Research Paper

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Young Arab Voices

Moving Youth Policy from Debate into Action

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Summary

- European and US funders have increased their provision of youth-focused programming in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) since the popular uprisings of 2011, but the majority of those in the 18–25 age range have largely disengaged from formal political participation.
- For young people, access to channels for civic participation, within or outside political parties, remains extremely limited. Feelings of disempowerment are prevalent, and policy-making is perceived as being dominated by an older generation of elites who are out of touch with the aspirations and needs of today's youth.
- External assumptions made about the risks of youth radicalization – above all, affiliation to groups such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – often fail to reflect the more commonly expressed desire of many young people to seek ownership and agency in shaping the future of their communities and societies as active and constructive citizens.
- The centralization of political power is a key driver in youth marginalization, blocking their engagement in social and political issues of interest and concern to them. 'Top-down' approaches to national youth policies not only fail to engage young people but also risk increasing their disillusionment. Instead, the value of civil society organizations in providing skills training and capacity-building programmes needs to be recognized through the provision of platforms for young people to express their views at both local and national level.
- Many young people still lack access to a good, formal education, and do not have the 'soft skills' that will best equip them for labour markets in which youth unemployment remains high. Successful youth programmes such as Young Arab Voices (YAV) have a role to play in addressing the gaps in training in transferable skills, but the deployment of these skills also relies on national governments' active engagement with young people.
- The expansion of cultural programmes such as YAV into a Euro-Mediterranean context is an important next step. Notably, the most common aspirations of MENA youth differ little from those that might be expressed by their unemployed and under-represented counterparts in countries such as Spain and Greece: they all seek a better education, jobs, the opportunity to acquire creative skills, and a platform and channels for their collective concerns to be heard by their respective governments.
- The global interconnectedness of youth activism and the interrelated nature of the problems to be addressed need to be reflected more in policies targeting young people. At both the national and the European level, they should not be seen as an undifferentiated category, but as having an important role to play in wider social and economic policies.
- The gap between youth engagement in social and online media, rather than through more conventional broadcast and print media, needs to be addressed in shared platforms for dialogue and engagement with society as a whole. Credible sources of public information, as well as training in research skills, are also critical if young people are to play a full civic role.

Introduction

Since the uprisings of what has been popularly termed the 'Arab Spring' of 2011, a number of youth training programmes have been instigated by European and US cultural institutions to build local capacity and respond to growing demands among young people in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to engage in new forms of civil society activism and prepare themselves for a fuller civic role.

Not all such programmes have survived the vicissitudes of the past five years, and the circumstances have not always been propitious for young people in the MENA region to contribute to shaping their own futures. The regional reality – including in Tunisia, which has made the greatest progress towards a democratic transition since 2011 – is that the majority of those in the 18–25 age range[1] have largely disengaged from formal political participation. For those whose formal educational experience has been poor or deficient, access to channels for civic participation, within or outside political parties, remains extremely limited. Where these channels do exist, they rarely address the needs of youth in neglected neighbourhoods and isolated rural communities. The young and educated, in turn, are discovering that the skills they have acquired in the region's formal education systems do not equip them adequately for the changing demands of the workplace in employment markets that are still precarious. Since the 'Arab Spring' they have therefore become more focused on their own personal and professional development.

However, the programme jointly sponsored by the Anna Lindh Foundation and British Council under the title Young Arab Voices (YAV)[2] is one of the most successful examples of a skills transfer and training initiative that is continuing to expand. This research paper is the result of a joint consortium project ('Debate to Action') convened by the Anna Lindh Foundation to review the context within which the YAV programme is currently delivered as it enters its second stage. The role of Chatham House researchers has been to reflect on the wider policy implications of expanding the YAV programme to reach new participants and audiences, as well as to make coherent links between the skill sets acquired through the programme and their impact on delivering real change for young people in the MENA region. The linked themes of youth participation and empowerment underlie the reflections set out here, which also have implications for wider youth programming and policy, both at the national level and as externally conceived.

The role of culture as a vehicle for promoting better understanding of MENA youth dynamics is also inherent in the second-stage planning of a programme that was originally designed to focus on the informal educational and cultural needs of a young generation emerging from the 'Arab Spring'. Despite initially high hopes, the period from 2011 to early 2013 failed to see the emergence of national or regional policies that significantly improved the socio-economic and political inclusion of MENA youth. For those MENA countries and governments that have subsequently avoided a dramatic

[1] The age range for youth used in this paper is 18–25 years, in keeping with the target group for the YAV programme. However, different age ranges (from 15 up to 29) are used by governments and other external youth programme providers, depending on the most relevant target group for the issues addressed and associated policy responses. See the discussion on what age range constitutes 'youth' in the Moroccan government's youth strategy for 2015–30: Ministère de la Jeunesse et Sports en collaboration avec le Comité Interministeriel de la Jeunesse (2014), *Stratégie Nationale Intégrée de la Jeunesse 2015–2030,* http://mjs.gov.ma/upload/MoDUle_1/File_1_319.pdf.

[2] See Young Arab Voices website: http://www.youngarabvoices.org/.

descent into violence, as in Syria, or virtual state collapse, as in Libya, the immediate policy priority is now maintaining political and economic stability rather than promoting youth empowerment, which is perceived to carry its own security and other risks.

In response to this new regional climate, second-stage plans for the YAV programme are being finalized at the time of writing to include the extension of its training model to two new MENA populations (Lebanon and the Palestinian territories) and into the Euro-Mediterranean area. With anticipated financial support from the European Commission's Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (EU NEAR) and the political backing of the European External Action Service (EEAS) of the European Union (EU), the aim is to link European youth more directly with their North African and Middle Eastern counterparts in debates and shared training and advocacy activities. The Anna Lindh Foundation is already actively involved, via its Euro-Mediterranean networks, in a number of cultural and educational activities linking the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean,[3] but the proposed extension of the YAV programme into Europe would be the first time that a programme delivered exclusively in the south was then adapted to include participants in Europe. The stronger link to European institutions also means the YAV model will more directly involve the creation of youth partnerships across Europe's southern neighbourhood region, as set out in November 2015 in the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy review.[4]

> At the level of total youth populations – namely the millions of young people across the region, rather than the low thousands identified as having affiliations with ISIS and other jihadist groups – the evidence suggests that the vast majority reject radical alternatives to the challenges they face.

Ahead of these developments, the findings of this paper take the form of a brief stocktaking of YAV across the MENA region, based on interviews and focus group discussions with YAV participants, programme alumni and trainers, supplemented by insights from stakeholders and observers of the programme over the past five years. The aim has been to highlight in qualitative rather than quantitative form the reactions and reflections of a sample group presented with a number of the policy assumptions that currently inform the design of youth programming in the MENA region. By relating participants' experience of applying the skills acquired through YAV training to the specific contexts in which they live, a number of key pointers for the future design of YAV programming have emerged.[5] Some valuable insights have also been gained into what young people across the region identify as representing their own priorities and aspirations, which is this paper's primary focus.

Three key assumptions underlie the research for this paper. The first is the salience of the region-wide risk of youth radicalization. This is explored in part because of the growing preoccupation of external governments, international organizations and programme funders with the local and overspill effects

[3] The Anna Lindh Foundation is the only organization to conduct a regular (four-yearly) survey of European and Arab reciprocal cultural views. Its latest survey, published in 2014, reflected a strong interest in greater mutual engagement on both sides of the Mediterranean. See Spencer, C. (2014), 'A Vision for Social and Cultural Relations in the Euro-Med Region', in *Anna Lindh Report on Intercultural Trends* (in association with Gallup) (2014), http://www.annalindhfoundation.org/report/vision-social-and-cultural-relations-euro-med-region.

[4] High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2015), *Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy*, 18 November 2015, http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/documents/2015/151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf. The relevant paragraphs for youth programming fall under 'Partnerships for Youth', p. 21.

[5] YAV programme-specific recommendations have been relayed to and discussed with the programme sponsors separately from this paper.

into Europe of the ideologies espoused by groups such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).[6] Yet few clear links have been established to date between more aggregate forms of youth exclusion (through unemployment and social and political marginalization, for example) and the recruitment of specific individuals and communities to radical armed groups, ideologies and causes. As a recent study of foreign fighters recruited to ISIS points out, particular communities within MENA states are clearly more vulnerable to radicalization than others.[7] But at the level of total youth populations – namely the millions of young people across the region, rather than the low thousands identified as having affiliations with ISIS and other jihadist groups – the evidence suggests that the vast majority reject radical alternatives to the challenges they face.

The second assumption relates to the need for youth voices to be more widely heard in respect of the contribution they can bring to bear: if young people in the MENA region are provided with access to policy platforms, at the national and international level, they will be more effective advocates for policy changes to address the structural deficits that prevent them from participation.

The third assumption relates to the MENA region's new and existing media platforms as a vehicle for young people to establish their own channels for public communication, advocacy and debate: giving young people in the Middle East a distinct media presence will provide them with opportunities to shape the debate on issues that are of concern to them.

A number of reports and studies published since 2011 have recommended greater youth access to local and national decision-makers through officially created youth councils, consultation mechanisms and the media, but these often overestimate the receptivity of the region's decision-makers to the messaging of youth through formal structures alone.[8] Shaping the context within which programmes such as YAV operate similarly risks being neglected in next-stage planning, either because the immediate focus is on equipping youth to engage with and influence local decision-makers themselves, or because the programmes are too narrowly focused. As a recent Mercy Corps report on youth programming in Afghanistan, Colombia and Somalia concluded:

> There is a tendency to create individual projects – economic development, education, conflict and peace building, civil society – in which youth may be a target population, rather than youth-focused programs that bring different sectors under one roof.[9]

In other words, second-stage youth programming must reflect the actual context in which newly empowered young people can realistically access the areas of economic, social, civic and educational policy that most concern and interest them. Their inclusion as active members of civil society is, in reality, a two-way street in which existing social, economic and political elites also have a role to play in understanding the benefits of participation by young people, and responding constructively to their initiatives. It is thus incumbent on external policy-makers and funders with access to local and national decision-makers to include elements in their programming that encourage social and economic gatekeepers in the MENA region to open more doors to innovative ideas and people.

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[6] See for example UNESCO's conference in June 2105 on 'Youth and the Internet: the Internet and fighting radicalization and extremism', http://en.unesco.org/youth-and-internet-fighting-radicalization-and-extremism; Petre, C. (2015), 'Tunisian youth counter radicalization with innovation', World Bank blog, 31 July 2015, http://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/tunisian-youth-counter-radicalization-innovation.

[7] Soufan Group (2015), *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, December 2015. See graphic on p. 11: 'More than a third of Tunisian foreign fighters originate from just three areas' (Ben Gardane 15,2%; Bizerte 10.7%; and Tunis 10.7%), http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf.

[8] See for example the OECD's very thorough review of MENA youth initiatives, including in relation to gender, with recommendations for regional governments in *Youth in the MENA Region: How to bring them in* (preliminary version), 2015, http://www.oecd.org/mena/governance/Youth-in-the-MENA-region.pdf.

[9] Mercy Corps (2015), *Youth & Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence*, February 2015, p. 50, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MercyCorps_YouthConsequencesReport_2015.pdf.

This paper provides only a snapshot of how a small number of the region's youth view the causal links between the frustrations that many openly admit to experiencing and the kind of remedies and approaches needed to move their lives on to a more socially integrated and secure footing. None of the sample interviewed see violence as the way forward, nor do they mention ISIS as an immediate preoccupation except in so far as it distorts the external image and prospects for their societies, or in the context of the destabilizing effects of terrorist attacks across the region and in Europe. A clear priority that emerged from the interviews and focus groups was the need to address existing issues at the very root of their causes. Much emphasis was of course placed on the standard of education within societies and communities, on the culture that this creates in the digital age, and on how the education system caters for the development of the individuals that it produces.

It bodes well for establishing common ground with their European counterparts in the second stage of YAV programming that the most common aspirations of the young people engaged in discussion for this project differ little from those that might be expressed by the youth in Spain and Greece, for example: for a better education, jobs, the acquisition of creative skills, and a platform and channels for their collective concerns to be heard by their respective governments. As a group, they are eager to become their society's problem-solvers, not problem-creators; and they seek to work within their societies, not against them.

The Young Arab Voices (YAV) programme

The YAV programme started in 2011 as a joint initiative of the British Council and the Anna Lindh Foundation, funded over an initial three-year period by the British government's Arab Partnership Fund. The programme has both a domestic and a regional profile in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan, and in its second stage will be extended to include new participants and trainers in the Palestinian territories and in Lebanon. To date, at least 80,000 people are estimated to have benefited from its impacts, either through formal training or participation in locally organized 'debate clubs', or through secondary and less structured activities deriving from what is essentially an informal education programme.

The aim of YAV has been simple: to engage the age group from 18 to 25 years in learning and deploying the techniques of debating in formally structured contexts, as well as, perhaps more critically, in adapting the skills learned to their everyday life as students, jobseekers, teachers and civil society activists. As one graduate of the YAV programme put it, at a regional meeting held in November 2015: 'Debating in YAV is not just another training programme, it is a state of mind.'[10]

The skills acquired through the practice of public debating are grounded in critical thinking, which is not traditionally taught in formal educational settings across the MENA region. Participants are first taught to listen, understand and absorb what others in the group are saying before responding to the messages being relayed, rather than reacting to the person, the situation or the assumed context of the arguments put forward. For many, being asked to prepare a set of arguments to back a proposition they do not necessarily support or believe in real life has been a novel experience. One of the resulting advantages most cited by participants is the ability to stop and think about how to get their own messages across in a variety of contexts, where putting themselves in the place of their interlocutor is a critical part of the process of productive communication.

[10] YAV graduate, speaking at YAV regional meeting held in Thessaloniki, Greece, November 2015.

Learning and practising public speaking is another asset that many have not had the chance to acquire through other means, especially in formal education. Above all, such skills increase their confidence to speak out on issues that matter to them, and to assume greater leadership roles in their everyday lives. However, if there are not the local audiences to listen sympathetically and then act on their insights, the risk of frustration increases.[11] For policy-makers concerned about youth radicalization, it is clear, as Mercy Corps advises, that more on-the-ground research needs to be funded to establish the direct causal links between unemployment, marginalization, frustrated expectations and violence. One of the unintended, and paradoxical, consequences of training programmes delivered in societies with limited outlets for young people to deploy the skills acquired is that graduates of these programmes are being better equipped to join forces with anti-establishment groups. Precisely because they learn to appraise the inherent structural injustices they perceive in their society of birth, their expectations for change, if not met through official channels, risk being deflected towards engaging with groups that promise change through violence.[12]

One of the strengths of the YAV programme has been its ability to prepare its participants to think constructively about what they will do with the skill sets acquired through debating, even if the outlets for engaging in civic action are currently limited. As an experiment in transferring what is essentially an Anglo-Saxon model of formal debate, YAV has had an unexpected cultural and personal resonance among participants. In a delivery model based on 'training the trainers' to 'cascade' the transfer of skills beyond national capitals to the setting up of debate clubs and networks in often small localities, the outreach of the YAV programme has been difficult to quantify numerically. None the less, one example of its informal influence was captured anecdotally by a Tunisian primary schoolteacher who told a regional meeting of YAV participants, trainers and stakeholders held in November 2015 that she often uses YAV skills to engage her pupils in resolving conflicts in the classroom.

The best local YAV trainers go on to follow 'master trainer' courses at the regional level or in Europe; competitive debates take place at regional level between mixed teams of debaters, and delegations of experienced debaters have recently undertaken dissemination and advocacy visits to London and Brussels.[13]

As the YAV programme has matured, and in parallel with other regional youth training programmes, current and former participants in YAV have shown a desire to move beyond 'debating for the sake of debating' towards applying their skills to concrete action in a number of fields. Five years after the 'Arab Spring', many of those in their twenties are now tired of being asked by external funders and agencies what they think of various local and regional developments, especially if the ideas they share are not acted on or responded to in any follow-up activity. This view comes across strongly in the regional interviews conducted for this paper, as does scepticism that a consultation process seeking to improve on the existing YAV programme will really address the gaps they identify. Yet much of what follows is characterized by the desire to participate and be heard, along with hope for the future. In any activity, the views of those most directly involved clearly need to carry weight in identifying the strengths, weaknesses and overlooked opportunities in both the programmatic delivery and the context within which it is taking place.

[11] This observation is also made in the context of Mercy Corps' critique of programming that assumes that building skills for employability among the young decreases their propensity to turn to violence. If there are no jobs or outlets for young people to integrate further in their societies, the opposite is often true. See Mercy Corps (2015), *Youth & Consequences*, p. 17.
[12] Ibid., p. 35.
[13] External dissemination and policy engagement visits have included the London 'YAV week' in October 2015 and meetings at Chatham House and in the House of Lords, followed by a meeting of EU institutions in January 2016, hosted by the Friends of Europe in Brussels. In March 2016 a Regional Debate Forum in Tunis brought together the winners of the national YAV Debate Tournament held over the previous month together with youth alumni for related advocacy and profile-raising events.

Methodology and Contextual Review

Research methodology

The research for this paper took place throughout November 2015. The methodologies used were focus group discussions and interviews with young people from Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco who have had varying degrees of experience with YAV, including those currently enrolled in the project, alumni and 'key informants'. In coordination with British Council and Anna Lindh Foundation partners in each country, focus group participants and interviewees were identified from established in-country networks and invited to participate.

In total, 78 people across the five countries were surveyed. Two focus groups were conducted in each country. Additionally, three or four interviews were conducted with key informants in each country, including experienced YAV alumni who had undertaken the 'training of trainers' programme and local partners of the YAV programme involved in delivering training and debates, as well as individuals without any experience of YAV, but with considerable professional experience in youth governance and capacity-building or other youth initiatives.

Focus groups and interviews were conducted in Amman, Tunis, Algiers, Rabat and Alexandria. While efforts were made to invite participants from a broad socio-economic and geographic spectrum, in some cases the logistics of attendance proved to be too difficult, and a significant number were not based in the cities in which the research was conducted. Many of the focus group participants were either current students in their initial engagement in the YAV programme or recent graduates of the programme, and most remained active in the YAV programme in their country in some capacity, while some were part of the alumni networks.

Time and resource constraints precluded travel by the researchers outside the main cities visited. Undoubtedly, further travel would have enabled the same issues and elements of the YAV programme to be explored in less urban areas. Table 1 provides a breakdown of participants by gender in each country.

Table 1: Number of participants in each country, by gender

Country	Male	Female	Total
Jordan	13	8	21
Tunisia	6	7	13
Morocco	9	6	15
Algeria	7	9	16
Egypt	7	6	13
Total	42	36	78

Source: Chatham House.

All focus group participants and interviewees were presented with the three assumptions already outlined in the Introduction – namely the importance of the region-wide risk of youth radicalization, the need for youth voices to be more widely heard in respect of the contribution they can bring to bear, and the need for young people to establish their own channels for public communication, advocacy

and debate. These assumptions were prompted by discussions within the project consortium about the changing regional context for youth programming, and policy priorities identified by the project funder. The qualitative analysis in this paper is based on the discussions that took place in the five countries, in response to the following propositions:

- Building the capacity of young people in the Middle East and North Africa in skills of effective research and debate will enhance their resilience to radicalization and their engagement in political and societal issues.
- Providing young people in the region with access to policy platforms at the national and global level will enable them to advocate for policy changes to address the structural deficits that prevent them from participating more effectively.
- Building a distinct media presence for young people in the region will provide them with opportunities to shape the debate on issues that are of concern to them.

(*Expanded questions used for discussions in interviews and focus groups based on the above propositions can be found in the Appendix to this paper.*)

The interviews and focus group discussions referred to in this paper are not meant to present an in-depth, comprehensive analysis of the political, social and cultural dynamics in each of the five countries. Rather, they are intended to provide a better understanding of the common challenges and opportunities experienced by individuals previously or currently involved in the YAV programme in engaging in social and political issues within their respective countries.

Policy context

The research also highlighted the importance of acknowledging and taking into consideration the different social and political contexts of young people in each country. Although similar themes emerged in the challenges facing young people in engaging in policy-related actions, those challenges are rooted in their particular domestic political and social contexts.

The research findings from this specific programme, albeit involving only a limited number of interviewees, concur with the broader findings and recommendations of a number of other reviews of youth programmes in the MENA region and beyond since 2011. Of these, the EU itself commissioned a number of single-country reviews of youth employability in the MENA region during 2013–14, and summarized its cross-regional findings in 2015.[14] The World Bank, the OECD and others have also produced reports on the programmes that national governments and international funders should implement and support in respect of integrating and employing young people aged between 18 and 29, who currently represent a regional average of 28 per cent of the total population.[15] Most conclude that at both the national and the regional level much more needs to be done in an area that has the world's highest levels of youth and graduate unemployment.[16]

[14] See the European Training Foundation's country reports conducted in 2013–14 on Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine and Tunisia, and its consolidated regional report *The Challenge of Youth Employability in Arab Mediterranean Countries –The Role of Active Labour Market Programmes* (2015), http://www.etf.europa.eu/web.nsf/pages/Youth_employability_AMCs.
[15] See Youth Policy, http://www.youthpolicy.org/mappings/regionalyouthscenes/mena/facts/#FN13.
[16] See OECD (2015), *Youth in the MENA Region: How to bring them in.*

In the non-governmental sector, alongside Mercy Corps' focus on the lessons to be drawn for youth programming,[17] a summary report written by young researchers of Youth Policy Labs highlighted the need for national and local governments to look beyond formal youth policies to include informal youth movements in their consultations and planning.[18] An internal review of the YAV programme was also conducted in 2014, with the aim of assessing the progress of the programme and its impact on individuals involved, and drawing lessons for the support of future partners.[19] In the policy sphere, a recent EuroMeSCo (Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission) report examines in depth the challenges facing young people in the MENA region, concluding that the current youth bulge is more often deemed to be 'a "problem" and "a threat" to national and regional security' than the opportunity for growth that it should in practice represent.[20]

Responses to date

Formal youth policies across the MENA region vary from the detailed (in the case of Morocco[21]) to those limited to youth employment measures; a new section on the role of youth is included in Algeria's recently amended constitution.[22] In most countries, some effort has been made to incorporate formal youth consultation through the official creation of youth assemblies or parliaments, or as sub-sections within political parties, but no national-level youth councils have been formally constituted.[23] The overwhelming conclusion from the interviews analysed in this paper is that the majority of young people do not feel that these processes have resulted in any concrete improvement in their prospects; for many, the likelihood of long periods of unemployment has increased since 2011, and educational standards have also declined. Above all, they note the widening gaps between outmoded teaching methods, the utility of qualifications acquired and the needs of the marketplace. In some countries it remains easier for non-skilled and low-skilled workers to find employment than for skilled workers and university graduates to do so.

The region's governments alone cannot solve challenges that arise in large part from an ongoing youth bulge which currently means that, on average, over 50 per cent of the region's population are aged under 20. New approaches to youth programming across the region need not only to build an innovative and self-reliant workforce, but also to invest in new forms of creative activity. Where the public sectors of the MENA region cannot absorb jobseekers to the degree they have done in the past, more needs to be done to reconceptualize and rehabilitate the private sector in economies characterized by bureaucratic, legal and financial hurdles to the creation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). A large informal sector (representing 40 per cent of the economies of Morocco and Algeria), as well as parastatal or private business sectors often closely tied to and favoured

[17] See footnote 11.
[18] Youth Policy Labs (2015), *From Rhetoric to Action: Towards an Enabling Environment for Child and Youth Development in the Sustainable Development Goals*, Berlin: The Case for Space Initiative, http://www.fromrhetorictoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/fromrhetorictoaction_research_report.pdf.
[19] Kemp, R. B., with support from Mathes, S. and Khagram, S. (2014), 'Young Arab Voices Strategic Review 2014' (Internal Draft), 16 October 2014.
[20] Colombo, S. (ed.), Abdalla, N., Shaban, O. and Schäfer, I. (2016), *Youth Activism in the South and East Mediterranean Countries since the Arab Uprisings: Challenges and Policy Options*, EuroMeSCo Joint Policy Study 2, February 2016, http://www.euromesco.net/images/papers/joint%20policy%20study_youth.pdf.
[21] See Ministère de la Jeunesse et Sports en collaboration avec le Comité Interministeriel de la Jeunesse (Morocco) (2014), *Stratégie Nationale Intégrée de la Jeunesse 2015–2030*.
[22] Algérie Presse Service (2016), 'Algeria-EU – Launch of Operational Phase of Youth-Employment Support Programme', 19 January 2016, http://allafrica.com/stories/201601200888.html; Bozonnet, C. (2016), 'En Algérie, la réforme de la Constitution adoptée', *Le Monde*, 6 February 2016, http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/02/06/en-algerie-l-apres-bouteflika-se-met-en-place_4860639_3210.html.
[23] The Moroccan constitution as revised in 2011 envisages the creation of a Consultative Council on Youth and Associative Action, but this has yet to be constituted. See Colombo, S. (ed.) et al., *Youth Activism*, p. 12, fn. 3.

by the state, often block the entrance of newcomers to the formal private sector through unfair competition. New business models, including social enterprise (in which private business models reinvest or redirect their profits to socially beneficial ends and objectives) are already being explored in the region as a means to link sustainable streams of income to social goals in ways that reduce dependency on the state or on time-limited project grants from external funders.[24]

In Tunisia the unemployment rate of graduates is the highest in the MENA region. The most immediate response of successive governments since 2011 has been to increase public-sector employment in ways that are now becoming unsustainable.[25] Increasing the appeal of and opportunities within the private sector has failed to compensate for the ongoing attraction of the public sector, which continues to dominate much of the labour market across the whole MENA region.

This mismatch suggests that self-employment, including in the informal sector, is the most viable way forward for a generation that, even under high rates of economic growth, would not easily secure a job. However, the informal sector lends itself readily to youth exploitation and, like the start-up and SME sector, has insufficient safeguards in legal systems that for the most part still penalize failure through the criminalization of bankruptcy. Likewise, social expectations have moved slowly since 2011, with unrealistic ideas about their 'entitlement' to a job (above all in the public sector) remaining prevalent in the minds of many new university graduates. The social stigma attached to taking a less secure or prestigious job, including in the private sector, leads many graduates into voluntary unemployment. This often results in years spent without any acquiring any work experience at all, and with no prospect of moving out of the family home.

> The parents and grandparents of MENA youth still reference national broadcast and print media for their understanding of current affairs, while young people themselves derive their understanding of the world from a variety of media in which officially sponsored channels and traditional newspapers do not feature as a primary source for many.

For those in full-time education or employment, the overriding concern is to play a greater role in addressing the gaps in policy delivery and implementation in their immediate environments, especially as consumers of education at a time when a number of governments are launching national educational reform initiatives. Despite profound scepticism about the responsiveness of official political systems, young people retain a strong interest in engaging as full and active citizens outside formal political circles, above all in drawing on their own experience and networks to promote changes in their immediate community and educational environments.

In this respect, generational gaps play a critical role; the prevalence of internet skills and the acquisition of English among the young – often self-taught or improved online – have led to the growth of mutual suspicions between younger generations who are well aware of the opportunities and ideas that exist outside their immediate environment and societies, and older generations

[24] One of the 'Debate to Action' partners, In Place of War, has in parallel to this paper been exploring the potential to develop its certified programme of cultural and creative training, the Creative Entrepreneurial Programme (CEP) in the YAV countries, as a form of social enterprise in the creative sectors. See 'Education IPOW', http://www.inplaceofwar.net/about-us.

[25] See *The Economist* (2016), 'Trouble in Tunisia: Dying to work for the government', 30 January 2016: Tunisia's 'public-sector wage bill almost doubled between 2010 and 2014. It now accounts for over 13% of GDP, one of the highest shares in the world.' http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21689616-unemployment-undermining-tunisias-transition-dying-work-government?zid=304&ah=e5690753dc78ce91909083042ad12e30.

who remain attached to social models based on hierarchies and respect for age and experience. Young people often find that their most immediate hurdles arise from parental and family expectations of how they should conduct themselves and define their individual socio-economic and civic aspirations. This is exacerbated by the lack of media outlets that provide a platform for youth views to be heard in society. As a result, the intergenerational acquisition of knowledge and news, and the discussion of ideas, often take place on parallel planes and in different vocabularies, even in the same households. The parents and grandparents of MENA youth still reference national broadcast and print media for their understanding of current affairs, while young people themselves derive their understanding of the world from a variety of media in which officially sponsored channels and traditional newspapers do not feature as a primary source for many.

Bridging the generation gap and mediating change in the social, familial and community context require sensitivity to the way in which both older and younger generations have experienced the rapid political and social turbulence across the MENA region since 2011. For older generations schooled in an acceptance of social hierarchies, the challenge of ceding more public space to younger people not only counters established cultural norms, but also threatens their positions and established interests at a time of heightened insecurity and socio-economic disruptions. The most constructive responses to current developments often come from those in what might now be termed the 'post-Arab Spring' generation who, having participated in or observed the trajectory of the past five years, are now more sanguine about the inevitability of change and accept that it will take time to come about. Reluctance to engage in formal politics, or the active discouragement from doing so that often prevails in their immediate environment, has not deterred many of this generation from wanting to prepare themselves for a more active political role when the time is ripe.

In a broader sense, the desire of young people to engage in refashioning their society in ways that reflect their increasing global interconnectedness is palpable at a time when most external interest in the MENA region is more narrowly focused on the region's security threats and conflicts. As already emphasized, the vast majority of young people across the MENA region are not involved in or inspired by the radical ideologies that attract so much attention in European and US policy circles. Rather, in discussing religion, ethnic and sectarian differences and the conflicts – both violent and non-violent – in their own societies and the wider region, the region's young people are acutely aware of the risk that inappropriate policies and public action will exacerbate the polarized positions already apparent within their own communities.

The EU's 2015 review of its European Neighbourhood Policy (in place since 2003) offers new opportunities for the region's youth to engage in external partnerships, above all with counterparts in Europe, through the extension of school and university exchanges, allowing for more European students to use Erasmus funding to study within the MENA region and for 'Erasmus +' to be extended to higher education establishments in conflict regions. There will also be a new emphasis on encouraging the kind of education, training and youth policy exchanges envisaged in the second-stage planning for YAV. Nevertheless, the text of the EU's review focuses much more heavily on increasing its security cooperation with MENA governments than on youth employment and partnerships, and this may pose problems for the growth of non-governmental activities in this sphere.[26]

[26] High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2015), *Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy*.

Challenges and Opportunities for Youth Engagement: The Regional Context

Youth attitudes to political and social engagement

The Arab uprisings of 2011 onwards raised hopes among youth populations for reforms that would include them more fully in decision-making processes. They expected their governments to do more to create a setting that would better incorporate youth voices from all social and political backgrounds. In the case of Egypt and Tunisia in particular, young people had high ambitions and optimism. For many, however, the reforms to which they aspired have yet to be realized; and in some cases the situation has even regressed, which has only increased frustration.

In Egypt this frustration has led to disengagement, apathy and a lack of participation in social and political issues and processes, as well as an increased sense of disillusionment.[27] This has left young people vulnerable to other, less legitimate pathways that seek to co-opt such sentiments. It is therefore essential for policy-makers to address this disengagement from society without compromising individual ambitions. Capacity-building measures are fundamental in this regard, but no less so than constructive outlets for the skills learned to be put to use in the broader society. Young people should likewise be encouraged to use their power responsibly to challenge existing political and social relationships and structures.[28]

In Tunisia one civil society activist noted that despite the significant cultural shift towards freer dialogue and discussion, a significant portion of youth remains disillusioned about engaging in formal political spaces.[29] Although there is a good level of engagement on political and social issues in the country, there is considerable cynicism owing to the failure of domestic political representatives to fulfil many of the ambitions of the revolution. Nevertheless, one Tunisian participant argued that goals of enshrining freedoms and justice, and of ending the abuse of power remained an ambition not just among the youth but among all Tunisians.[30] Despite the frustration, focus group participants stated that securing freedoms and liberties gained as a result of the revolution was fundamental to the achievement of future goals.[31]

In Morocco the 20 February Movement sought to establish a more democratic constitution, with a clearer separation of powers. Among the protesters' demands were measures to ensure the freedom of the press and an end to corruption, with more transparency and separation between business and politics.[32] These calls for reform gave rise to constitutional revisions that were subsequently endorsed in a national referendum in July 2011. Focus group participants noted the greater powers of accountability that were granted to civil society groups as a consequence. One participant cited

[27] Focus group, Egypt, November 2015.
[28] Youth Policy Labs (2015), *From Rhetoric to Action*, pp. 9–10.
[29] Interview, Tunisia, November 2011.
[30] Ibid. See also Bendermel, R. (2015), 'Why are so many Tunisians joining IS?', *Middle East Eye*, 11 December 2015, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/why-are-so-many-tunisians-joining-748811153.
[31] Focus group, Tunisia, November 2015.
[32] Madani, M., Maghraoui, D. and Zerhouni, S. (2013), 'The 2011 Moroccan Constitution: A Critical Analysis', *Institute for Democratic and Electoral Assistance*, March 2013, pp. 10–11.

the example of the dismissal of the youth and sports minister in January 2015, stating that this had been achieved in part through pressure from civil society organizations and social media.[33]

In Jordan the impact of the Arab uprisings is treated with greater caution. Although many young people are sympathetic to the ambitions of increased engagement and inclusion in political and social issues, the Jordanian youth who took part in this research related these ambitions to what is happening in neighbouring conflicts and considered the implications for Jordanian society. As one interviewee put it: 'If you see what is happening today in Syria and to Syrians it makes you think, if I went out protesting tomorrow, where would I go if violence broke out?'[34]

In Algeria the 'Black Decade' of the civil war of the 1990s has left a lasting impression on the popular mindset, especially in relation to youth engagement and participation on social and political issues.[35] Despite this, one Algerian participant noted a slow but steady shift towards overcoming reluctance to engage and play a more active role in reforms, but also noted that young people in Algeria still need to manage their ambitions carefully.[36] In many cases these have been tempered by caution in social and political circles since the end of the civil war, heightened more recently by the changing regional security climate, falling oil prices (which seriously affects Algeria's economy) and anxiety over the future of the country's political leadership.

Youth access to formal power structures

Across the region, young people face a number of challenges in gaining access to policy platforms in order to advocate on key domestic or regional issues. Inadequate access to official and reliable information was one key limiting factor, and it was also evident from the meetings conducted that, to varying degrees, poor access to information and policy-makers restricted the scope for youth engagement.

Public access to quality and reliable information allows young people to play a better-informed and more active role in public debate. The governments in Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan have undertaken initiatives that are looking either to introduce or to improve on existing legislation on wider access to public information. The Tunisian government is planning to implement an action plan that will lead to the creation of a steering committee and an information commission. In Morocco the government has organized public consultations on a draft law with representatives of parliament, civil society and academia, together with international experts. In Jordan an amendment to the existing Access to Information Law in 2012 granted, *inter alia*, access to required information to non-nationals.[37]

As focus group participants in Algeria explained, there is a fundamental problem with access to information on key issues, such as economic reforms, housing and health services.[38] This demotivates young people and has increased the sense of apathy and widespread political and social disengagement that followed the civil war.[39] Participants explained that the national experience of the war had led to a great reluctance within families to support or encourage the engagement of younger members in any

[33] Focus group, Morocco, November 2015. For background, see El Yaakoubi, A., 'Morocco king sacks sports minister over flooded soccer pitch', *Al-Arabiya,* 7 January 2015, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/sports/2015/01/07/Morocco-king-sacks-sports-minister-over-flooded-soccer-pitch.html.
[34] Interview, Jordan, November 2015.
[35] Focus group, Algeria, November 2015.
[36] Focus group, Algeria, November 2015.
[37] OECD (2015), *Youth in the MENA Region: How to bring them in,* p. 45.
[38] Focus group, Algeria, November 2015.
[39] Focus group, Algeria, November 2015.

state-related activities.[40] This context differs significantly from the national experiences of the other participating YAV countries, which have not had a comparable civil conflict in the last 20–30 years. These factors have led to the formation of a political 'bubble' in Algeria which is out of reach of those who are not part of the political elite and thus leaves little formal space for youth participation.[41]

In Morocco, by contrast, the new constitution sought to further institutionalize youth participation in the formal political spaces, with the introduction of initiatives such as local youth councils.[42] However, young people have still encountered their own significant obstacles to and restrictions on engagement and participation within the major political parties, with focus groups and participants citing issues of nepotism and opportunism.[43]

Young people often have the impression that domestic decision-making power lies in agreements and relationships that are forged outside the official political processes. One interviewee explained this in the context of Jordan, where politics have their roots in the country's tribal society. Although this is not necessarily seen as a negative issue in Jordanian society, the interviewee acknowledged that it can undermine the role and power of party politics.[44]

Lack of access to power and the feeling of disempowerment are, for many young people, tied to persistent intergenerational tensions. The perception that policy-making elites are dominated by an older generation that is out of touch with the aspirations and needs of today's youth was highlighted numerous times in the countries visited, and is a clear driver for the exclusion and marginalization of young people.[45] Participants noted the clear tensions that exist as a result; political and social issues that are discussed in the public sphere are too often representative of the older generation's perspective, not that of the youth, and many remarked on a lack of leadership for young people. As one Tunisian interviewee noted:

> Often the youth feel that the political discourse in Tunisia is not reflective of the issues, priorities and discussions of its time. This creates a reluctance to engage in politics among youth, which can be a contributing driver of radicalization. Radicalization can be framed in a way that it is made [to seem] the only clear way to achieve change, it can become attractive in that sense.[46]

The poor political representation of young people was also a recurring issue in discussions among focus group participants, who often expressed frustration that one reason why the youth voice is not heard in decision-making circles is its lack of adequate representation in formal political spaces. Too often, they asserted, talk of greater inclusion and action on behalf of the young fails to materialize, damaging the confidence placed in existing processes and political representatives. Focus group participants in Morocco noted that, despite increased efforts by the government to engage young people on political and social issues, much more could have been done, as indicated by their continued reliance on social media outlets, rather than public forums, as platforms to discuss political and social issues.[47] For some young people in Morocco there is a sense that youth issues are often a low priority for policy-makers, with youth quotas in assemblies and political parties often

[40] Focus group, Algeria, November 2015.
[41] Focus group, Algeria, November 2015.
[42] Euromed Youth (2014), *Youth work in Morocco and youth participation projects at local level,* EuroMed Youth Programme IV and SALTO-Youth EuroMed Resource Centre, p. 19, http://www.euromedyouth.net/Youth-work-in-Morocco-and-youth-participation-projects-at-local-level-534.html.
[43] Focus group, Morocco, November 2015.
[44] Interview, Jordan, November 2015.
[45] See also Parker, E. (2013), 'Tunisian youth: between political exclusion and civic engagement', Tunisia Live, 14 June 2013, http://www.tunisialive.net/2013/06/14/tunisian-youth-between-political-exclusion-and-civic-engagement/.
[46] Interview, Tunisia, November 2015.
[47] Focus group, Morocco, November 2015.

dominated by tactical voting and in some cases subject to nepotism, which undermines the quota's purpose of greater youth representation.[48]

Various cultural barriers, particularly intergenerational tensions, further undermine youth engagement and participation and perpetuate perceptions of disempowerment. One Jordanian focus group participant noted, for instance: 'We also have some issues with our social habits, where in each household it is the elders who can speak and the youngsters who have to listen. If you want to speak, you have to do so outside the household! This is wrong.'[49]

The impact of structural deficits on youth participation and development

One of the greatest challenges facing 18–25-year-olds in MENA societies is to convey the diversity of their personal aspirations and perceptions of how to improve their own and their communities' lives in often very varied circumstances. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the challenges of youth engagement, participation and social integration is neither understood nor accepted by an increasingly large section of MENA populations who have in common only their age and their relative exclusion from mainstream society.

Most reject the idea that any new interest taken in them, whether externally or internally generated, should be motivated by a need to 'deradicalize' those among them who have been attracted to the violent messaging of ISIS or other regional armed militant groups. The vast majority, quite simply, want to be able to pursue a life with constructive options. From this perspective, it is the lack of such options, combined with intense feelings of injustice and neglect, that drives a minority into criminality and violence (see Box 1). This means that official policy, whether national or international, needs to focus as much on the limits to full youth participation in society as on the directly expressed needs of young people themselves.

Box 1: Understanding of the drivers of 'radicalization'

Discussion of the issue of youth radicalization prompted diverse reactions among participants, including scepticism. In considering possible counter-measures, one Jordanian interviewee acknowledged the importance of capacity-building initiatives that develop debating and research skills. However, the young Jordanians interviewed see radicalization also as a result of increasing intolerance and intransigence within society: 'We see both political and religious forms of "radicalization", which ultimately emanates from the exclusion of other voices.'[a]

One Tunisian interviewee noted other factors apart from poor socio-economic conditions that leave Tunisian youth vulnerable to radicalization: young people do not feel that they have a stake in the future of their country; under former president Ben Ali, only one-and-a-half hours a week in school were dedicated to Islamic education, and there was a large-scale clampdown on religious groups and religiosity among citizens more generally.[b]

A Moroccan interviewee who has conducted extensive research on the issue of radicalization across Africa saw addressing shortcomings in formal education as the key to tackling the problem: critical thinking needs to be nurtured in order to counter ideas with other ideas.[c]

[a] Interview, Jordan, November 2015.
[b] Interview, Tunisia, November 2015.
[c] Interview, Morocco, November 2015.

[48] Ibid.
[49] Focus group, Jordan, November 2015.

Embedding a culture of debate and dialogue that is reinforced by critical thinking and social awareness is an essential long-term goal that can only be established and maintained by the youth populations in each country. It is also a foundation on which social and political participation and reform can be discussed and implemented effectively. As one Jordanian interviewee explained, capacity-building programmes (such as YAV) which focus on enhancing skills must begin to evolve so that more young people participate with a strong commitment and intention to turn them into tangible actions.[50] One such initiative would be for national governments to recognize and prioritize skills development initiatives; another would be to engage young people in policy dialogues, in either a local or a national context. For instance, local and national authorities could engage with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that can act as effective vehicles for youth participation and government accountability. Importantly, this requires greater institutional inclusion of such organizations.

> In Tunisia and Egypt the uprisings in 2011 led to an explosion of aspirations and expectations for political and social inclusion and engagement. These have been fulfilled to varying degrees, but have also been the source of considerable disappointment and frustration.

In Tunisia and Egypt the uprisings in 2011 led to an explosion of aspirations and expectations for political and social inclusion and engagement. These have been fulfilled to varying degrees, but have also been the source of considerable disappointment and frustration. In Egypt, in particular, a considerable level of disillusionment and apathy has developed among young people at the failure to fulfil these early hopes.[51] Tunisia has witnessed a surge in the establishment of civil society organizations and youth engagement initiatives since the uprising. However, the principal structural obstacles to effective engagement on policy issues have been shortcomings in human resource capacity-building: training and expertise are often inadequate.

Aspiring to economic independence was often seen by focus group participants and interviewees as a greater priority than involvement in political and social matters. As one Jordanian focus group participant argued, the average young person on the street is not necessarily concerned with the issues of the collective; rather, they are usually too busy either studying or working to establish and maintain an independent everyday life. Political engagement and participation has therefore become a secondary concern and is often reduced to isolated events such as elections.[52]

Service delivery, operating capacity and a functioning infrastructure were also seen as a priority among young people across the region, especially for health and transport. In particular, focus group participants and interviewees in Tunisia, Algeria and Jordan emphasized the importance of effective infrastructure that can cater for the daily demands of domestic life.

The centralization of power is one key driver of youth marginalization that prevents widespread engagement on social and political issues. The centralization of resources and power in major cities and key provinces was discussed in Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco in particular. Some focus group participants in Jordan felt that there were fewer opportunities for young people in provinces beyond Amman than for those in the capital, and that provinces in more distant regions can seem isolated,

[50] Interview, Jordan, November 2015.
[51] Focus group, Egypt, November 2015.
[52] Focus group, Jordan, November 2015.

function less effectively and provide fewer opportunities for community engagement. However, some participants felt that the ongoing debate over the decentralization law would help address some of these imbalances.[53]

Similar criticisms were expressed in Tunisia. One interviewee explained that there is a problem with the centralization of wealth and resources, with four or five governorates dominating.[54] This has severe knock-on effects on the youth populations, and reinforces any sense of marginalization they may have. In January 2016 protests broke out in Kasserine governorate and spread to other parts of the country, including Tunis. These protests were related to youth unemployment and poverty, and are linked to sentiments of regional marginalization, as well as the failure to address key economic and political challenges.[55]

Overall, the clear message emerged that failing to address these concerns over youth disempowerment in tackling political, social, cultural and economic challenges will only serve to disillusion and marginalize young people even further. A key factor in establishing the positive independence that young people seek is ownership and agency in the future of their community and the societies in which they live and to which they contribute.

Youth perceptions of international and regional relations

Perceptions of international and regional political dynamics are often seen in negative terms, leaving many young people wary of perceived foreign involvement in their respective countries. Among the Jordanian interviewees and focus group participants, the 2003 Iraq war was frequently referred to as an example of a superpower seeking to assert its dominance in the region. One participant summed it up thus: 'America never creates dialogue, it only steers it.'[56] It was noted by numerous individuals that international support, financial or otherwise, is seen to come with conditions attached, whether these are positive or negative. An Algerian focus group participant also put forward the view that the West did not invest and involve itself in cultural enterprises without wanting to benefit from such engagement; for instance, its reason for seeking a better understanding of Algerian society was to develop a relationship that was ultimately of benefit to the West.[57]

An important perception of the motivation for Western government support of youth initiatives in the region, as argued by one Jordanian, was that if young people grow up with a poor education, they could become a threat to the West should they become radicalized.[58] A similar point was also made by an Egyptian focus group participant, who felt that Western governments view Egyptian youth as 'largely ignorant and backward'.[59] As a student in the United Kingdom, this participant had found that 'There was a lot of confusion in the understandings of what the situation was in Egypt and wider Arab world … there was a lack of clarity in their opinions and convictions.'[60]

[53] Focus group, Jordan, November 2015.
[54] Interview, Tunisia, November 2015. See also Euromed Youth (2012), *Youth work in Tunisia after the revolution*, EuroMed Youth Programme IV and SALTO-Youth EuroMed Resource Centre, p. 12, http://www.euromedyouth.net/youth-work-in-tunisia-after-the-revolution.html.
[55] See *Albawaba* (2016), 'Tunisia's ripple effect: What will happen after the Kasserine protests?', 31 January 2016, http://www.albawaba.com/news/tunisia's-ripple-effect-what-will-happen-after-kasserine-protests-799708; *The New Arab* (2016), "Angry, tired and disappointed' Tunisian youth return to streets', 24 January 2016, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2016/1/24/angry-tired-and-disappointed-tunisian-youth-return-to-streets.
[56] Focus group, Jordan, November 2015.
[57] Focus group, Algeria, November 2015.
[58] Focus group, Jordan, November 2015.
[59] Focus group, Egypt, November 2015.
[60] Ibid.

This Western focus on radicalization was viewed with considerable scepticism and cynicism. Participants questioned what exactly was meant by 'radicalization' and whether it really reflected what is of primary concern to young people when engaging in political and social issues. As one Tunisian interviewee explained, one of the main disappointments and frustrations currently felt by young people in Tunisia is the prevalent approach of dealing with youth issues through this lens of violence and radicalization. According to the interviewee: 'They [the government] are not willing to let the youth have input on strategic issues, which is problematic when it is the youth who have the best grasp of what the mood is on the street.'[61] One Moroccan focus group participant explained that radicalization can be better understood as 'the traits of someone who … does not have the capacity to critically process things, ask questions and express themselves'.[62] Another argued that radicalization is defined by the context in which one lives, and different communities and societies will therefore understand and interpret it in different ways; it was not a natural state but a product of the ills and failures of society.[63]

Following the Arab uprisings in 2011, the international funding pledged to countries such as Tunisia and Egypt increased significantly, but not all has been forthcoming or easy to disburse. Although some of the increased financial support contributed to the development of elements of civil society, a longer-term problem – as noted above – is inadequate expertise, skills and training. These inadequacies, combined with lack of continuity in funding, have also brought about the demise of many of the organizations that emerged at that time and have led to serious sustainability problems.[64]

[61] Interview, Tunisia, November 2015.
[62] Focus group, Morocco, November 2015.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Focus group, Egypt, November 2015.

Key Issues

Youth experience of formal education

In all of the countries involved, it was noted by interviewees and focus group participants that there were numerous shortcomings in the formal education systems of their respective countries. For many young people, formal education is comparable to an initiation process in which they are taught to memorize rather than to learn and think for themselves. Typically, it is a one-way communication experience, where there is not much space for students to engage with their teachers in dialogue and discussion.[65]

Often, it is this space and opportunity that can help nurture critical thinking and develop transferable skills such as research techniques and debating skills, a missing element noted by many. One Moroccan focus group participant with experience of both public and private educational institutions noted the marked difference in approach between the two: at private education institutions there is less concern with short-term results and more concentration on instilling the right values for learning, helping to nurture critical thinking among students. In this participant's experience of public education institutions, such space for learning was not as readily available, with the focus being on core vocational subjects such as maths and the sciences.[66] Through the 'Decade of Education' announced by King Mohammed VI in 1999, which was aimed at improving the quality of public education, Morocco made great strides in improving youth access to education, but challenges remain in terms of its quality.[67] Despite considerable efforts by the government, learning achievements are low and not geared to the demands of the labour market.[68]

Indeed, formal education systems in the MENA region more widely have been criticized for not equipping graduates with the skills the private sector requires.[69] The mass expansion of secondary and tertiary education has been a policy feature within many Arab states, but it has also led to 'non-mastered effects', and increasing numbers of poorly qualified, unemployed graduates.[70] This point was also made by a Tunisian interviewee who was critical of the fact that most graduates are not deemed to be sufficiently qualified by many of the international organizations that establish premises in Tunis.[71]

Reform of educational institutions to incorporate and support activities that promote training in more transferable skills such as research methodologies and debating techniques was seen as a priority across the region. Focus group participants and interviewees in all the countries visited commented on the need to address the failures in formal education to develop and nurture 'soft skills' and critical thinking among young people – key attributes that empower and improve their engagement and participation in social and political issues. For example, the ongoing educational

[65] This point was raised by focus group participants and interviewees from all five countries visited.
[66] Focus group, Morocco, November 2015.
[67] Euromed Youth (2014), *Youth work in Morocco and youth participation projects at local level,* p. 8.
[68] Ibid.
[69] OECD (2015), *Youth in the MENA Region: How to bring them in,* p. 20.
[70] Aissa Khadri (2014), *Locally-Rooted Youth and Social Movements in the Southern Mediterranean: The Anna Lindh Report 2014*, Anna Lindh Foundation, p. 53.
[71] Interview, Tunisia, November 2015. See also Euromed Youth (2012), *Youth work in Tunisia after the revolution,* p. 10.

reform in Morocco opens a window of opportunity for policy-makers to engage in wider public debate on the issue. But one Moroccan interviewee, a teacher by profession, expressed disappointment at the perceived lack of government engagement with stakeholders in discussing these reforms: the majority of the debate was restricted to political parties and official political circles.[72] This dissatisfaction was reflected in student teacher protests against planned education cuts in Morocco in January 2016.[73]

On the need for educational reform in Tunisia, focus group participants stated that, even though they did not expect this to take effect overnight, since 2011 only cosmetic reforms had been introduced. The government was offering no clear pathway showing how and what would be changed to fill the current vacuum in formal education.[74] However, it was acknowledged that the Tunisian government had shown a willingness to explore incorporating programmes such as YAV into formal educational establishments.

Youth experience of informal education

Informal education plays an important role in compensating for some of the shortcomings of formal educational systems. Programmes such as YAV begin to bridge the existing skills gap and have attracted the interest of the Tunisian government, which is currently exploring the introduction of elements of YAV training within the formal education system.[75] In one Jordanian YAV participant's experience of the programme: 'YAV raises the awareness of young people and improves their level of education and cultural mindset … it makes the person involved want to invest in a topic and research it so they are able to discuss it properly.'[76]

There were mixed reviews of the YAV programme and curriculum content and its consistency across the MENA region. In some countries, among them Tunisia, there was a strong emphasis on using research skills in preparation for debates, while other participating countries seemed to fall short in focusing on and enhancing this capacity. Streamlining the development of research skills appears to be one of the ways in which the YAV programme could become even more effective as it moves into its second stage. Not only would the subjects being debated be less susceptible to misinformation and manipulation, but the skill of critical thinking already taught in a debate context would be naturally complemented if it can be used to identify, locate and analyse research material that is relevant to the realization of other ambitions in young people's lives.

Many of the focus group participants and interviewees acknowledged the value of civil society organizations in providing skills training and capacity-building programmes for many young people across the region. As one Algerian participant explained, from his own experience, he had been highly sceptical of the impact of initiatives such as the YAV programme until he had participated. The skills learned had a great impact on his daily life and interactions with family and friends, as well as enabling him to create his own networks nationally and transnationally. He also felt more motivated to remain in Algeria to reinvest these skills.[77]

[72] Interview, Morocco, November 2015.
[73] See *The New Arab* (2016), 'Thousands of protesters defy protest ban in Morocco', 24 January 2016, http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/1/24/thousands-of-protesters-defy-protest-ban-in-morocco.
[74] Focus group, Tunisia, November 2015.
[75] See Anna Lindh Foundation (2016), 'Tunisian Education Ministry enters new partnership to embed debate in the curriculum', press release, 24 March 2016, http://www.annalindhfoundation.org/news/tunisian-education-ministry-enters-new-partnership-embed-debate-curriculum.
[76] Focus group, Jordan, November 2015.
[77] Interview, Algeria, November 2015.

Organizations that fund and run educational initiatives must ensure that the requisite support, both logistical and diplomatic, is offered to young people and those delivering the projects to achieve maximum outreach and impact. Informal education initiatives such as YAV face many difficulties in this area. Throughout the interviews and focus group discussions, a number of participants said that they had encountered political, bureaucratic and logistical obstacles in establishing and embedding debate clubs in educational institutions. For example, one Algerian participant trying to set up a university debating club had found the authorities were uncomfortable with an initiative supported by international organizations and were also wary of any political issues being discussed.[78] Some Moroccan participants also described problems in getting sufficient logistical support (human and material resources) to establish clubs or even to run meetings and workshops.[79]

> If the aim of the next stage of YAV is to ensure its long-term relevance and utility in improving the lives and life chances of young people across the MENA region, it is crucial for the participants themselves to have a greater stake (or 'ownership') in defining how the next stage of the programme best responds to their immediate and longer-term needs.

Many interviewees emphasized that there should be greater consistency in the way international initiatives such as YAV are delivered in order to increase impact, effectiveness, outreach and sustainability beyond the lifetime of a project cycle. If the aim of the next stage of YAV is to ensure its long-term relevance and utility in improving the lives and life chances of young people across the MENA region, it is crucial for the participants themselves to have a greater stake (or 'ownership') in defining how the next stage of the programme best responds to their immediate and longer-term needs. It is also clear that YAV needs to include a greater number of people, above all in localities that lack access to official and informal training and educational opportunities of the kind enjoyed by many existing participants.

The title of the project on which this paper is based ('From Debate to Action') similarly reflects the realization that no free-standing programme will remain relevant to its target audience over the longer term unless it develops much stronger links to the societies in which it is delivered. To move from debate to action in this context ultimately means doing more to set YAV in the context of a programme for progressively acquiring skill sets that are relevant to practical outcomes and identified by the participants themselves. At the same time, programme providers need to direct their efforts towards convincing local and international policy-makers to create more and new avenues for young people to participate directly in policy formation, in socially responsive and sustainable employment and in innovative forms of entrepreneurship than those that are currently open to them across much of the region.

Capacity for youth engagement in social and political issues

There was widespread agreement and acceptance among the research participants of the importance of acquiring debating skills to increase social and political cohesion and to counter intolerance. Developing key 'soft skills' helps foster a culture of debate and dialogue; it enhances

[78] Focus group, Algeria, November 2015.
[79] Focus groups, Morocco, November 2015.

critical thinking, increases resilience to radicalization and even strengthens effective social and political engagement. Participants saw the advantage of cultural programmes such as YAV as instilling in them a strong sense of shared values. As already noted, a key principle of the programme, echoed in the focus groups with current YAV participants and alumni, is to enshrine listening and understanding in any interaction before judging or responding. As one Tunisian YAV participant put it, 'YAV is an important initiative which gets young people talking to each other, helping them better understand one another and to come up with new solutions.'[80]

However, capacity-building in debating skills could also be improved and supported by effective training in research skills to counter a lack of depth in the formulation of arguments for debate and dialogue – a problem that exists to varying degrees across the region, and that is part of wider educational failings. As one Jordanian interviewee stated: 'We have people who speak in the name of religion or secularism without knowing what it means or what it is.'[81] Understanding where to find reliable sources of information and how to appraise conflicting viewpoints is an essential learning component in debating skills training, and is also important in facilitating effective participation in programmes such as YAV.

In a policy context, YAV programmes impart what are generally called 'life skills', and these have considerable transferability. This is particularly important at a time when most governments in the countries where these programmes are delivered are seeking to reform their education systems to address the need for improved workplace skills amid high levels of graduate youth unemployment.

Although politics and bureaucracy often pose significant obstacles to action, the lack of capacity-building in training and skills was also frequently cited as an important limiting factor. As one Egyptian noted, before young people can have an impact on and alter elements of society that they see as flawed, they must first acquire the requisite skills and training to do so; but too often, such resources are not available in-country and it is one of the reasons why those with the means to do so go abroad for further study and training.[82]

Skills and training programmes also help to address the wider culture prevalent among a number of young people in the region of expecting the state to provide them with a job and stability. One Moroccan interviewee linked this lack of personal initiative to an absence of ambition and aspirations.[83] A Jordanian interviewee accepted that a substantial shift in culture away from expectations of the state would take a long time, but believed that key capacity-building initiatives such as YAV were required to lay the foundations; this would help to embed in young people a culture of assuming and accepting their own responsibility for bringing about positive change.[84]

Youth participation in policy platforms

Focus group participants and interviewees felt it was crucial that participation in cultural programmes or informal educational programmes be linked to processes and outcomes aimed at achieving results. As one Jordanian focus group participant commented: 'We can sit around a table and talk a lot about these issues, but I am conscious that these projects [such as YAV] want to distract us from doing

[80] Focus group, Tunisia, November 2015.
[81] Focus group, Jordan, November 2015.
[82] Interview, Egypt, November 2015.
[83] Interview, Morocco, November 2015.
[84] Interview, Jordan, November 2015.

something and appease us.'[85] There exists a danger for both governments and NGOs that if they fail to achieve tangible, action-oriented goals through engagement programmes such as YAV, they will increasingly be viewed with cynicism.

The lack of official responsiveness to their public endeavours is a further source of frustration among young people. Focus group participants in Algeria were critical of the absence of opportunities available to engage with policy-makers and contribute more to debate on issues that are of concern to them.[86] One example was cited by a group of individuals who had sought to establish a youth parliament. This was rejected by various authorities, who deemed it 'too political'; they were told to create it as a civil society initiative instead.[87] A similar point was made by an interviewee in Jordan, who argued that poor access to policy-makers led to the sense of apathy among some youth.[88] This perception of isolation from decision-making processes clearly serves only to reinforce sentiments of youth marginalization.

Civil society organizations play a valuable role in acting as a platform for young people to participate in social and political issues and engage with decision-makers (see Box 2). As one Jordanian explained, such organizations can act as a channel of communication to decision-makers,[89] but what undermines civil society activism and the organizations themselves is the lack of outreach by decision-makers and policy-makers that would give them greater legitimacy.[90]

Box 2: Nabni – an influential NGO

Nabni is an initiative that seeks to bring together Algerian citizens of diverse backgrounds to combine their experience and expertise to publicly debate key domestic issues, and put forward proposals for developing the country. It researches issues connected with the economy, education, health and governance in Algeria.[a]

Nabni was highlighted by one Algerian focus group participant as an example of an NGO in Algeria that has been successful in working to influence government policy. It was held up as a model to follow when seeking to develop discussion and debate on domestic issues to more action-oriented activities that can have social and political impact.[b]

[a] See the Nabni website for more information: http://www.nabni.org.
[b] Focus group, Algeria, November 2015.

Empowering civil society organizations in terms of their human and financial resources was also seen by some interviewees and focus group participants as an effective way of cultivating youth participation and activism on key issues. Shortcomings in sustaining human and financial capacity in what often turn out to be short-term programmes and initiatives undermine the effectiveness of civil society participation. Tunisian and Egyptian participants noted the adverse impact of short-term thinking on building human capacity and expertise, which often widens the gap between civil society organizations and policy-makers.[91] In order for the former to achieve sustainable impact and engagement, longer-term funding is needed.

Issues associated with securing long-term funding support are often cited as major obstacles for youth organizations, and, for some, an added difficulty is restrictions on the receipt of foreign funding.[92]

[85] Focus group, Jordan, November 2015.
[86] Focus group, Algeria, November 2015.
[87] Focus group, Algeria, November 2015.
[88] Interview, Jordan, November 2015.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Focus groups, Tunisia and Egypt, November 2015.
[92] Youth Policy Labs (2015), *From Rhetoric to Action*, p. 16.

One Tunisian key informant with extensive experience of YAV from its inception argued that if funding for the programme ended immediately, it would not take long for its legacy to diminish.[93] Continuity and ongoing programme development are both needed for sustainable results to be achieved. In Morocco an experienced civil society activist explained that although, broadly speaking, many organizations that serve as a good platform for all sections of society do function well, the government and political parties need to reach out and engage more energetically with them.[94]

Youth engagement with the media

Social media and online media outlets

Youth engagement with the media in their domestic contexts, and in many cases with policy-makers, is dominated by use of social and other online media, rather than with the more conventional broadcast and print media. (None the less, in terms of media consumption, television remains dominant among young people in the MENA region, according to the 2016 *Arab Youth Survey*.[95]) The Arab uprisings of 2011 propelled social media and online media outlets to the fore as platforms and networks for engagement on political and social issues. Participants in focus groups in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt noted the power of social media in helping them achieve change for their respective movements.[96]

As well as using social media on an individual basis, civil society organizations have adopted them for advocacy work for their own respective causes. Focus group participants in Morocco highlighted the significance of social media as a platform for youth-to-youth engagement and network-building.[97] For many civil society organizations, Facebook functions as their primary means of communication. This was evident from its role in organizing protests and local initiatives in the aftermath of the uprising in Egypt in 2011. More recently, however, greater state oversight of online activism has hampered such developments.[98]

Research interviewees and focus group participants compensate for the lack of formal routes for youth input by using online media as a primary source of information; as a channel for engagement; and as alternative avenues via which to build networks that challenge the mainstream narratives promoted by broadcast and print media, and that hold politicians and authorities to account. They outlined the varying impact of social media in helping them scrutinize authority in their own country. One example was given by Moroccan participants who cited the social media campaigns that mobilized pressure against Morocco's previous youth and sports minister and ultimately led to his dismissal.[99]

However, the question of credibility in the use of social media and online outlets is also significant, and poses a different set of challenges. As some participants noted, the unregulated nature of social media allows for the proliferation of false information and the abuse of information to take advantage of vulnerable groups, including for the purposes of radicalization. It was also noted that the lack of research skills among many young people means that they are often incapable of scrutinizing and filtering the vast amount of information they can access via the internet and social media outlets.

[93] Interview, Tunisia, November 2015.
[94] Interview, Morocco, November 2015.
[95] ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller (2016), *Arab Youth Survey 2016: Inside the Hearts and Minds of Arab Youth*, pp. 41–42, http://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/uploads/whitepaper/2016-AYS-White-Paper-EN_12042016100316.pdf.
[96] Focus groups, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, November 2015.
[97] Focus group, Morocco, November 2015.
[98] OECD (2015), *Youth in the MENA Region: How to bring them in,* p. 66.
[99] See footnote 33.

As one Egyptian commented, many socially and politically active youth learn to set their own parameters of credibility when it comes to the use of new media platforms, but these can vary greatly according to how each individual decides to utilize the various resources that are available.[100]

Broadcast and print media

Broadcast media outlets and corporations were seen by some as the most detached pillar of power for young people in terms of impact through engagement. Participants generally regarded traditional media as a repressive, inhibiting force that did not allow the space for independent youth voices. Although traditional print media and TV were often cited as important platforms for engagement with other sections of society and decision-makers, they were also believed to be the tools of the state or of other powerful political entities, rather than a means of informing the general public. Many such outlets are believed to represent different political agendas, whether of a state, political parties or wealthy businessmen and corporations.

The perceived lack of independence was cited as a key factor undermining the credibility of traditional media, reinforcing the importance of social media and online outlets as sources of information and engagement. Additionally, it was felt that traditional media, whether public or private, rarely engage with young people on crucial issues of concern to them. In the age of social media, where access is free and platforms are varied, this makes traditional media seem even more exclusive and hierarchical. As one Tunisian focus group participant emphasized, they must alter their mind-set regarding what they want to produce and how they want to present material in order to be more inclusive.[101]

Participants also noted how the different uses of traditional and new media have resulted in parallel discourses on the same domestic issues. At the same time, as one Jordanian commented, often issues are discussed exclusively on social media that are not being addressed in broadcast media, and vice versa.[102] In the view of participants, more efforts must be made to prevent such clear distinctions between media outlets, and more bridges need to be built for youth to engage and participate in public – particularly domestic – media outlets on issues that are of importance to them. This would enable them to have a public voice that can be heard by other parts of society and encourage further dialogue.

Participants felt that programmes such as YAV should provide young people in the MENA region with more opportunities to participate freely in traditional media public debates, as a key component of building on skills attained through the debate programme. Schemes such as the Munathara Initiative[103] offer valuable experiences for youth participation in the Arab public sphere, as noted by a Moroccan focus group participant who regularly takes part in workshops associated with the initiative, and who argued that it provides a popular platform for youth engagement. However, this participant had personally experienced problems in setting up public debates in Morocco,[104] and felt that more should be done by local and national authorities to encourage such initiatives for young people to develop and engage in themselves.

[100] Focus group, Egypt, November 2015.
[101] Focus group, Tunisia, November 2015.
[102] Interview, Jordan, November 2015.
[103] Founded in 2012 in Tunis, the Munathara Initiative promotes the voices of youth, women and marginalized communities in the Arab public sphere, with the aim of enabling wider participation in society, politics and governance. See http://www.munathara.com/.
[104] Focus group, Morocco, November 2015.

The generational gap in the use of media also serves to reinforce some of the generational tensions that were cited by many participants in all of the countries visited. As one Tunisian remarked, the increasing reliance of young people on new media as their source of information and communication, as well as to create networks among themselves, only exacerbated such tensions in the country.[105] There is thus an increasing need to create shared platforms in which a variety of perspectives are expressed in order to enhance understanding – above all across generations. This in turn requires the creation of a culture of dialogue across families, communities and societies.

[105] Interview, Tunisia, November 2015.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Attempts to advance youth inclusion in social and political spheres since 2011 have been hampered by the lack of political will on the part of governments to be more inclusive in the face of increased security threats (both actual and perceived), by the poor quality of formal education, and by the limited availability of and access to capacity-building initiatives.

Opportunities for young people to participate in formal political spaces remain limited. There are a number of institutionalized barriers that hamper efforts to enable and incentivize greater youth engagement in civic and formal political activities. This is most apparent in the immediate environments in which young people operate: even if their families do not discourage them from becoming more active citizens, they encounter obstacles to accessing decision-makers at a local and national level, as well as reliable sources of information. Yet it is apparent that they are seeking to engage constructively in politics, not only on youth issues but also on those of concern to all citizens – such as security – where they often have valuable insights into the specific risks facing their peer group. On the issue of youth radicalization, above all, respondents clearly regard it as a product of the marginalization experienced by a minority who see few alternative options, and as an issue that reflects too narrow a focus on the symptoms rather than the underlying causes of youth frustration across the region.

For the most part, young people in all the participating countries aspire to be able to hold domestic decision-makers accountable in a political culture where power is no longer concentrated in the hands of an elite. In the interim, what they experience as a form of systematic exclusion from public life has made them feel detached from decisions that affect them. This in turn has served to marginalize them and to undermine their trust in processes aimed at engagement and participation.[106]

For the most part, young people in all the participating countries aspire to be able to hold domestic decision-makers accountable in a political culture where power is no longer concentrated in the hands of an elite.

While the intention of channelling more programme assistance towards youth initiatives is good, the detail of how to balance the social and cultural aspects of youth-to-youth exchanges with the security imperatives of EU and regional governments has still to be worked out. Individual EU member states need actively to address the consequences of the restrictions on visas and on northward mobility from the southern Mediterranean arising from the current refugee and migration crisis. More than ever, the EU's policy towards its southern neighbourhood needs to be joined up both internally and externally in ways that integrate youth policy with its broader objectives, rather than treating 'youth' as an undifferentiated category distinct from its top-line strategic goals.

Although literacy rates have improved in the past few decades, formal education still fails to nurture critical thinking and provide young people with transferable skills, such as those used for debate and research. YAV and similar programmes provide training in such skills and create a culture of dialogue that facilitates better understanding and allows space for the inclusion of

[106] See OECD (2015), *Youth in the MENA Region: How to bring them in,* p. 76.

a range of voices in any debate. However, while some participants are well placed to apply these skills to improving their own lives and those of their communities, others are aware that more efforts are needed to raise the level and content of debate and to transfer skills into other spheres, including civic activism. The lack of research training and specialist expertise was also often cited as a major obstacle to meaningful political participation. The current dearth of 'soft skills' programmes in formal education systems to address such deficits explains why many young people are keen to see these programmes embedded in formal educational structures in order to reach a broad spectrum of their peers across the region.

Civil society organizations play an important role as a non-partisan medium enabling groups and networks of young people to campaign and have their voices heard. However, there are also limitations associated with such groups that serve to undermine trust in the process of engagement and participation. As well as lacking medium- or long-term funding, which makes it difficult to implement sustainable programmes, many civil society organizations struggle to ensure adequate human resource capacity, political space and stakeholder buy-in.

Youth engagement is being increasingly driven through online and social media outlets rather than via traditional print and broadcast media. This divergence is opening up parallel spaces of national discourse in which younger generations are accessing and feeding into online outlets while older generations still rely on the traditional print and broadcast media that also drive mainstream political opinion. This generational schism breeds further divisions over questions of national importance and entrenches feelings of youth marginalization and disempowerment.

Recommendations

The following key points for future action within the YAV programme itself, by national governments and by the international community emerged from the research and participant feedback on the YAV initiative undertaken for the purposes of this paper.

Action points for YAV programme sponsors, planners and deliverers:

The country-specific experiences of first-generation YAV alumni need to be captured in planning for the next phase of the programme, above all to meet the expectations of those participants seeking to turn 'debate into action'. **A formal assessment, including resource mapping in individual countries, is thus an essential preliminary step to meeting the requests of YAV alumni for further 'action-oriented' activities arising from the expansion of YAV.**

To respond to one such request, **the core curriculum of the YAV programme needs to be complemented by a research training component** focused on locating and evaluating relevant reference material in order for participants to structure convincing and effective arguments in debates.

The expansion of the programme into the Euro-Mediterranean space increases opportunities for direct exchanges between young people faced with similar, if not entirely comparable, challenges in their respective national environments. **Support for concrete trans-regional ('north–south' and 'south–north') initiatives will require additional programmatic planning and resources to meet the expectations these encounters are likely to unleash.**

As part of a wider review to embed YAV within the individual social and educational contexts of each participating country, **senior YAV programme staff need to focus on exploring the feasibility of introducing YAV programming in both formal and informal educational curriculums in each participating country.** For some countries (such as Tunisia, where an agreement to this effect was announced in March 2016[107]), this will mean incorporating elements of YAV in formal educational establishments; for others it will entail liaising with local educational leaderships to accord YAV a more formal status in relation to official educational provision.

The commitment of the European Commission and the EEAS to the next stage of YAV expansion **should ideally strengthen the programme's director-level coordination with European Commission delegation staff in-country,** along with relevant European diplomatic missions, so as to **engage their senior-level in-country networks in creating opportunities for YAV alumni** and introduce the benefits of YAV to local decision-makers and economic actors. In the absence of such enabling environments, many YAV alumni will find it hard to make the relevant official connections themselves.

Widely held assumptions about the radicalization of youth also need to be better informed by research specific to the local context, and by the insights of the majority of young people who are not attracted to violence but who understand the contexts within which it arises.

European policies aimed at combating youth radicalization should also be underpinned by more contextual research into the risks of focusing youth programming too narrowly on capacity-building without concomitantly creating a receptive environment in which young people can go on to fully realize their potential.

Action points for MENA-region national governments:

National governments should prioritize skills development among young people to enable their constructive and well-informed social and political participation. Formal education systems should institutionalize the teaching of transferable skills such as debating techniques, with the support of the international community if necessary.

Non-vocational skills training, such as business and social entrepreneurship training for those who are seeking to create their own employment, **should be provided in formal education institutions with the support and buy-in of the local private sector.** This will increase the breadth of career options for young people, ensure fewer young people pursue opportunities outside their country, and inspire young people to develop and transform their local and national communities.

The development of micro-enterprises and socially conscious business models – such as social enterprise – is more advanced in some countries (such as Morocco) than in others. **The relevant national ministries should undertake a scoping study on pre-existing opportunities, comparative good practice elsewhere in the region and the success rates of pilot projects in social entrepreneurship.**

'Top-down' approaches to youth programming and national youth strategies need to be recognized as insufficient unless they are fully informed by young people themselves. All stakeholders need to work together to shift the current culture of representation and

[107] See footnote 75.

consultation towards affording young people greater influence in shaping a range of youth- and non-youth-focused policies. Further efforts are also needed to embed and institutionalize the role of civil society organizations as a platform for youth engagement in social and political issues.

Policy-makers and civil society organizations should prioritize local policy dialogues and consultations over national-level processes to capture the diversity of needs in the design and implementation of policies targeting youth. Greater coordination at the local level between official programmes for employability, local authorities and civil society organizations would represent a more incremental and politically acceptable way of promoting the participation and inclusion of young people in their immediate communities.

Youth detachment from traditional media outlets must be addressed. The lack of representation in print and broadcast media is exacerbating young people's exclusion from national discourses and debate. **Encouraging and supporting the creation of more inclusive media outlets** would provide them with shared platforms for discussing political and social issues among themselves and with other elements of society.

Access to accurate and reliable sources of public information should be prioritized as a key step towards youth integration into the national policy and discourse on change. The lack of accurate and readily available information across the region only serves those who seek to capitalize on youth disenfranchisement for their own goals.

Appendix: Interview/Focus Group Questions

Proposition 1: Building the capacity of young people in the Middle East and North Africa in the skills of effective research and debate will enhance their resilience to radicalization and increase engagement in political and societal issues.

- How useful are programmes such as YAV in your current context?
- What would you say are your goals and aspirations?
- Do you think you will be able to achieve your goals in the country you are living in?
- Relating to your experience, what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of formal education?
- Relating to your experience (if relevant), what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of extracurricular/informal education?

Proposition 2: Providing young people in the Middle East and North Africa with access to policy platforms, at the national and global level, will enable them to advocate for policy changes that can address the structural deficits that prevent them from participating more effectively.

- What are some of the key issues affecting youth?
- How do you define/practise civic engagement? And do you find civic engagement in your country effective?
- How do you think others in the West and beyond interpret what is happening in the Middle East and North Africa; in particular, what the situation is with youth in your country?
- How do you see the role of the international community in your country and in the region? And who are the most trusted actors?
- What channels exist for young people to interact with each other and policy-makers, form networks and have their voice heard?

Proposition 3: Giving young people in the Middle East a distinct media presence will provide them with opportunities to shape the debate on issues that are of concern to youth.

- What role do you think traditional media plays in shaping young people's perceptions of the developing political and economic national and regional context?
- What role would you like the media to play and why?
- How might the media need to change to be more representative and have greater appeal to youth?
- What generational differences do you observe in the way specific social groups approach the topic of new media in your country?

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Cover image: Tunisian students on Habib Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis on 14 November 2014. According to official statistics, Tunisia has more than 600,000 unemployed (15 per cent of the working age population), of whom about 240,000 are graduates from higher education institutions. Copyright © FETHI BELAID/AFP/Getty Images

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