development and enhancement seen as *situated*, and shaped by various actors across different scales? (3) How can voices from the Global South, and specifically from the AME help view TM as a philosophy and social practice that is also concerned with empowerment and social justice realms, rather than instrumental concerns to raise MNC productivity?

Our paper is structured as follows: To ground our work in the literature, we first highlight both the limitations of GTM approaches in capturing the macro characteristics, and review and critique current models of MTM. We then draw on the *political economy of skill formation* and *transnationalism* to illustrate the complexity of the governance of MTM processes globally, and how macro dynamics incorporate multidirectional flows that shape MTM in the AME. We then extend and broaden aspects of organization actors rarely covered in the MTM literature and advance debates of current writings (for example, Sparrow et al., 2019) through

proposing a new MTM model. This reasoning is also aligned with contemporary debates of human capital development (Castells, 2000; Nussbaum, 2011). We conclude with a discussion and a future research section.

### **Global talent management (GTM)**

The centrality of GTM to the achievement of MNCs strategic objectives has become widely acknowledged in recent years (Caligiuri et al., 2010; Stahl et al., 2012; Tarique & Schuler, 2010). Emerging empirical insights highlight the importance of international employee mobility as a key element of MNC's global talent strategies (McDonnell et al., 2010; Sparrow, 2007; Stahl et al., 2012). GTM writings largely focus on individual and organization levels of analysis (Makarem et al., 2019; Tarique & Schuler, 2010) are largely written from the vantage point of the MNC (Makarem et al., 2019). While there is evidence of MNC collaborations with governments in addressing talent needs, these are based on studies of EU developed countries and city state countries such as Singapore (Dickmann & Parry, 2019). A consequence of this is that MNCs have been guided by neoliberal models of economic development which privilege the Global North, at a time where economic development models are changing to cope with climate and environmental challenges. These circumstances have necessitated a global response, and the development of global governance frameworks provided by the SDG architecture, as we see later, assists in the evaluation of many economic, human development and skill upgrading indicators (see UNDP, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; World Bank Group, 2016).

GTM *via* MNCs can occur at an international level (between nations), multinational level (many nations) and regional level (for example, Asia Pacific and Europe). The differences of international TM and localized TM practices are subtle but these differences place additional demands on the management of the TM processes including issues such as relocation, cultural reorientation and language translations (see Marquardt & Berger, 2003; Metcalfe & Rees, 2005; Sparrow et al., 2019). An important omission in much GTM literature, is the contextualized embeddedness of myriad factors and thus ignores the *spatialized* organization of TM activities (Chaudhary & Moss, 2019; Mayer & Solga, 2008).

### **Macro talent management (MTM)**

There is little commentary which maps out how the organizing arrangements and governance of MTM is devised, and how these challenges can

be viewed *collectively*. In contrast, TM writers are addressing MTM to fully grasp the phenomenon of GTM (government and nongovernment policies, diasporas, and brain circulation) (Abeuova & Muratbekova-Touron, 2019; Al Ariss et al., 2014; Khilji et al., 2015; Marmenout & Lirio, 2014). However, the literature on global talent management and Macro TM in developing countries is still evolving, although it is underpinned by a **neo-liberalising** ethos as the following quote exemplifies: It is ‘*important that the scope of talent management extend beyond an individual and organizational analysis to incorporate the macro level in order to fully comprehend the complexities of managing talent in today’s globalized world, where organizations are not only competing with each other but where governments, organizations and their societies have also joined the race*’ (Schuler et al., 2019, p. 3). The quote succinctly argues that GTM discussed above concentrates on MNCs, markets and capital gains, rather than view interconnections of human, economic and social dimensions of development. Consequently, scholar’s show awareness of other MTM partners, but still privilege ‘top talent’:

Macro TM incorporates activities aimed at attracting, mobilizing, developing, and retaining *top talent* in organizations. As such, it also has major implications for organizations, including multinational enterprises, NGOs and countries (Sparrow et al., 2019, italicized by the authors).

While these observations pose challenges for MTM policy formation, arguments have been guided by the neoliberal *smart economic rationalities* of MNCs, and play down the social relationships, and the role and inclusion of various *social development* actors in specific territories (Lanvin & Evans, 2018; Michaels et al., 2001; UNDP, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; WEF, 2016; World Bank Group, 2016). The increasing recognition that MNCs are not always the lead actors involved in skills development (Sparrow et al., 2019; UNHCR, 2017; WEF, 2017a; World Bank Group, 2016), is prevalent in TM and human development accounts that excludes actors such as the ILO, UN, which are central to many political economy assessments (Castells, 2000, 2017; Sklair, 2002; World Bank, 2019).

The different actors involved in MTM, and their inter and intra relationships are important in understanding the skill challenges in the Arab Middle East. This represents a key knowledge gap, and goes beyond assuming MNCs are leading talent development, as our arguments will show. To illustrate this, a recent text on Macro TM (MTM) in emerging markets, stressed the importance of contextual dynamics and provided a ‘general model’ for MTM that incorporates (1)‘environment,’ and includes under this header, government policies, country



competitiveness, national culture, NGOs and education institutions, (2) 'TM practices that includes 'Talent Planning, acquisition, development, and retention', and (3) MTM outcomes, which only depict a range of productivity issues such as competitiveness, productivity and country rankings (i.e. Sparrow et al., 2019). There are a number of weaknesses in this model. Firstly, the model assumes MTM is mainly about organizational level efforts to develop TM. This ignores the multi-level processes and relationships between various partners at 'global', 'state', and 'organization' level. Secondly, the 'environment' includes together descriptions of 'conceptual ideas' and 'actors' when they should be separated. The elements of the environment needs explaining, separately from the multiple actors. This is likely to include economic and political systems, and how these are governed; the makeup of the population and workforce; and the levels of education and overall human capital expertise of a nation (Norgaard & York, 2005). Thirdly, the outcomes presented are limited as they are assuming MNC TM practices are governed by neoliberal development and focus on productivity measures. This is very different from the current global governance policy now advocated by the World Bank Group (2016), WEF (2019), and UNDP (2019a, 2019b, 2019c) which is advocating moving away from marketized neoliberal models of economic development, especially in the Arab Middle East (WEF, 2017a).

Our analysis of MTM in the AME thus examines myriad 'actors' across different scales and poses additional challenges for global HR strategies relating to human capacity development (McNulty & Hutchings, 2016; Porter, 2000; Torres, 2008; Tung, 2016). A relevant ethical example from the Global South, especially in the AME is how country governments have devised national skills development programs which incorporate several Ministries in Education, Industry and Social development, Women's Units, as well as the roles of NGOs and universities to undertake training and education (ILO, 2003; UNDP, 2016, WEF, 2017a). For example, the AME region is aiming to build human capacity in Islamic Finance (Saudi and Bahrain in particular), since many Islamic law and banking experts originate from Malaysia. The design of regional development skills strategies relevant to the Middle East will be explored in detail later but these include inter alia: Islamic Finance and Insurance, digital capacities and life-long learning, and these fields rely on collaborative partnerships with a range of organization actors in the global political economy (see Metcalfe, 2019; UNDP, 2016; WEF, 2017b), and are underpinned by a collective ethics of human development of all citizens (Ramadan, 2009; UNDP, 2019b; World Bank et al., 2015).



**Table 1.** MTM multi-level and multi actor model.

	MTM Actors	MTM Functions and Processes	MTM Outcomes
Global TM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International NGOs</li> <li>• UN SDGs</li> <li>• WB competitiveness</li> <li>• WEF HCD</li> <li>• ILO Human Rights</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guiding Frameworks on HRD/TM</li> <li>• Social and Human rights constitutions</li> <li>• Consultancy to state governments</li> <li>• Funding of governments</li> <li>• Funding of NGOs</li> <li>• National TM Plans</li> <li>• Skill frameworks</li> <li>• Entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Empowerment</li> <li>• Knowledge Economies</li> <li>• Funding of NGOs + Professional Institutes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growth and Productivity</li> <li>• Social Justice</li> <li>• Inclusion</li> <li>• Human well-being</li> <li>• Ethic-Politico decision making</li> <li>• Readiness for talent planning and development</li> <li>• Resisting globalization, neoliberalism and advocating Arab development strategies and principles</li> </ul>
National TM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State Institutions</li> <li>• HRD/TM</li> <li>• Industry</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Women's Units</li> <li>• Arab Ethic and Philosophy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business Planning</li> <li>• Family Planning</li> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Entrepreneurship</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
Local TM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NGOs</li> <li>• Professional bodies</li> <li>• Women's Groups</li> <li>• Civil society actors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women's rights</li> <li>• Women in politics</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Collaboration and Transnational networking with NGOs and women's groups</li> <li>• Collective social movements and protests</li> </ul>	

### ***TM and MTM gaps and intended theoretical contribution***

Following our reasoning, TM theorizing that acknowledges myriad partners could lead to more effective policy development at several scales, and across diverse territories. We are driven by a concern that TM theorization has tended to view economic advancement often rests with MNCs, and privileges neoliberal/smart logics (Jiang et al., 2015; Lanvin & Evans, 2018; Nathan & Overman, 2013; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2017; World Bank Group, 2016). TM approaches, thus, assume that labouring in an MNC is the dominant form of employment relationships, in an era where there are mounting concerns of MNCs genuine commitment to both human and economic development (see Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Jackson et al., 2013; UNDP, 2016, 2019b; WEF, 2019). Moreover, while MNCs accounts are embedded in neoliberal ethics there is no connection to how local practices becomes global, are nuanced, and how the global is articulated in the local level, obscuring spatial assessments. Radical geographers have argued that social relations and the notion of 'place as process' captures the fluidity of location and the relationalities of changing economic and governance forms of skill

upgrading processes (Conway, 2008; Massey, 1994; Metcalfe, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Our endeavour, therefore, is to move beyond dominant TM scholarship that privileges MNCs and Global North logics, and reimagine new vistas for TM organization actors, and new TM conceptualizations in multiple locales/locations, in order to show Global South perspectives of MTM.

Our arguments contribute to the GTM literature in 3 keyways. Firstly, to give life to multiple forms of movements, we examine the multiple actors involved in designing and building TM imaginaries, at multiple scales, and the complex relationalities that span this multi-level form and myriad of inter and infra networks. This perspective enables one to frame TM through a theoretical lens of the *political economy of skills formation* (Brown, 1999; Brown et al., 2001; Metcalfe & Rees, 2005) to more accurately depict the how, and what, of TM in specific locales. Building on Brown (1999), and to advance theoretical understandings of the macro TM field, we critically examine ‘the political economy of talent formation’ which provides an overarching lens to help explore how concerns about talent are intertwined with debates about industrial productivity, and high skills strategies relevant to governance systems and their approach to skill formation. We devise an integrative model (shown in Table 1) of Global TM, National TM and Local TM to capture the transnational dynamic nature of who does skill upgrading, as well as show the realities of how talent institutions collaborate with multiple partners in providing skills and human capital education solutions across scales.

Secondly, we maintain that the context matters in TM (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020) and that scholarship on TM needs to incorporate a spatialized lens to fully appreciate the complexities of the politics and economics of place and location envisaged in social change and development writings (for example, Castells, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 2011), and specific regions (for example Ragazzi, 2014; Vaiman & Collings, 2015). Talent identification, development and enhancement needs to be evaluated as a human activity and process, that is *situated*, and shaped by various actors across different scales (McLaren, 2017; Metcalfe, 2008; Wilson, 2015). As part of this logic, we use transnational thinking to explore economic and social progress (Vertovec, 1999). Transnationalism insights, evident in Castells social theorising (2000, 2017), forges a global communication imaginary of nodes, networks, patterns and flows that constitute and reconstitute *multiple actors’ movements’* in dynamic spaces, rather than just single out MNCs actors. Transnationalism also captures the multiplicities of movement and resistance (Cornell & Seely, 2016; Metcalfe & Woodhams, 2012).

Finally, our treatise for reimagining GTM in a transnational world brings forth a Global South voice, albeit in the AME. We advance intellectual inquiry of TM, and position our thinking within, and through an Arab Middle Eastern case, very much as a decolonial act and academic practice (Metcalf, 2019; Ragazzi, 2014; Wilson, 2015). Unlike contemporary TM scholarship that attends to organization productivity (Khilji et al., 2015), we position TM as a philosophy and social practice that is also concerned with empowerment and social justice realms, rather than instrumental concerns to raise MNC productivity. This line of reasoning complements emerging scholarship covering the ethical concerns of global TM and managerialist logics (Jackson et al., 2013); specifically human rights and labour relations in the Global South (for example Farndale & Sanders, 2017; Sparrow et al., 2013), and subaltern (Arab) voices often marginalized or silenced (Asher, 2017). In the following sections, we discuss our theoretical lenses and analytics framework in more detail, and we then introduce the AME as a case in point for our proposed MTM Model.

### ***Theoretical lenses and analytic framework***

#### ***Theory of political economy of talent formation***

The political economy of talent formation has its roots in economic sociology and the new institutionalism (Streeck, 1992) which challenges neo-conservative views of human capital. The political economy writings on skill formation relate to the history and values of the economic system. The political economy climate has been changing in the Global South and is moving away from neoliberal doctrines which have dominated global economic planning (WEF, 2017a; World Bank, 2019). The foundation of this shift can be dated to the first UN Human Development Report in (1990) and marked a challenge to predominantly neoliberal development writings and moved towards people centred development policies (UNDP, 2019a). Following the era of MDGs, and their failure in achieving many human development efforts, the 17 SDGs formed in 2015 incorporated a concern for how development shapes people's lives and their overall wellbeing (Syed & Metcalf, 2017). The formation of SDGs in 2015 marked a change in global governance with institutions stressing the importance of eradicating inequality and raising populations out of poverty. SDG 17 advocated the importance of developing collaborative partnerships to support skills upgrading with many agencies and highlighted that MNCs should play a greater role in global human development (WEF, 2017a, 2019). As Sparrow et al. (2019) have stated, a range of international agencies, including the World Economic Forum

(WEF), the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank (see also Metcalfe & Murfin, 2011; Metcalfe & Rees, 2005) have established a range of measures to evaluate health, education, investments in skills upgrading, in essence, a range of talent repertoires (Metcalfe, 2019). The shift against neoliberal logics has been mounting for some time, yet TM inquiry has been, and still is, embedded in neoliberal systems.

In sum, multiple stakeholders have agreed that social progress signifiers are important for assessing how countries have advanced, stressing the importance of governments to check market mechanisms, and develop social and human capacities. A focus on human development rather than purely economic growth now underpins the guiding philosophy of most international organizations, including the UN, World Bank and WEF. The *World Bank Report on Competitiveness* (2016) was monumental in breaking down neoliberal principles, and for the first time embraced a human ethics logic, underscored in the many UN philosophies. We mark this global transition to strongly highlight the lack of *ethics, sustainability and equality* issues in dominant TM writings.

The political economy of skill formation and economic performance are socially constructed and experienced within social institutions such as schools, government, offices, or factories, that can be organized in different ways (Al Ariss et al., 2014) even if 'capitalism' is the overarching system of economic organization (Ashton et al., 1999; Brown, 1999; UNDP, 2016). This reflects the varieties of the capitalism approach (see Hall & Soskice, 2001; Morgan, 2015) which shows that the global variations in economic conditions and the constitution of political interest groups and classes, and in labour markets, shape skill formation policies in very different ways. In political dialogue the commitment to a high skills economy is aligned with aspects of a nations' 'competitiveness' (UNDP 2019b; World Bank Group, 2016, 2019; WEF, 2016). However, the human ethic concern in fact builds on the tradition of political economy that dates back to Adam Smith (Brown et al., 2001), which supported market checks, and incorporated various forms of social protection, and social provisions for a states' population, which is reflective of social justice provision in the commentary of social progress currently supported *via* various SDG reporting measures (Syed & Metcalfe, 2017; UNDP, 2019c).

Mindful of the fluidity in the ways knowledge and capacities are defined, skill formation is defined as government efforts to build the social capacity for 'learning, innovation and productivity' (Green, 1999; Metcalfe & Rees, 2005). However, skill formation is more than capital investment in education which is the premise of human capital theorizations (Ashton et al., 1999; Ball, 1998; Brown, 1999). Skill formation is

socially constituted and includes norms, interpersonal capabilities, trust, social networks and how work is important in the functioning of society and in its economic organisation (see Castells, 2000). Skill acquisition represents more than the sum of individual action and represents collective capacities (Castells, 2000; Nussbaum, 2011) embedded in the socio-historical context. Scholars, therefore, increasingly question neoliberal aspects of education and economy, which has tended to disconnect from social, cultural and political dimensions (Morgan, 2015). An important aspect of contemporary skill formation policies, influenced by SDG and Arab Human Development reports has been attempts to expand opportunities for education and skills upgrading for both men and women, premised on 'inclusive' dimensions (UNDP, 2016). The 17 SDGs provide an umbrella framework guiding economic and social policy in developing economies. The 17 SDGs are underpinned by two key development agendas relevant to MTM in emerging economies, firstly, the elimination of inequalities and the empowerment of women, and secondly, the building of education capacity and opportunity in order to support employment growth (Metcalf, 2019; UNDP, 2019a, 2019c; WEF, 2019). The political economy of skill formation in the AME, thus 'raises issues of social purpose, and social justice'. There is scarce MTM literature that has addressed issues of inclusion and upgrading talents for groups or collectives, since the individual ethos was at the heart of the War for Talent in 2001; and individualism, and the 'value' of individual elites remain the dominant feature of global talent discourse (for example Makarem et al., 2019; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2017).

While recent scholars of TM have focused on macro TM encompassing both actors and activists in the contextual field (Khilji et al., 2015; Schuler et al., 2019; Sparrow et al., 2019), they have not shown the multiplicity of their organic/evolving structures that unites actors across scales. In generalising talent, they have not addressed the nuances and complexities of human capital and skill formation trends. Human capital concerns are central to the political economy of skill formation. Economic growth greatly expanded the policy significance of human capital theory, as neo-classical ideas about economic competitiveness came to the fore in the 80s (Lanvin & Evans, 2018). Human capital theorists rejected the contention that labour could be treated as a homogeneous category inherent in classical political economy. They asserted the need for a broader concept of human capital that included the skills, knowledge, and know-how of workers. From a human capital perspective, the technological upgrading of employment, together with the increasing value of labour, also involves a power shift that transforms not only class antagonisms but the relationship between capital and labour, and this has been the case until the

current time. These observations reflect the ethico-political decision making in governance processes relevant in the AME context.

The significance of human capital ideas has supported the view that the quality of human resources is at the heart of future economic competitiveness, evidenced in various reports of economic globalization (See Nussbaum, 2011; O'Sullivan & Collings, 2019; Porter, 2000). The application of human capital theory to global economic trends add weight to the assertion that income should reflect the market value of labour judged by international, rather than domestic, standards. The winners in this competition are those who have acquired human capital with 'global appeal' and reflects current elite theorizing which is popular in contemporary writings. Reich a former Labour Employment Advisor called talented workers 'symbolic analysts' who are engaged in problem-identifying, problem-solving, and strategic-brokering activities in the global knowledge economy (Reich, 1991), and his estimation accounted for about 20% of UK and USA workforce. The distinct difference here worth noting is that of the 'government measurement' of national talent, not an MNC, which we argue is pivotal for understanding the AME region, given the ethico-political orientation to policy planning.

The significance of talents, knowledge and productivity provide a source of wealth, but one that is not just conceived at the individual organization level, but is wealth, a human capital for nation states, which is the key argument presented here for underpinning MTM and talent formation in regional territories (Nussbaum, 2011). The role of the nation state is changing at this stage in the cycle of global capitalism, and it is changing in diverse ways in distinct regional territories (Castells, 2017; UNDP, 2019a; Wilson, 2015 World Bank, 2019). Since the 90s, MNCs have been controlling industrial agendas, including many new FDI decisions. The recent calls by Klaus Schwabb at the WEF 2020 for 'stakeholder capitalism' and the **covid-19** crisis have influenced governments to step up, respond to, and control and coordinate skill systems. The governments drive for a 'high skills economy' helps build the foundations for political and economic aspiration that supports national innovation. The logic of this is that national skill formation policies are being led by state institution's, not MNCs, and that the need to upgrade and create a world class labour force requires will be based on the collaboration of several partners/actors (Castells, 2017).

### ***Transnationalism, movement and organizing***

The forgoing discussion has highlighted that the examination of the political economy of talent formation opens up avenues to further

deconstruct the contribution of a myriad of actors to national talent development and allows one to deconstruct the logic (i.e. neo-liberal/developmental; elitist/inclusive) underpinning such talent development. To build on the framework of the political economy of talent formation, we draw on transnationalism to illustrate the multiplicity of flows, movement and agency, and show how this lens is of particular relevance to the AME as it is a region that has experienced conflict, revolutions, ongoing protests and civil unrest.

Transnationalism is defined as a condition in which, despite geographic borders and distances, certain kinds of relationships and processes are globally intensified (Vertovec, 1999). A transnational lens enables us to identify multiple ties and interactions linking/connecting employment and TM theorizations and practices across nation states. Transnational thinking shows how skills development and HRD in the West is entirely different, as it has largely been conceptualized as an organizational development activity (Metcalf & Rees, 2005). In contrast, skills upgrading in the Global South represents an institutional approach where public administration systems, localized sectors and cultural processes govern how a state builds human capacity and development (Garavan et al., 2016; Syed & Metcalfe, 2017).

A transnational perspective highlights networked based societies where fixed territories are less influential or relevant, and there is a cultural flow of ideas from West to East and vice versa (Metcalf & Woodhams, 2012). Generally, however, Global North senior executive organization practices are privileged in TM writings. In contrast, transnational processes and efforts in the Global South tackle institutional development and consider social, political, and economic actors, and their inter-relationships, that affect people and development, which often represent resistance to colonization and western ideologies (Ramadan, 2009). Examples of transnational entities are revolutionary movements, MNCs global value chains, trade unions and scientific networks, social media networks, and communications activities (Castells, 2000, 2017; Loomba, 2005). Transnational social movements are the social and political practices that often manifest themselves in particular international NGOs, evident in the Arab Spring<sup>1</sup> and in ongoing protests in Syria and more recently Lebanon. Labour and social movements, together with MNCs and political institutions represent transnational scholarship, as activities are interweaving in diverse spaces, and across digital platforms, and can be seen at intersecting multi-levels that include global, state and local formations (Metcalf, 2019). A transnational lens adopts a multi-level logic, and incorporates the activities around managing talent flows, mobility and acquisition at the global and state level, and also at grass



roots level, with many TM upgrading initiatives delivered by, and through, government agencies and MNCs, as well as NGOs, and localized systems of work organization. This includes how labour practices may or may not be supported/constrained by governments regulations (Farndale et al., 2008; Makarem et al., 2019).

This is evidenced if we consider spatialized insights of TM action. The politics of ‘positional difference’ (spaces) and the ‘politics of cultural difference’ (cultural values and institutional differences) help unravel the localization of organizing arrangements in AME and resistances to fluid logics of imperialism and globalization (McGovern, 2007; Metcalfe & Woodhams, 2012; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Transnational insights show the ways in which power relations are forged by complex patterns of global ideologies and local knowledges and practices. As Mahler explains, we need to connect transnational interpretations from ‘above’ and ‘below’ (See Cornell & Seely, 2016; Metcalfe & Woodhams, 2012; Naples, 2002). Transnational activities from above acknowledges the ways in which macro level structures are controlled by powerful elites in global governance frameworks/networks, although institutional capacity is fragile and changing. Conversely, transnationalism from below seeks to unravel ‘everyday practices of ordinary people, their feelings and conditions of existence’ (Mahler, 1988 in Naples, 2002, p. 7, emphasis added by Mahler, see also Cornell & Seely, 2016). However, social media and ICT can also help forge ‘digital galaxy’ like configurations of labour/social movements *via* transnational networking on platform structures (Metcalfe, 2019).

### ***Arab Middle East (AME) environment***

To ground the multi-level operations and multi-level actors of our MTM model, we provide a background to the AME region to illustrate the very different political, economic and business contexts. The AME is an economically diverse region that includes countries at various stages of economic development, and with vastly different endowment of natural resources (IMF, 2003). The focus in this paper, from a geographical viewpoint, is on countries in the Arab Middle East region (Afiouni & Karam, 2017), including the Levant (i.e. Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine) and the Gulf Cooperation Council states (i.e. United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman). Although bearing many common cultural features such as the use of the Arabic language, family centrality and a bulging youth (Karam & Afiouni, 2014), there are stark economic, political variations across these two country clusters. For example, GCC countries are high-income, oil-

reliant economies that focus on developing the physical and social infrastructure required for private sector development. From a political perspective, all of the GCC countries are traditional monarchies, with a strong state playing a visible role in economic activity and human development. Other common structural features of the GCC economies include a heavy reliance on expatriate labour, a young and rapidly growing labour force, and a dominant public sector (World Bank, 2019; World Bank Group, 2016). The Gulf is trying to address this Human Capital challenge by implementing a set of strategies and reforms. These reforms include making private-sector employment more attractive to nationals by equalizing public- and private-sector employment conditions (Gonzalez et al., 2008), as well as creating new economic expansions and a more efficient public sector (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007). On the other hand, countries in the Levant benefit from relatively high levels of educational attainment but are challenged by infrastructure shortages, slow economies, bureaucracy, corruption, and an unstable political environment (Afiouni & Karam, 2017). Furthermore, and in contrast to GCC countries, the workforce is mostly local, and employed in the private sector, namely in services, healthcare and education that represent the largest sectors in the economy (World Bank Group, 2016). The Arab Spring and Islamist Winter is ongoing (Metcalf, 2019), with Lebanon the most recent state to be experiencing protests, targeting government corruption, poverty, education and limited work opportunities as well as the most destructive nuclear-like explosion in modern history that hit Beirut on August 4, 2020. Further highlighting the importance of place and space. While the macro environment in the AME is well documented and well known, what is often absent from the TM literature is the focus on actors at multiple scales, the interaction between them and the policies they draft that shape skill formation and national HRD plans which we will discuss next.

## **Proposed MTM model**

### ***Multi-level scales***

In our model (Table 1), we extend and broaden aspects of organization actors rarely covered in the MTM literature and advance debates of current writings (for example, Sparrow et al., 2019). We specifically inject into the discussion Global South voices, and subaltern experiences (Conway, 2008; Cornell & Seely, 2016; Wilson, 2015). Importantly our critical insights specifically consider the fluid dimensions of agency in transnational locales, and, why, and how, agentic possibilities can be realized or not. Our analytic framework focuses on the AME and illustrates

that current TM and GTM theorizing fails to address the Global South macro level contextual realities.

Table 1 provides a holistic and dynamic view of the situatedness of MTM characterized by the presence of multiple actors, with multiple agendas, ideologies, and policies, at different scales, global, national and local. The actors at Global level include MNCs but also global institutions that help shape MTM talent agendas. These are the World Bank, the UN, ILO, and regional agencies such as the Islamic Development Bank and Arab League. Together these form the global governance frameworks guiding human and economic development. The functions and activities at global TM levels provide codes/frameworks that influence the development of skill formation strategies at national levels and may also impact MNC operations and policies. These may include legislative provisions such as the ILO treaties on decent work and human rights, and more recent policy developments such as the WEF reports on Human Capital Development (HCD), which were formed to help a myriad of actors in defining and upgrading HCD priorities (WEEF, 2016, 2017a, 2017b). The Arab Human Development Report (UNDP, 2019b) entitled *'Leaving No-one Behind'* sketched out an inclusive picture for social and economic progress and is guided very much by the ethico-political stance of Arab philosophies (Ramadan, 2009).

Complementing Arab views on social justice, and salient to our concern here are the SDGs compiled by the UN covering the timeframe 2015-2030 which we explore in more detail later. We have organized the actors, and the activities they are involved in, in a hierarchy but human development is characterized by multiple partners working across scales. Table 1 illustrates talent activities and processes are defined in respect of Arab priorities and visions of development. The outcomes of MTM in the AME are broad ranging and show both economic, social, and ethical aspects of TM outcomes.

Table 2 provides a more detailed picture of the multi-actor relational zig zag framework and examples of TM planning. NGOs are working directly with the World Bank on entrepreneurship; the WEF and ME governments are working on Digital and knowledge management; the Islamic Development Bank, state governments, and women's units/organizations are working on Islamic Finance and Economics. In what follows, we further describe the key activities and processes of myriad actors, and their strategic agendas and finally, we explore the potential outcomes of Arabized visions for talent and skills upgrading which are drastically different from MNCs ideologies, but bear greater resonance with global governance strategies premised on SDG architecture.

**Table 2.** Multi-level and multi actor relationships for knowledge and TM upgrading.

Global, State and Local Actors	National Strategies	Examples
World Bank, Islamic Development Bank, Saudi and Bahraini government agencies Women's Organizations	Islamic Finance and Economic Development	1. Collaboration of actors in Islamic economic development (see World Bank/IDB 2016) planning premised on sharia 2. Islamic Finance training for men/women delivered by specialists at the Women's Organization headquarters and funded by government, and for men IDB Jeddah.
Saudi Government and Women's NGOs	Entrepreneurship Training	Saudi government Funded 'Al Nada' women's organization
Bahraini Businesswoman Society (BBS) and UN Women	Entrepreneurship Training	UN funded development training held in Bahrain and helped form the Bahraini Businesswoman Society
Islamic Development Bank GCC governments/World Bank	Knowledge Hubs/Cities	Working together to develop STEM skills for smart cities (mainly UAE and Saudi)
WEF Arab Governments	Lifelong Learning, Digital, Knowledge Management	WEF assisted governments in identifying key skills for upgrading curriculums and job growth areas
WEF, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Industry Women's Councils	STEM	In GCC education curriculums are being reviewed following WEF report

(Compiled from Metcalfe, 2019; WEF, 2019; World Bank et al., 2015).

### **TM actors, political dynamics and TM processes**

In Table 1, the proposed MTM multi-actor framework, we map out the various TM actors, at *various scales*, *Global*, *State* and *Grassroot/Local*, as this acknowledges our multilevel transnational lens of inquiry.<sup>2</sup> Our concern here is to clearly identify dominant actors and relationships that exist in organizing and developing talent repertoires, which can operate at different scales but more often reflect what we term a *mosaic of relationships*, albeit working with, and through, a range of environmental and contextual challenges.

### **SDG architecture for governing national and local MTM**

As explained in the environment section above, the AME region continues to face many macro levels challenges that impact HRD processes, specifically the talent management pipeline which highlights the readiness of the talent pool to fill organizational vacancies. As already highlighted MTM debates at the global level, including Global South states, and the AME talent strategies practices are entwined with the SDG governance framework. The UN is supported in this global talent aim by the ILO, World Bank and WEF, and they in turn all assist individual states

in skills formation. There are thus many actors involved in responding to the development of global frameworks that address skill issues.

Most of the GCC countries have invested in institutional development strategies and established Ministries for HRD and have national HRD plans. A national HRD plan refers to the development of a 'national' policy of skills formation and development and is normally devised by governmental administration departments and is shaped by the political and governance regime of a particular country (Metcalf, 2006, 2011).<sup>3</sup> These national HRD initiatives can be conceived as *national talent agendas* for a particular country, and broadly consider the development of human capital. HRD initiatives can be regionally oriented within a nation state or incorporated with partnerships with other governments, or regional agencies such as The Arab League or the GCC. In line with the regions industrial planning and SDG institutional arrangements, various GCC countries are now systematically pursuing TM policies that focus on managing, upgrading and maintaining their country's human capital (Metcalf, 2019; Syed & Metcalfe, 2017; WEF, 2017b). This is reflected in the implementation of Gulfization programmes (for GCC), and localization programs in other regions that aim to recruit and develop national citizens in order to increase their employability and reduce the country's dependency on foreign labour (Metcalf, 2011; Pinnington et al., 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2004). The majority of AME states established TM/HRD units in government in the early 2000s, but their remit and organization vary greatly (Metcalf, 2011). All AME states have received consultation and support in drafting national TM plans from the UN, ILO, or local NGOs, as this was embedded in the MDGs, and is also part of SDG planning. Thus, GCC countries, except for Oman, have institutional frameworks for skills development as part of their long-term economic development planning. These MTM processes are highly detailed and build on strategies from the 90s addressing organization and talent diversification away from oil and gas sectors. Those states that have limited natural resources such as Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon have very weak institutional capacity, and consequently their progress in building human capacity development (HCD) has been limited (see WEF, 2016, 2017b, 2019).

A key aspect of the AME National HRD and TM processes are 'partnership arrangements' with GCC governments covering training and development projects, together with bodies such as the Islamic Development Bank and the Arab League. TM has covered a range of skills upgrading, including leadership development, entrepreneurship; knowledge management and team development since the formation of the MDGs in 2000. Learning and Training for Work in a Knowledge

Society (ILO, 2003) and Knowledge Management in the Learning Society (OECD, 2000) exemplify skill development agendas that national states could adopt, in respect of MDG attainment. TM initiatives are building on the foundations of the 'knowledge economy aims' prevalent in the 90s, where states were required to establish governance machineries and women's development units for the monitoring of the attainment of MDGs (2000-2015) and SDGs (2015-2030).

Global TM is thus a specific activity of the global governance framework for human capacity development devised by international agencies. National HRD/TM agendas emanates from global economic and social development planning, and most are premised on Arab values that often represent resistance to western and neoliberal orthodoxies. However, international organizations such as the UN and World Bank have also assisted local NGOs in training and empowerment planning in many Arab states, illustrating the spatial dynamic of TM strategy and organization. The governance for skills development is aligned with National TM and managed/measured by the collaboration of a range of government departments including education departments, women's units and industrial ministries, in a specific state (Metcalf, 2011; see also World Bank Group, 2016 and WEF, 2016, 2017a). However, national TM initiative's in the AME include many local institutions, partnerships and community networks. Local MTM processes and ethico-political organization are fluid and flexible and react to regional and national development agendas.

As highlighted in [Tables 1](#) and [2](#), HRD and TM units often collaborate with the UN, as well as liaise with local NGOs who are often granted a leadership remit for skills planning. Relationships are thus not hierarchical in geographic contexts, but flow in multi-level ways, intersect, and form multiplicities of organizing arrangements. For example, in Saudi Arabia, the governance of National TM is managed by the Chambers of Commerce in Riyadh and Jeddah alongside the Ministry of Education, and in Bahrain National TM planning is managed by the Bahrain Society for Training and Development, together with the Supreme Council for Women, and the Ministry of Education. This is significant as the local centres have responsibility to devise TM planning. This reflects that transnational ethic which stresses the importance of local actors in contributing to social and economic development (Vertovec, 1999).

Another example of local level initiative for human development includes the Lebanese Banks who devised many skills upgrading opportunities due to weak institutional government mechanisms as highlighted previously (Afiouni & Karam, 2017). In addition, there are numerous NGOs at local levels dedicated to skills and training, financed by

agencies such as the Department for ID in the UK, who work in partnership with many stakeholders (e.g. CAWTAR, Tunisia, Care International). Examples of the inter zapping arrangements are detailed in Table 2 to illustrate the multiplicities of MTM interactions, organizing and planning.

Global and National TM strategies and practices are thus quite distinct, although overlap, and the multi-level framework is characterised by collaboration not only in a specific state, but also regions through institutions such as the Islamic Development Bank, (IDB), GCC and the Arab League. Importantly the SDG architecture, and other global health and work codes helps establish a framing for the development of national HRD interventions. The dynamic of a multi-level and multi-actor talent organization structure shows the vast disconnect of a neo-liberalising ethics embodied in contemporary Northern writings, to that compared in the AME in the Global South (Metcalf, 2019). The multiple actors in the MTM model thus helps us to better understand the complexity of the socio-historical and geo-political environments, and how they develop TM practices. Appreciating the dynamic roles of TM organization actors highlights the socio-political dynamics of TM, and how mobilization can be supported or constrained across scales, as well as framing talent flows *via* inter and intra organization processes. These multi-directional flows reflect the essence of ‘transnationalism’ in that change and movement is from ‘above’ and ‘below’ (Conway, 2008). While one can define national TM as an institutional framework embedded in state machineries, localized TM is very fluid and emerges in responses to human and development needs, moreover, the responsibility to support local communities reflects the Middle East commitment to post modernity premised on Arab ethics (Cesar, 2014; Ramadan, 2009). Overall the landscape of MTM in the AME rests on multiple actors collaborating in dynamic ways, that rest on social justice and ethical principles not often articulated in MTM literature (UNDP, 2019b, 2019c).

Unlike the profit orientation of MTM activities and processes, in the AME they are largely collectivist, and embrace a national development ethos. This aligns with a ‘development state’ model often advocated when discussing the Asian tigers, although generally the AME public administration has not forged partnerships with MNCs which Singapore did (see Nathan & Overman, 2013; Ng, 2011; O’Sullivan & Collings, 2019). Rather, across the AME, partnerships at local level and government level have been with the ILO, UN or World Bank, or international NGOs like Care International, not MNCs. While we can view these efforts as addressing the well-known MTM processes of planning,



acquisition, development and retention, talent logics in the AME support an ‘*inclusive*’ and *collective ethic*, and stress Arabization and Arab subjectivities that resist and dismantle neoliberal and individualist ideology (Metcalf, 2019; Ramadan, 2009). Articulating a decolonial state identity negates western models, and also illustrates multiplicities of identities and movements of Arab populations and subjectivities (Asher, 2017). The governance of talent systems in the AME is framed within SDG architecture incorporating international organizations, state institutions and local groups and NGOs, and this approach has distinct implications for the outcome of MTM.

### **MTM outcomes: ethics, inclusion and development**

In Table 1, we show that outcomes for global, national, and local actors of MTM are premised on human development. The interweaving collectivist ethos of Arab MTM, is dramatically different to contemporary MTM which has focused on MNC operations, and primarily addressed labour productivity. Importantly for our model, as already highlighted we have included broader MTM outcomes as they directly shape human and sustainable skills development, embedded in SDGs, which are not commonly addressed in dominant MTM or TM writings. Amidst major social and political upheavals, countries in the AME region are facing a youth bulge accompanied with high unemployment rates (Ali, 2011; WEF, 2017a, 2017b). This demographic outlook is very different from what we see in the developed economies. While much of the GTM literature focuses on the ageing population and the shortage of talent facing developed economies (Farndale et al., 2010; World Bank, 2019), what we see in the region is quite a different demographic landscape. Reflecting on the Arab spring that hit Tunisia (December 2010), Egypt and Saudi (January and throughout 2011), Syria (January 2011), Lebanon (October 2019) and the many attempted but aborted revolutions in other countries, observers note the lack of employment opportunity for the youth as a key driver for such upheavals (Ouedraogo, 2015; Pinnington et al., 2019). While development state planning in industrial ministries is pushing agendas to diversify the economy, MTM activities have been stepped up to provide collective skill building. These developments tie in to broader economic debates to eradicate inequalities between the Global North and Global South, as well as in South-South relations.

Importantly, given our aim to inject a social ethics in understandings of talent identification and development, we face challenges as MTM scholars in shifting debates from the global elite, towards more social justice and inclusive aspects of MTM. Sparrow et al. (2014) argue that in

order to better manage talent at a macro level, the challenge now is for researchers to understand how elite networks serve, govern, and regulate the management of global talent. This perspective is at complete odds with many developing regions economic plans (UNDP, 2019a, 2019b; World Bank, 2019), and ignores the global, national and local TM dynamics shaping skill formations in the AME. Suggestions by commentators that immigration policies can support talent pipelines illustrate a complete disconnect and lack of understanding between the Global North and AME, and how labour relations are impacted by refugees and migrants' movements in very complex ways (see Jackson et al., 2013; Sparrow et al., 2019).

## Discussion

### *Re-imagining TM*

The forgoing discussion highlighted how transnational logics negate a single globalization voice and illustrated the multiplicity of partners involved in TM in order to extend current thinking on MTM. We argued that Global TM, National TM and Localized TM more accurately depicts the multiplicities and interweaving of MTM processes and represents skills *language* that resonate with the AME population (Piekkari et al., 2014). In the following we highlight the value of a multi-layered lens, that grounds our thinking within a spatialized framework which has not been used in TM or MTM previously. We consider the value of these approaches given there is a great deal of concern about exclusion, and whether elite TM systems are viable in an AME context. Our discussion also considers why scholars of MTM are exclusive in their orientation, and how this is at odds with global development and the governance of skill building a centre point evidenced in the SDGs. We also include a section on future research and offer research propositions.

There have been relatively few commentators on human capital aspects of skill formation in talent management. Crane and Hartwell (2019) like many TM scholars argue that human capital and social capital are the 'individualized capabilities' of workforces (see also Chatterjee et al., 2014). These individualized skills can be further enhanced by viewing them as 'relational resources'. This is evidenced if an international employee in a new MNC region can acquire knowledge and competence by leveraging his/her relationships. Further, the social capital endowed within an individual employee can enhance elements of human capital. The value of human capital is contained within an 'organization frame' and can be enhanced or suppressed *via* various movements of social capital relations. This does not reflect the value of human capital as a shared

collective resource in a nation state, and of the ways it has evolved and applied in the original focus of Becker (1964 first edition, third edition 1993; see Cesar, 2014 and Sklair, 2002). Becker's treatise of the importance of government investment in education and training and of contributions to economic and human development has remained a tried and tested theory in political economy writings. He argues in the third introduction in his 1993 edition his motivation was to show how human capital proposals: 'could improve the quality of the work force through schooling, training, medical services and childcare' (1993, p. 19). An important aspect to remember is that the community and nation development ethos is stronger in the AME, due to an inclusive ethics. Simply, skills and capacities can be viewed as *collectivised*, spatially defined and located.

Following these insights, multiple fields in economic and human geography, education and development studies (see Donald et al., 2019; McClaren, 2017) have drawn on Becker's human capital principles and illustrated that urbanization, demographic changes and investment in skills and employment, prioritize the development of human capital through talent enrichment and skill building, at both enterprise and national levels (see UNDP, 2019a, 2019b; ILO, 2003). Thus, it is argued that the concept of human capital needs to go beyond pure economic terms to include organizational and societal imperatives linking micro-, meso- and macro-level parameters (Makarem et al., 2019). As we strongly argue in this paper, it is clearly evident that at the macro-level, talent management is a multi-stakeholder concern (Donald et al., 2019) which includes the nurturing of multi-level alliances across scales in order to devise an economy-wide holistic strategy for skills and human development.

Our deliberations have drawn on social theories of space, social change and political economy (Castells, 2000, 2017; Massey, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 2004). The AME debate on economic advancement is 'changing the terms' of upskilling and MTM language, as the 'power of development' (Cesar, 2014; Solga, 2014) is viewed as collective progress, and premised on ethico-political decision making processes and inclusive Arab values and history. The inclusion of all citizens in sharing and bearing fruits is the prime driver for economic and social development in the AME (UNDP, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). One aspect that is prevalent is that the efficiency and productivity discourses of TM in the Global North, are not countenanced in any way in the AME. A clear signifier of this is the absence of SDG debates in contemporary MTM writings, highly unusual given they represent the architecture for many state developments plans in the Global South. Further, a Global North trajectory has a strong

resonance with individualism, with a ranking, rating and recording ethic (usually within an MNC), with aspects of social inclusion and sustainability surprisingly absent from much TM research. This perspective seems completely at odds with the dynamic of TM processes in the AME, where talent upgrading is simply viewed as a collectivist endeavour and public good (Morgan, 2015; Pinnington et al., 2019). Moving beyond inequalities is an appropriate ethic of care for economic planning and growth (Cesar, 2014; UNDP, 2019a).

While there is ongoing debate of inclusive and exclusive approaches to TM, talent formation systems provide avenues for forming and informing dialogues of talent development which could bring together critical insights of myriad political and social stakeholders involved in the TM debate discussed above. As we have argued throughout the paper, the political economy of talent formation, therefore, raises fundamental issues about inequality, social justice, and economic opportunities. It leads us to consider who are the beneficiaries of gains in productivity and economic development? Is the circle of prosperity drawn in a way that is inclusive or in a way that excludes a large minority from its fruits?

Similarly, leading scholars are more interested in TM trajectories that are aligned with elite identities, staff segmentation processes, recording, ranking and rating, and ultimately, an exclusionary ethos. We wonder why the TM community is concerned with the 1% when even classic political economy and liberalism considered issues of income redistribution, market checks and social protection mechanisms (Jackson et al., 2013; Sklair, 2002). While political governance varies across the AME, social and economic planning is organized around a development state model, which advocates a stronger role for public administration (Cesar, 2014). Questions thus arise to how to reform social and economic institutions for high skills, taking Singapore as an example that is much recognised as a city state that has achieved this, (McNulty & Kaveri, 2018; Norgaard & York, 2005;), and the efforts of UAE are similarly <sup>4</sup> being recognized (Norgaard & York, 2005; Pinnington et al., 2007). Our adoption of transnational approaches helped show fluid forms of social fields, including views that homelands and new locations are not always defined by geographic territories (Metcalf & Woodhams, 2012). Transnational frames are thus not just about movements and flows but captures new subjectivities arising from uprooting, movement, and identity assimilation in new cultures, in defined geographic areas, as well as the multiplicities of place and location *via* digital platforms (El Said et al., 2015; Metcalfe & Woodhams, 2012).

The development of skill formation systems should thus be regarded as a dynamic political process, dependent on the outcome of various

political struggles regarding such matters as institutional design and transformations during critical junctures in historical development. While traditionally the political economy of skill formation was concerned with factors that pertain to the economy, education and development scholars stress that the SDG governance architecture makes salient upskilling strategies which can support the growth of knowledge intensive industries, and MNCs would benefit from participating more in SDG governance (UNDP 2019b; World Bank, 2019; World Bank Group, 2016; World Bank et al., 2015). Scholars note that there is still a war in terms of talent attraction and retention, particularly in emerging markets where companies seek talent from developed nations to supplement their talent pools and train their locally recruited talent (Cui et al., 2018). While these factors might be highly relevant in the North American and Western European contexts where most of the literature is originating from, the political assumptions and ‘national business systems’ (Whitley, 1996) upon which GTM theorizing is based (e.g. neo-liberal economies, free movement of people, etc.) is not relevant in many developing country contexts around the globe, especially in the Arab Middle East where there is ongoing economic and political turmoil.

### **Future research**

Our deliberations have focused on the multiplicities of transnationalism, and of myriad partners collaborating, energising and supporting talent development. There are clearly numerous agendas for scholars to define that explore the relationalities of numerous stakeholders involved in diverse forms of talent upgrading. An important avenue to complement multi-agent thinking are studies to address the gendered, raced, and classed dimensions of TM logics and organization, and the prioritization of this globally. This will necessitate engaging with transnational feminists’ movements and organizations who have been on the move since 1995 when the Platform for Women’s Development pioneered by China, and again advocated by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September 27<sup>th</sup> 2015 at the birth of the SDGs (see also Asher, 2017; El Said et al., 2015; Naples & Desai, 2002 for MGD). Transnational feminist understandings of TM incorporate complex empowerment capabilities’ and mobilities and are foundational to SDG attainment. The role of NGOs and women’s groups in supporting TM remains a lacuna in global research. NGOs more accurately track and trace women’s development and are often safe spaces where women can discover possibilities for human and talent development (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Nussbaum, 2011). The intersectional dynamic of talent mobilities and flows therefore, and

different subject positioning offers a promising research field in emerging and developing economies especially. Further, given commitment to developing city/hubs spaces and innovation zones there needs to be more explorations of how MNCs can work in partnership with government, education centres, NGOs and community groups to help address talent upgrading processes in specific spaces/regions as outlined in SDG 17 on governance. This is especially important where countries pursue a development state model. A collaborative and partnership MTM ethic, aligns the AME region with Arabization values and brings on broad MNC skills and capacities for the mutual benefit of all stakeholders (see Pinnington et al., 2019; Sparrow et al., 2019).

A further avenue for TM research addresses spatialization. As Sparrow et al. (2019) has highlighted, the 'kaleidoscope of diversity', and the multiplicities of development beyond that of individual organizations, and expands our understandings of human social advance/movements, in city states and clusters (Singapore, Silicon Valley, Bangalore, India, North Carolina Research Triangle); regions (GCC); and countries (China) (Dickmann & Parry, 2019; Porter, 2000; Sparrow et al., 2019). More broadly, this highlights how collective capabilities addresses social justice opportunities (Nussbaum, 2011). This is not to say that context has not been addressed, rather, as Johns (2006) argues it needs to be more sophisticated and embedded in research questions and research design, and we hope space and place frames discussed here will nurture TM intellectual enquiry. O'Sullivan and Collings (2019) build on the potential of spatial themes that rest on regions and countries as hubs for clusters of specialized industry sectors. Our coverage of spatialized approaches to TM, reflects human geography concerns with economic localization, and is especially pertinent given the array of regional linkages being forged, for example in China's Belt and Road initiative, the Islamic Development Banks ambitions to build Islamic Finance city/regional spaces, and also many smart city initiatives, evident in Dubai and Abu Dhabi knowledge cities (World Bank et al., 2015). Our concern is that studies of MTM are 'inclusive' and consider broader worker characters other than the elite (see Dickmann & Parry, 2019; Khilji & Khan, 2018). Space and place insights of building TM capacities thus offer the TM field many opportunities to provide interdisciplinary research that directly links to TM policy development. Throughout the paper, we have noted variations in the macro level landscape of the various AME countries, as well as the disparity in governments' responses to such challenges that lead to different TM processes and outcomes. More research is needed to further flesh out country nuances and focus on countries mostly affected by the

current geo-political turbulence in the global economy. We include some future research questions that can be further explored:

What are the implications for spatialized assessments of MTM in other developing regions such as Africa and Latin America? Does our investigation of myriad actors supporting human wellbeing spell out the end of an individualized MTM elite focus, and the movement towards a collective MTM ethic? How can we advance the theorizing of movement and mobilities in TM writings in developing contexts? How will covid-19 shape MNC MTM strategies and behaviour as economic coordination once again is being addressed and directed by formal governance systems of states, together with advice from international organizations such as WHO and ILO? And importantly, given that the SDGs centralize gender equality in all 17 goals, how can one advance an MTM framework that supports social justice and equality ethics? Related to this, how can new imaginaries of the decolonization of MTM help root and reaffirm Arab histories, knowledges and cultures? Finally, studies on the role of MNCs in working to the principles of SDGS 17 which highlights the importance of MNC partnerships with development agents could fruitfully aid MTM theorizing and development policy.

## Conclusion

Challenging dominant Global North trajectories, we have critically explored the complex terrain of global TM. We provided a macro assessment of TM processes, at different scales (i.e. Local, National and Transnational) and showcased the myriad partners in devising TM strategy that existing scholarship has not sufficiently examined (see Khilji & Schuler, 2017, p. 400). In sum, we argued that explorations of the complexities of economic organization, and unravelling new multiple forms of TM theorizing would benefit from spatialized accounts, and the politics of location in shaping TM logics and ideas (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Massey, 1994; Sklair, 2002) and the geographies of transnational organizations (Cesar, 2014; Sholkamy, 2010). We have taken the AME as a case in point to highlight the inadequacy of current MTM models and proffer multiple dimensions of TM realities in the Arab Middle East, and indeed other developing regions (see Khilji & Khan, 2018; Sparrow et al., 2019).

Our discussion advances the knowledge of AME TM in macro contexts in very distinct ways. Firstly, TM strategies and actions have to be conceived as a multi-actor process, crystallising dynamic relational flows which forge complex power relations that have to be carefully navigated. In the Global South, and in the AME, skills upgrading, and education development is largely driven by government, and managed by state



institutions and local organizations collaboratively, and monitored and assessed through SDG global governance mechanisms (UNDP, 2019c; WEF, 2017b). The economic sociology focus on the political economy of skills formation links together dynamic and fluid TM groupings. Second, our lens of transnationalism unravels the numerous actors involved in TM not addressed in previous writings, so that talent flows and relationships with actors move up, down and across locations/institutions (depicted in Table 2), unlike globalization critiques, which position the MNC as the central actor (in a seemingly global vacuum), and largely presents MNC insights of their top down cultural and organization activities. TM actors include international organizations, government administration departments; NGOs and community and women's groups who interact in dynamic ways. In the AME region MNCs role are not leading TM agendas, rather it is more likely to be organized as a collaborative partnership with UN Women and local NGOs. MTM thus, as an activity is formed at several scales, and as a development intervention process in the Global South needs to be meaningfully explored as spatially localized, and theorized around the politics of location and intersectionality frames (Massey, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Flowing from this thirdly, we have alluded to the agentic potentialities of various multiple actors (Asher, 2017). Global North TM accounts assume that talent (an individual with talent) can move freely in geographic locales or in the digital galaxy. The narrow focus of MNCs talent activities, planning, recruitment, development and retention TM practices is simply not an accurate picture of talent movements, social change and organization development realities in many regions of the world. MNCs are not always the leaders of TM agendas in specific locales and are far more likely to work in tandem with various organization actors. A final contribution to our deliberations stresses social justice and ethical decision-making processes. We have alluded elsewhere to TM instrumental concerns (Makarem et al., 2019), given that efficiency arguments are presenting a narrow aspect of current global governance economic strategies (ILO, 2013; World Bank, 2019; World Bank Group, 2016). This does not fare well with sustainability agendas and prioritising the economic and social advance of poorer nations, which argues for the upgrading of human well-being, and suggests that dominant MNC approaches need to be radically rethought (WEF, 2016; World Bank, 2019; World Bank Group, 2016; Davos Meeting 2020<sup>5</sup>). Further, recent reports by Klaus Schwab and WEF have highlighted the importance of economic inclusion, and there is ongoing debate on how MNCs will respond to multiple economic ethics.

Organizations and countries have much to gain by creating sustainable TM practices, by engaging various stakeholders, and by crafting their MTM practices in a way that takes into account local, country and regional dynamics. To explore the potentialities of how ‘context matters in TM’ (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020), we developed an MTM model for the AME that could be refined and applied in other territorial locations. A key agenda for MTM strategy development is agentic possibilities premised on social inclusion. Individualized insights negate the collective capacity efforts needed for economic and social upgrading. This is especially important given that TM scholars have largely aligned themselves with managerialist ideologies, exemplified in the way staff segmentation quantifies one as included or excluded (Collings et al., 2019). As we stated previously, TM scholarship has evolved and privileged elite categories and remains committed to the *Hunger Games* stratifying rationalities (Makarem et al., 2019). Our coverage of multiple agencies doing TM in the AME, highlights how much research is needed to explore talent development and deployment in many states, evidenced in national HRD plans, as well as grassroots organizations engaging in skills upgrading. Ultimately our paper on the AME unveiled TM as a collective ethic premised on an Arab ethos, denounced individualism and neoliberalism, and aims to ‘leave no-one behind’ (UNDP, 2019b). Global South voices are getting louder in the political economy and decolonial imaginaries are openly advocating resistance to western knowledges.

## Notes

1. The Arab Spring and Islamist Winter is a term for a range of uprisings. Scholars have largely reported Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, however there were also uprisings in Saudi, Bahrain, Morocco and Qatar which were all quashed by military intervention (Cesar, 2014; Metcalfe, 2019). The outcome of the current Lebanese uprisings remains unclear.
2. It is important to appreciate the differences of international actors as they have differing levels of finance, organization and power. ‘International NGOs’ are primarily based on social upgrading and tackling human development, and many play local roles, and are funded by state governments or independent benefactors such as Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The ILO, World Bank, UN, UN Women are part of global governance framework that regulates economic planning via liaison and organization with state governments and are funded by state governments. The WEF is a relatively new institution formed by Klaus Schwab to represent MNCs in the global governance framework, and is funded by MNCs, although they themselves classify their status as an NGO.
3. Most AME states have governance principles premised on Islamic Sharia. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address Islamization, and Islamic institutional

framework's. However, most countries are identified as addressing economic challenges via 'development state' models with large public administration sectors.

4. It should be noted that Singapore has not advocated initiatives for gender equality, and governance ideology is best described as gender neutral in all social and economic planning. Rightly Singapore has paved the way for national talent planning, but this is mainly for men, and men who have Chinese heritage.
5. At the annual Davos in 2020 meeting, has asked for MNCs to consider views on stakeholder capitalism, given that inequalities in both developed and developing regions are continually facing inequalities. How this will develop is still not clear. But WEF, as an MNC institution, classified as an international NGO, is asking tough questions about equity and human development (see <https://weforum.org>, 2020 Theme, *Stakeholders for a Cohesive and Sustainable World*, 21-24 January, 2020).

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