

ARAB DIGEST - April 2014

Youth Political Participation and Decision making in the Arab States

I- Arab Youth and Evolving Regional Context

The Arab region has been experiencing a massive youth bulge¹, with more than half of most countries' populations under the age of 25. Young men and women in the Arab region today are the most educated; thus they hold the potential to make a considerable contribution to the development of the region.

"Taking the youth seriously" is not an option but an urgent priority for many countries in the region, which has witnessed the readiness and ability of the young men and women to mobilize the society and became an integral part of the social transformations in tandem with the Arab spring in 2011

Since the Arab Awakening many youth in the region have remained politically active through "political movements" instead of engaging with and in political parties. Young men and women are traditionally active politically in universities (when allowed) but very often disillusioned with political leadership and political institutions and excluded from policy development. As a result, political activism of youth is not organized according to formal groupings.

Opportunities for youth to engage in governance and participate in political and decision-making processes depend largely on the political, socioeconomic, and cultural contexts where social norms in many parts of the world result in multiple forms of discrimination against young women.

Both formal and informal engagement can be understood as political participation, and both are beneficial for a vivid and resilient democracy and should be supported. There is strong evidence that the participation of young people in formal, institutional political processes is relatively low when compared to older citizens across the globe. This challenges the

¹ The increase in the proportion of youth in the population pyramid of the Arab world
http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/Beirut/pdf/YCE%20_EN.pdf

representativeness of the political system and leads to the disenfranchisement of young people.

Young people in the Arab world are thus standing at the crossroads of major changes in their countries. The current generation of young Arab men and women is the most and possibly also the best-educated ever. Yet, many face enormous challenges in finding decent employment and in participating in democratic decision-making processes.

II- Regional overview²

- One out of every five persons in the Arab Region is between 15 and 24 years old and more than half of the population is below the age of 25
- Arab countries have one of the highest regional youth unemployment rate in the world, particularly affecting young Arab Females
- Youth are almost entirely excluded from participation within parliaments in almost half of the Arab countries reaching a low of 7%
- The average age of parliamentarians in the world is 53 (50 years old for women parliamentarians)³ compared to 53 in the Arab States⁴

III- Issues and challenges facing youth participation in the region:

Following the protests and civil unrest in numerous countries of the region (e.g. Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain, Libya and Syria), it is important not to overlook Arab youth aspiration for participation in the decision-making process. More than ever before, young Arab men and women are aware of the importance of participation and its relevance for them, their societies and their future. However, entrenched institutional arrangements, dated governing procedures, and inadequate evaluation and accountability mechanisms have to date contributed to limited youth participation in decision-making processes.

Nevertheless, many Arab States have recently refocused their efforts on youth issues. They have begun to recognize that this important part of the population should not only be thought of as beneficiaries, but also as active agents of economic, social and political transformations. With new, youth-led and youth-oriented civil society organizations flourishing, and more young people utilizing information and communication technologies, Arab youth are now more able to voice opinions, address existing inequalities, and shape community priorities.

² <http://social.un.org/youthyear/docs/Regional%20Overview%20Youth%20in%20the%20Arab%20Region-Western%20Asia.pdf>

³ Over 80 % of parliamentarians are between 40 and 60 years old. In contrast, the median age of the world population in 2009 was 28.4 years.

⁴ Global parliamentary report

IV- Efforts on Youth in the Arab Region

Out of 22 countries in the region⁵, very few have either developed youth policies or are in the process of formulating them. Nevertheless, recent unrest in the region has presented a compelling rationale for governments to bring youth issues firmly into the focus of the national agenda. Policymakers have increasingly recognized the need to formulate national youth policies and action plans, aimed not only at fostering youth human capital development, but also at providing them with the necessary opportunities to reach their full potentials in education, health, employment, and participation in public and political life.

United Nations entities have long been involved in working on youth-related issues in the Arab region. Recognizing the importance of youth initiatives, they work hard to improve the conditions of young Arabs by assisting Member States in achieving development goals. Their work includes but is not limited to: advocacy, promoting national youth policies, strengthening youth participation, and coordinating mechanisms with Member States in order to ensure better outcomes.

V- UNDPs support to Youth Participation- Case studies from the Arab States

1- Libya

UNDP supported the national dialogue on the constitution review process: a national survey around the constitution review process was conducted in March 2013. Local constitutional dialogue sessions were organized in 15 different locations around the country. Approximately 900 Libyans representing various groups, political affiliations, ethnicities, women, youth participated in the dialogues sessions

2- Iraq

70 youth activists (51% women) were empowered to participate in politics. Through the Youth Training Camp, they acquired knowledge on a wide range of issues related to diversity, how to address conflict, advocacy, youth mobilization, social media, project cycle and project management.

3- Lebanon

⁵ The twenty two countries within the Arab region are Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen

In Lebanon: The National Youth Policy Action Plan adopted by the Council of Ministers, was discussed at the Parliament in March 2013 with members of civil society and youth factions of political parties. A Youth Policy Document Implementation Strategy was developed and submitted to the Youth and Sports Parliamentary Committee for adoption in November 2013. Through a series of studies, UNDP helped raise the awareness and strengthen the engagement of MPs on issues related to youth employment and women and youth participation in party structures and elections.

Parliamentary outreach to civil society and women/youth was successfully enhanced. An animated interactive online platform introducing the Lebanese legislative process to youth was created on the Parliament's website, allowing youth/children and citizens at large to interact with MPs and send their inquiries, paving the way for a more involved public with regards to the Parliament and MP workings, capable of efficiently holding MPs accountable. As a result of this, MPs are also better informed now as to the needs of the public, especially youth.

4- Morocco

The Parliament launched its newly adopted Strategic Plan and received support in the area of communication and outreach. In direct follow-up, UNDP is now developing a project to support the Moroccan House of Representatives in implementing its Strategic Plan, with a significant focus on promoting youth participation and opening the institution to youth civil society organizations.

5- OPT

Through the support provided to student councils, young people have acquired the confidence and skills they need to participate in democratic political processes and make their voices heard. Trainings were held in the West Bank and Gaza, helping young people hone their advocacy, oratory and debating skills, while teaching them about the importance of voting and standing for office. The country's first 132 member Youth Parliament was created, resulting in greater political participation and involvement of youth in the democratic practice. 45,505 young men and women registered for the elections, of which 38,911 (25,812 men and 13,099 women) were qualified for voting. 23,187 young people (61% men and 39% women) voted in the elections (60% turnout of registered voters). Young Palestinians learned about the principles of a democratic society—from the separation of powers and social responsibility, to lobbying and advocacy. Young people are now better informed to hold their elected officials as well as service delivery institutions accountable for their actions and/or inaction thanks to the conferences on 'Social Contract' held in Gaza and West Bank for Palestinian youth from all walks of life. Furthermore, the Karama Human Rights Film Festival stimulated dialogue, debate and awareness of human rights and development issues in the Arab world and the OPT. 2600 persons attended the festival. 2 short films were produced, one on gender and other on youth.

6- Somalia

The Parliament's outreach and dialogue strategy was developed. MP's conducted outreach into regions – resulting in a strengthened connection with their constituency. Parliament engaged the public in the ongoing constitutional review process. The Constitution Implementation and Review Committee organized its public launch, with large attendance of Civil Society, including women groups and youth.

VI- What can Parliaments do/Parliamentary Action Points

A- Parliamentary activities and projects promoting youth participation in the Arab States⁶

1- Yemen⁷

The House of Representatives approved a loan agreement for fifty million dollars and signed by the Yemeni government with the Islamic Development Bank, aimed at creating job opportunities for youth. 80% of the fund aims to promote youth employment in rural areas and reduce poverty.

2- Bahrein⁸

Ms. Jamila Suleiman, a member of the advisory board presented a proposal at the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The suggested proposal delves on the protection of the rights of children from exploitation in armed conflicts and demonstrations, and carries a total of 25 recommendations dealing with the role and actions parliamentarians in the field of protection of children's rights, and preventing exploitation in wars and conflicts. The proposal was presented by HE Mr. Jamal Mohammed Fakhro, the first deputy head of the Shura Council during the meeting of the 130 session of the Assembly of Inter-Parliamentary Union held in Geneva, Switzerland.

3- Kuwait⁹

A Kuwaiti Deputy proposed a law stipulating that the government set up a fund for every citizen since birth and spares him/her a monthly amount , which will accumulate to approximately 40 000 dollars.

According to the draft law submitted by MP Askar Al Anzi , the government should deposit fifty dinars (177 dollars) every month to every citizen from birth to adulthood . The bill aims to provide a decent life for young people when they reach adulthood.

⁶ Source Agora News/ Arabic page

⁷ <http://ow.ly/v4wQz>

⁸ <http://ow.ly/v4xgA>

⁹ <http://ow.ly/v4zX1>

4- UAE¹⁰

A 4-member youth parliament comprised of primary and secondary school pupils across the country's seven emirates was created, with all the pomp and ceremony resident in any other parliamentary election process in the world.

Mohammad Ahmad Al Murr, FNC Speaker, said running the UAE school parliament helps ingrain values of democracy in pupils, along with imparting leadership skills and promote political participation.

¹⁰ <http://ow.ly/v4CLr>

PARLIAMENTARY ACTION POINTS

ASKING QUESTIONS

To understand what strategies are in place with regards to the political participation of youth, parliamentarians can ask parliamentary questions. Some of the suggestions below may need to be contextualized to suit a particular national context, but they should prove useful as ‘model questions’:

- What is the parliament currently doing to engage young people? Is there a strategy in place to seek out their ideas and advice?
- To what extent are young people being included in parliamentary processes? Have they been invited to speak at committee hearings, and have they been consulted on relevant legislation?
- In the past year, what pieces of legislation have been passed on youth related issues? Are there pending issues that should be taken up urgently?
- What percentage of the budget is dedicated to youth initiatives? Can this be increased?
- Does the parliament have a social media strategy? If so, is this strategy sufficiently tailored to reach young people?
- What kind of voter education activities are being carried out, and to what extent do they focus on youth? How are schools, universities, societies and so on being targeted?

GETTING ANSWERS

Addressing the issues that are relevant to youth today often requires information, knowledge and technical expertise that is not readily available to most parliamentarians. Soliciting the right kind of information is crucial in designing sound solutions. Parliamentarians can do this in a number of ways:

- **ENGAGING YOUTH ORGANISATIONS AND NETWORKS.** Connecting with young people and organizations who work on these issues on a daily basis can bring a wealth of information and potential solutions to the parliamentary table. Through their own research and advocacy, youth groups and experts have often already done a lot of legwork. You could take on their suggestions with regard to pilot projects, and to build public support for new initiatives.
- **COMMISSIONING RESEARCH AND IMPACT STUDIES:** Research and impact studies can go a long way towards convincing your fellow parliamentarians, and relevant government officials, of the need for youth engagement. Such studies should always be gender-sensitive and should carefully assess the impact on vulnerable groups such as minorities, indigenous peoples and refugees.

- **SUPPORTING YOUNG MPs:** Supporting young MPs and the initiatives they take with regard to youth is pivotal in mainstreaming youth priorities in parliament. Parliament and parliamentarians can support young MPs by launching mentoring schemes, offering training and induction programmes, and giving them the opportunity to take the floor in committee and plenary sessions.

BUILDING CROSS-PARTY NETWORKS

Parliamentarians are likely to be more successful if other MPs support their views. Cross-party collaboration can be very effective where youth is concerned, and can take many forms:

- **COMMITTEES AND PARLIAMENTARY GROUPS:** Working with a parliamentary committee or parliamentary group to gather broad-based support for draft laws or new initiatives will amplify their impact and increase chances of success.
- **CROSS-PARTY NETWORKS OR CAUCUSES:** A cross-party group (or caucus) includes like-minded MPs from different political parties who agree on an issue or policy. Such a group could champion youth issues and ensure that youth is placed at the top of the parliamentary agenda. Beyond this, support from across the political spectrum means initiatives are less likely to be altered following a change of ruling party.

MAINSTREAMING YOUTH POLICIES

Promoting youth policies is most effective when there is a streamlined, consolidated strategy or initiative in place – haphazard policies and a lack of coordination are much less likely to obtain good results. To mainstream youth as a policy priority, parliaments can:

- Develop a **NATIONAL YOUTH POLICY**. This policy should set some key priorities, outline some longer term targets, and ensure that the necessary budgets will be earmarked. For examples of national strategies, please visit Youth Policy at <http://www.youthpolicy.org/>.
- Build a **YOUTH ENGAGEMENT** strategy. Engagement efforts range from arranging open days and school visits to inviting youth to committee hearings and plenary sessions, or consult them on the implementation of youth initiatives.
- Invest in **VOTER EDUCATION INITIATIVES**, focusing on youth.
- **FIND CHAMPIONS** – celebrities who connect with youth and encourage them to join the ‘formal’ conversation on issues that are important to them.
- **REACH OUT:** organise national and sub-national consultations, and engage with youth at the constituency level.