Forward...

With the beginning of 2010, YAP will prepare and circulate a quarterly electronic newsletter on youth policy issues in Lebanon. The newsletter aims to inform relevant stakeholders of the status of youth policy in Lebanon and of various activities taking place in that regard, and to present suggestions and recommendations as per the feedback from readers.

YAP is a network of youth organizations working together to have a national youth policy in Lebanon, which provides youth with opportunities to participate in the public life as decision makers. YAP works at three levels in parallel: empowering youth to advocate for their rights; organizing lobbying meetings with decision makers to initiate policy change; and building partnerships with the media with the aim to promote youth demands and influence the public opinion.

Today, there isn’t a national youth policy in Lebanon; however, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, together with the United Nations Youth Task Force and the Civil Society in Lebanon- represented by YAP- are working towards this end.

This first issue in hand presents a definition of a national youth policy, breakthroughs pertaining to national youth policy in Lebanon achieved to date, challenges lying ahead, and enabling factors that make the work on national youth policy possible.

All information presented in this issue is based on the youth policy literature from Lebanon, the region, or globally, and from documented experience in the field of youth policy.

A National Youth Policy Is...

The national youth policy is a declaration by the State of its commitment to its young people. The national youth policy aims to accord more attention and opportunities for youth, to consider young people’s needs and aspirations within the framework of government policy and national plans, and to allocate resources to achieve equitable youth development at the national level. Practically, the national youth policy should improve living conditions of young people, allow them access to welfare services, and create an enabling environment for their genuine access to power and participation in the public life.

The national youth policy is a comprehensive and unified document that includes all actions that need to be taken by the government to improve the status of young people in the country. It should be based on scientific research in all sectors affecting young people, and on reliable statistics taking into account several factors, such as: youth age distribution, gender, educational attainment, rural/urban distribution, fields of interest of youth
In other word, the youth policy should be a multi sectoral policy and it urges inter-ministerial collaboration on youth issues, for that youth are not a separate age group; they are citizens like all other citizens, but have specific characteristics pertaining to their age.

Once acknowledged, the national youth policy should be reviewed periodically in order to reflect the changing needs of young people and society.

**Guiding Principles of a National Youth Policy**

Today, young people in Lebanon do not have confidence in the State. On one hand, the State does not respond to young people’s needs and aspirations; on the other hand, there are many laws that do not allow young people’s access to information and participation in the public sphere (e.g. legal age to form and join associations...). Therefore, the guiding principles of a national youth policy should focus on mainstreaming youth issues in national plans, and on amending existing discriminatory laws.

The national youth policy should also be gender inclusive i.e. ensuring equitable opportunities for females and encouraging their activism through allocating various incentives.

The national youth policy should also have a rural emphasis, given that a large faction of the Lebanese population lives in the rural peripheries. Such a consideration will enhance young people’s stay in their rural areas, and minimize migration towards big cities.

On another level, a national youth policy should integrate minorities and refugee young people into the functions of mainstream society and include them in national plans, as a national policy should address all young people in Lebanon, not only Lebanese youth. Finally, the national youth policy should be youth driven i.e. initiated by young people and definitely responding to their needs and aspirations. All this requires long term collaboration and partnership between policy makers, ministries, young people, and youth NGOs.

Lebanon is in the process of developing a national youth policy. Today, only 2 Arab states, Bahrain and Jordan, have a national youth policy, whereas more countries have initiated the preparation of a youth policy and strategies. However, the youth policy in the above mentioned 2 countries were issued by the highest authority, not by young people. In Lebanon, the process has started in the year 2000 “bottom up” i.e. by Civil Society and young people, and has been raised up to the government. Some milestones have been achieved in that regard. We present them to you below:

- Establishing the Ministry of Youth and Sports in the year 2000. Prior to that date, it was the directorate of youth and sports under the ministry of education. The establishment of the ministry is a commitment by the government to give more attention to youth and sports issues.

- Establishing the department of youth (alus-yaba) within the Ministry of Youth and Sports in 2009, with the aim to address youth development and policy issues, away from sports. Prior to that, it was the department of youth and sports (alus-yaba wal-ara). The establishment of a separate department for youth is an attempt by the ministry to give adequate attention to youth development issues.
• Considering Palestinian students at the Lebanese University an exception to being “foreigners” as per the Law No. 392 issued by the Council of Ministers in February 2002 and which determines the tuition fees for foreign students at the Lebanese University four times more than the fees paid by nationals. The exception of Palestinian students from being “foreigners” in this sense was acknowledged by the Council of Ministers 3 months after issuing the Law, as a result of strong pressure by activists and the media. If the exception had not been acknowledged, this Law would have deprived thousands of Palestinian students from seeking tertiary education, which is at the core of Human Rights.

• Abolishing in January 1999 the decree # 478 previously issued by the Lebanese government (precisely by the minister of interior and municipalities) in 1995, and which imposed an entry and exit visa before leaving for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. This decree created many obstacles to the right to free travel for Palestinians, mainly young people, who traveled extensively for education and job opportunities abroad, and affected their reunion with their families residing in Lebanon.

• Abolishing the compulsory military service for males in 2005 as a result of a law voted by Parliament. Before the abolishment, the service was of 1 year, and then reduced to 6 months. The military service had been considered by the majority of young people as an obstacle holding them back from the start of their careers. At YAP, we call for replacing the military service by a civil service that is compulsory for males and females alike, which helps in sensitizing young people to the issues and needs of their society, and encourages them to engage in community service, which consequently widens their exposure and strengthens their sense of belonging to their society.

• Lowering the voting age from 21 years old to 18 years old in 2009. This constitutional amendment, which is a 4 stage process, is in its third stage (stage one: law adopted on March 19, 2009 by the Parliament; stage 2: the cabinet approved the constitutional law by a vote and drafted a constitutional amendment; stage 3: the Parliament is awaited to vote in favor of the amendment; stage 4: the president and the prime minister should co-sign a promulgation of the amendment, after which the law is put into force). YAP calls upon the Parliament to achieve stage 3 by voting on the amendment of the law, so that young people between 18 and 21 years old could vote in the upcoming municipal elections scheduled at June 2010.

• Acknowledging the sex education curricula by a ministerial decision in October 2009 under the title of “Life Skills on Reproductive Health Education topics from a Gender Perspective”. We call upon the Ministry of Education and the Educational Center for Research & Development (CERD) to integrate the new curricula in existing disciplines and train teachers on the new curricula.

• Issuing the decree numbered 80/2007 by the Council of Ministers (a national and legally binding acknowledgment to work on developing a national youth policy in the country. Hence, it is a guarantee for a “no way back” from developing a national youth policy.

• In relation to the decree numbered 80/2007, a national youth forum is being formed and will be launched in early 2010. This forum has members of almost all youth wings in Lebanese political parties and non political youth organizations. Its role is to monitor the process of the development of a national youth policy, to contribute to the content of the policy and to feedback on it. The youth forum is a guarantee that the national youth
policy development process is participatory and broad based. This will ensure that the policy under development responds to young people’s needs and aspirations from various backgrounds and affiliations across the country.

- In relation to the decree numbered 80/2007, a youth card is being worked on with the aim to: provide direct services and discounts for young people in Lebanon aged 15-26 years old, and to provide an opportunity for young people to actively engage in community service activities and therefore improve their citizenship practices and belonging to the State, and consequently, re-build the confidence of the young people in the State.

Challenges Ahead...

The challenges facing the development of a national youth policy are many. It is important to identify these challenges and put mechanisms in place to overcome them or mitigate their negative impact. These are the following:

- The failure of the government to acknowledge a national, comprehensive and multi-sectoral youth policy, and having instead a fragmented and uni-sectoral policy. This could happen as a result of many factors: lack of capacity and expertise at the Ministry of Youth& Sports; political calculations by political blocs; political calculations by political blocs; political calculations by political blocs; political calculations by political blocs; political calculations by political blocs; political calculations by political blocs; political calculations by political blocs; social and cultural sensitivities and considerations among others.

- The current budget of the Ministry of Youth& Sports, especially for youth developmental activities. The very small annual budget totaling to 9 billions Lebanese Lira (equivalent of 6 millions USD) in 2009 reflects a lack of interest in allocating resources for youth issues by the government, noting that the bulk of the budget is spent on salaries, sports activities, equipment, and maintenance of building, leaving a very small amount to be spent on youth developmental activities.

- The presence of laws that limit the active youth participation in the public and civic sphere, namely the age to form and join associations which is 20 years old (the law 1909 at the ministry of interior) and 18 years old (law 629/2004 at the ministry of youth& sports).

- The current educational school curricula are characterized by rote education, and are not student focused. In addition, they still adopt the “teaching” approach instead of the “learning” approach. All this makes students passive recipients of education, lacking the sense of initiative and critical thinking, and unable to contribute to their own learning.

- The Parliamentarian committee for the mother and child is not active and lacks a vision on how to work on children and youth issues, given that the phases of childhood and youth overlap between the age of 15 and 18 years old. We call for ongoing coordination between the committee for the mother and child and the committee for youth and sports in order to achieve the best interest of children and youth at the legislative level.

- The role of the Ministry of Youth and Sports is pivotal in coordinating youth issues with other ministries; it is rather an inter-ministerial role. Today, the ministry is not playing this role adequately, which might be at the detriment of a comprehensive multi-sectoral youth policy.
The recently established department of youth at the Ministry of Youth & Sports is not very active. This is partially due to the lack of specialized staff in youth development issues, and to the lack of funding. We call upon strengthening this department, as it has a key role in contributing to the development of a national youth policy and monitoring its implementation and evaluation.

The dominant mentality of sectarianism and rigid conservatism among decision makers is an obstacle to developing a comprehensive policy that addresses all aspects of life of young people, including issues addressing social, religious, and political taboos.

The absence of a strong media. Despite the presence of youth pages in most of the key newspapers in Lebanon, journalists are rarely aware of the long term work on national youth policy, the language of youth development and related concepts and terms. We call for a long term partnership between youth NGOs and the media, and for training journalists involved in civil society work to undertake training on developmental concepts and tools to become more familiar with the youth development work, and hence have more accurate coverage that reflects the long term accumulative work in youth development and policy.

Enabling Factors...

Despite the above mentioned challenges, some enabling factors exist and help in paving the way towards acknowledging a national youth policy. These are:

- The Parliament and the Cabinet are aware of the active role of NGOs in calling for a national youth policy, in presenting recommendations in various sectors affecting young people, and in working hard to achieve this. Consequently, the government has begun to open up for a synergy with the Civil Society in that regard.

- The United Nations, represented by the UN Youth Task Force, has played a positive role in bringing into focus the importance of national youth policy to international agencies and in mobilizing its expertise and resources to achieve this end. Its role should continue to be that of support (technical and financial), and to maintain open channels with other stakeholders to allow maximum contribution of young people in the national youth policy process.

- Some of the current members of Parliament and ministers are young, have an innovative mind, and aim to mainstream youth development in the national plans of the government. An example on this is the draft law presented by the Minister of Interior and Municipalities, Mr. Ziad Baroud, to the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers on October 2009, calling for lowering the age to form and join associations (article 5 in the associations law 1909) from 20 years old to 18. We at YAP, call for lowering the age to 15 in compliance with the Child Rights Convention (CRC), which Lebanon had signed and ratified, and which says in article 14 that “any child has the right to form and join associations”.

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Thank You!

YAP would like to thank the National Council of Swedish Youth Organizations (LSU) for their ongoing support since 2005, and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung for their support in 2009 and 2010.

Towards Youth Friendly Policies...