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# The Potential and Challenges of Youth in the Arab Region

Background paper for thematic sessions

UNDP Regional Conference

“Development challenges and priorities in a changing Arab region”

Amman, Jordan

22-23 May 2017

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## Background

The Arab region is home to the youngest population in the world, with over 100 million young men and women between the ages of 15 and 29.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the current Arab youth generation is the largest the region has witnessed in 50 years, with more than 60% of the population under the age of 30.<sup>2</sup> These figures, along with the major youth-led protest movements witnessed in various Arab countries since 2011, have galvanized discussions about the development challenges faced by young people and their root causes. Youth are demanding responsive political systems and social justice, while seeking equitable economic opportunities.

However, despite the potential of Arab youth to drive positive change, they are not fully involved in the design of development policies for their future. Their exclusion is not necessarily targeted at them but is manifested in relation to broader exclusion or marginalization that may be taking place linked to social class, gender, geographic location, culture and/or community. The result is that a combination of patriarchal social norms and exclusionary forms of governance processes continue to sideline youth in many places- as political and economic participation are often considered to be the prerogative of the older generation. According to the Arab Human Development Report 2016, “youth in the Arab countries have a great difficulty voicing their expectations and effectively engaging in the political sphere...”<sup>3</sup> This trend undercuts both development and social cohesion, and yet remains poorly recognized.

In addition, Arab youth face high unemployment rates and undergo difficult economic conditions, even though they tend to be “better educated and more connected to global knowledge relative to older ages.”<sup>4</sup> Unemployment among Arab youth is the highest in the world, at 29% versus 13% worldwide.<sup>5</sup> The region needs to create more than 60 million new jobs in the next decade to absorb the large number of workforce entrants and stabilize youth unemployment. Young women face even greater challenges in overcoming social, cultural, and economic barriers to their inclusion. The unemployment rate for Arab women is twice that of young men, with the figures reaching 25% and 44%, respectively, while total labor force participation for young women is under 16%.<sup>6</sup>

## Analysis

Since early 2000s, few national policy frameworks have started to pay attention to youth concerns with a number of Arab countries designing stand-alone national policies or strategies targeting youth. Despite these efforts, the approach can be described as considerably narrow and even cosmetic in some cases. For example, *the institutional setting of policymaking for youth has usually been restricted to one ministry* (for ex. Ministry of Youth and Sports) with no mechanism for coordination with other ministries (education, labor, health, etc.), civil society, or other key actors, making it challenging to address the issues that youth perceive as priority. Moreover, the approach treats youth priorities as being distinct and tend to focus on

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<sup>1</sup> Chaaban, Jad, 2013. Expanding Youth Opportunities in the Arab Region, Arab Human Development Report, pg. 6. *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)*, [Online]. Available at [http://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/library/huma\\_development/expanding-youth-opportunities-in-the-arab-region.html](http://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/library/huma_development/expanding-youth-opportunities-in-the-arab-region.html)

<sup>2</sup> Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality, Executive Summary. *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)*, [Online]. Available at <http://www.arab-hdr.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> World Development Indicators. *The World Bank*, [Online]. Available at <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>. [Accessed May 2017].

<sup>6</sup> World Development Indicators. *The World Bank*, [Online]. Available at <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>

education and employment rather than the general social and political infrastructure that allows youth to live by their full potential and expectations.

The question of social inclusion – ensuring youth participation in and contribution to the advancement of society as a whole is important for sustainable development. Youth in the Arab states region constituted the largest share of demonstrating populations during the 2011 uprisings. But perception surveys reveal that they currently experience less satisfaction and less control over their future than otherwise similar youth in other parts of the world.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, formal political participation rates among Arab youth are of the lowest worldwide reflecting low levels of trust in political institutions and processes, and in the state. The willingness of youth to demonstrate did not translate into a greater propensity to use the ballot box after the uprisings; in fact, relative to the rest of the population, young people preferred demonstrating to voting. In voting, every country in the region is well below the global average among all age-groups, with a gap of about 20 percent. In several countries, voting is low among youth compared with the overall population, reflecting the lack of confidence of youth in undemocratic institutions. For instance, in Tunisia's latest elections in 2011, young people represented the highest ratio of voters who refrained from voting, with only 17 percent of Tunisians aged between 18 and 25 registering to vote.<sup>7</sup>

The situation is further aggravated by the exposure of Arab youth to political violence, armed conflict, displacement, and manipulation of identity and religion by extremist groups. The region has experienced the most rapid increase in war and violent conflict of all geographic regions over the past decade, rendering many youth deprived of basic capabilities (e.g. access to health services and education). Around 58% of the world refugees originate from the Arab region that is home to 49% of the world's internally displaced people (IDPs)<sup>8</sup>. More than 13 million children in the region, or 40 % of the 34 million school-age children, are not attending school in the countries affected either directly or indirectly by armed conflict<sup>9</sup>. Millions of youth, who have been displaced from their homes and countries, face a daily struggle for survival without access to employment or livelihoods, and are likely to experience exploitative working conditions, inadequate access to vocational training, and overall social exclusion, making them vulnerable to exploitations by extremist groups.

Despite the general perception that youth usually adopts more open values, perception surveys have recently shown that youth in the Arab States region register high levels of social and religious intolerance. The region's gap with the rest of the world in terms of "tolerance" is wide, estimated at 26 percent in social areas and 24 percent in religious areas. Egypt and Lebanon, more religiously diverse countries, score above the global average, suggesting that diversity could foster tolerance. In the averages across countries and populations, youth do not appear to be more tolerant than the older generation and are, in fact, religiously less tolerant. Yet, there is a clearly positive and significant education effect, which is even larger in the region than in the rest of the world, suggesting that investment in quality education is an important entry-point to fostering tolerance.<sup>10</sup> Gender specific obstacles include legal barriers to equality, gender based violence, and increasing social and political conservatism that constricts young women's choices and forms a rigid, insidious alliance against their empowerment. In light of these challenges, as stressed in the Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) 2016, youth in the Arab region experience prolonged transitions to adulthood, characterized by 'waithood' in the parental home. Many are unable to afford a home of their own, form a family, or achieve independence in their lives, thus struggle to attain full social and economic

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<sup>7</sup> Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality, Executive Summary. *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)*, [Online]. Available at <http://www.arab-hdr.org/>

<sup>8</sup> 2016. UNHCR statistical online database 2016. *The UN Refugee Agency*, [Online]. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/>. [Accessed November 2016].

<sup>9</sup> September 2015. Education Under Fire. *The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)*, [Online]. Available at [https://www.unicef.org/mena/Education\\_Under\\_Fire.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/mena/Education_Under_Fire.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality, Executive Summary. *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)*, [Online]. Available at <http://www.arab-hdr.org/>

inclusion in their societies. Yet, improving educational outcomes and employment rates in and of themselves will not provide youth with a sense of agency (or voice).

## Entry Points

Prioritizing a greater investment in youth and improving policies and programmes with and for youth are required to enable them to reach their full potential.<sup>11</sup> The following are some propositions for entry points in this regard:

1. ***Enabling legislative and policy environments for youth empowerment.*** Enabling legislative and policy frameworks that are instrumental in the identification of national priorities and allocation of resources as well as guide public officials to guarantee protections and eliminate discrimination. Youth empowerment requires laws and policies to specifically address the needs of youth and encourage their meaningful and inclusive participation in society. Most importantly, ensuring a sector-wide approach to implementing youth policy is key for impact and sustainability. However, adopting inclusive governance<sup>12</sup> at the level of institutions, mechanisms, and processes is key to achieving enabling legislative and policy environments. The latter cannot be implemented through a piecemeal and fragmentary approach.
2. ***Supporting economic empowerment and targeting jobs creation.*** Access to decent work and livelihood opportunities, including through economic development are key determinants for the socio-economic empowerment of youth, as they also create a sense of identity and dignity, helping to better integrate young people into their communities. Supporting policies for decent job creation through increased quantity and quality of jobs, and at the same time investing in young people's employability through skills training and entrepreneurship are necessary. Working on both sides of the equation- skills and opportunities- would allow matching skill-sets with current market demands.
3. ***Facilitating youth's engagement in peacebuilding and resilience-building.*** The vast majority of young people globally and in the Arab region have no interest in and do not engage in violence, and already are – or should be – engaged as powerful agents of peace. Youth therefore could make positive contribution to peacebuilding and resilience-building efforts and as such they need to be systematically included in the related processes. Youth could also take on more prominent roles to mitigate and resolve tensions in their communities but their engagement requires deliberate targeting to empower them for such roles as there is a need to address long-standing social norms of patriarchy that make it more difficult for young men and women to lead and make decisions when it comes to peace and security in their communities. Including such norms, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security (2015) highlights the barriers that should be removed to this end for contributing to lasting peace.
4. ***Facilitating youth's role as partners in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.*** The relationship between youth and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is reciprocal. SDGs aim to transform the world by dealing with persistent global development challenges and the empowerment of young men and women is essential for such transformation. Young men and women can be successful agents of change if given the right incentives and if their knowledge, reach, and innovative abilities are cultivated for this purpose.

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<sup>11</sup> 2015. From Rhetoric to Action. The Case for Space Initiative, [Online]. Available at <http://restlessdevelopment.org/file/from-rhetoric-to-action-pdf>. "We are witnessing a worrying global trend as civil society space appears increasingly restricted. (...) we hear and see time and again the systemic barriers and obstacles that inhibit child and youth development."

<sup>12</sup> Refer to the "Inclusive Governance and Sustaining Peace" Background Paper.

5. ***Fostering youth's role in promoting gender equality.*** Youth have a pivotal role to play in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in the Arab region. In order to overcome myriad social, cultural, and economic barriers facing young Arab women, youth must be enlisted as partners. Specifically, they must be provided with guidance and incentives to change narratives about inclusion to contribute to building a gender-sensitive society.

## Questions

1. How can we strengthen existing programmes to include young people as partners in the achievement of the SDGs? What needs to be done to increase their leadership capacities for this purpose?
2. How can stakeholders ensure a sector-wide approach to implementing youth policies?
3. How can development partners expand the space for youth to engage as positive actors of peace?
4. What mechanisms do we need in place to help address the many barriers to youth employment?
5. How can youth play a role as partners in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment?

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<sup>1</sup> Gallup world poll data