

# Policy Paper

## YOUTH POLITICS IN LEBANON. A call for citizen empowerment.

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## Executive summary

Lebanon has sought in the last years to promote youth-oriented policy formulation processes. The Council of Ministers has endorsed a 2012 youth policy strategy that benefitted from the support of external funding actors, youth-based organizations and civil society actors. The Lebanese government has moreover cooperated with international actors such as the European Union (EU), the United Nations and the World Bank with a view to implementing youth-based projects targeting job creation, empowerment, citizenship, and peace building. In the wake of the Syrian conflict and its ‘spillover effects’, international projects have drawn on youth politics as a key requisite to boosting Lebanon’s social cohesion and resilience.

Appraising Lebanon’s youth politics cannot however be separated from the broader socio-political, economic and legislative challenges that the small polity has grappled with throughout its post-war transition and in the more specific context of the post-2011 Middle East. Several structural, economic and political constraints have thwarted the implementation of the national youth strategy, and interfered with the politics of youth activism.

Mapping perceptions and grievances of the Lebanese youth is pivotal to understanding the specific weaknesses inherent to Lebanon’s youth-based policy framework on the one hand, and informing policy on the other.

## **Introduction**

This policy paper takes stock of key structural, domestic, and international factors that have impacted Lebanon's policy framework towards the youth population. The first section sets the context by providing a general overview of the youth profile in Lebanon. Drawing on the SAHWA Youth Survey (2016) and other reports, the second section identifies key challenges that Lebanon's youth has confronted in the post-war period (1990 onwards). The third part outlines the Lebanese state's policy strategy towards the youth and briefly assesses its effectiveness in the context of Lebanon's sociopolitical realities. The fourth section elaborates on the politics of youth cooperation between the Lebanese state and the international community. It identifies key international actors collaborating with the Lebanese state in the youth policy field, and describes some illustrative projects that they have implemented. The concluding section critically evaluates the achievements of the youth policy in Lebanon. Assessing the effectiveness of the national youth policy cannot be disentangled from a broader reading of the political challenges that have thwarted effective governance and democratization in post-war Lebanon. To this end, the conclusion maps some of the constraints that have hindered the Lebanese state from devising an impactful national youth strategy geared towards addressing on the one hand the grievances of the youth, and harnessing on the other the potential of youth-related grassroots and international initiatives. The concluding section recommends policy measures that could enhance the youth population's role in development and state building.

## **Problem description: situation and problems of the young people in Lebanon**

### **a) Lebanon's youth profile**

Lebanon's youth population aged between 15 and 24 represents 20% of the population (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014). Youth literacy rate amounts to 99.01% and this rate is higher for females (99.32%). Gross enrolment ratio in secondary education is estimated at 68.2% with a slightly higher number of enrolled female pupils (68.37%). Gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education amounts to 42.77 %, and this rate is slightly higher for females (45.75 %) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014).

Lebanon's youth unemployment rate has inspired controversial estimations (Abou Jaoude 2015, 6). Generally estimated to be between 20% and 24 % (Chaaban and El Khoury, 2015,

12; Kawar and Tzannatos, 2013; World Bank Data, 2014), youth unemployment rate is higher for females (Dibbeh et al, 2016, 9) and higher than that of the adult population in Lebanon (Rarrbo, 2005, 6).

The Lebanese youth is known for its general propensity to emigrate (Dibeh e al, 2016, Nehme and Nehme, 2016). It is reported that one third of the population aged between 15 and 29 would like to emigrate (Chaaban and el Khoury, 2015: 11). Key push factors hinge on Lebanon's turbulent political situation, dissatisfactory labour market conditions, parents' encouragement to do so, and unemployment (Nehme and Nehme, 2016: 379).

In the context of Lebanon's post-war transition, youth engagement in political life has been a double-edged sword. It has reflected at the same time eagerness to participate in political processes and disenchantment with Lebanon's political system. The small Lebanese republic is characterized by its vibrant scene of youth-based Civil Society Organizations (CSOS). The latter are involved in various issues ranging from civic engagement, leadership, conflict resolution, gender justice and social inclusion (UNESCO, 2015). At the outbreak of the 2011 revolts, Lebanon's youth has echoed the Arab youth population's general interest in promoting freedoms and civil liberties, and has harnessed the power of information technology, namely social media, to engage into political debates (Maamari and Zein, 2014). At the same time, Lebanon's youth has displayed signs of alienation from political governance (Chaaban and El Khoury, 2015: 13). The latter is decried for prioritizing sectarian politics at the detriment of the individual (Cammett, 2014, Maamari and Zein, 2014: 504), relegating youth and gender concerns. Youth-led protests in the context of the 2015 garbage crisis attest to this perception of alienation from the political system.

Showing discontent with legal limitations undermining youth and gender participation, activists have throughout the years rallied for implementing changes in the voting law, such as lowering the voting age from 21 to 18 so as to facilitate youth political participation (The Daily Star, 2011). In the context of Lebanon's polarized political scene, elections have however not taken place since 2009.

#### **b) Young people's grievances and perceptions of challenges**

The Lebanese youth has been confronted with various economic and societal challenges compounded by the polity's unstable political situation. In general perspective, youth

grievances revolve around Lebanon's segmented educational system and the inequities it entrenches, problems of youth market integration, low levels of job creation, mismatch between skills and opportunities available, and dissatisfaction with working conditions and wages (Abou Jaoude, 2015: 7-10; Dibeh et al 2016; Kawar and Tzannatos, 2013: 2; Nehme and Nehme, 2016). Political instability, slack strategic planning in job creation and unemployment arise as important drivers spurring the youth to emigrate in search for better opportunities (Nehme and Nehme, 2016: 380).

As previously underscored, the Lebanese youth has been particularly critical of Lebanon's socio-political realities and of the performance of post-war state institutions. A study has shown for instance that almost 90% of the youth agree with the statement that networks and connections to people in influential positions (commonly called *wasta*) are key to their access to employment (Krishnan et al, 2016: 17). Decrying the politics of sectarianism and the government's politics of corruption, youth activists and youth-based grassroots organizations have been pivotal orchestrators of Lebanon's post war 'iconic protest movements', namely the 2010 Laïque pride, the 2011 anti-sectarian demonstrations, and the 2015 'garbage crisis' protests.

The abovementioned grievances and difficulties emerge as pervasive areas of concern in the SAHWA youth ethnographic field study which focused on youth perceptions in the cities of Ein El Remmaneh and Joun (LAU, 2016). Interlocutors targeted the limitations that Lebanon's educational system entrenches. Polarized along the public/private divide, the system is thought to reinforce social disparities and exclusion (LAU, 2016: 11). Limited employment opportunities in addition to Lebanon's dominant culture of clientelism are cited as structural factors that put the brakes on the youth population's ambitions. Those factors also contribute to their perception of disenfranchisement. Interlocutors allude in this instance to low wages, favoritism and nepotism as obstacles to their integration in the job market. The realisation that economic precariousness is contingent on Lebanon's political instability adds to a general perception of limited agency in governing one's professional path.

## **Discussion: policy responses to the problems of youth**

### **a) Lebanon's National Youth Policy**

Lebanon's political framework has been initially decried for failing to craft youth-orientated national policies (Kabbaro, 2005). Indeed, the Ministry of Youth and Sports has only been established in 2000. Youth-related issues were formerly tackled by the Ministry of Education. Nevertheless, in the wake of various youth-led lobbying and advocacy attempts, Lebanon's national agenda has gradually integrated the Lebanese youth in its policy formulation processes. In 2009, the Ministry of Youth and Sports devised a special department to deal with youth-related matters, and in 2012, Lebanon's national youth policy finally saw the light (Youth Policy, 2014).

Endorsed by the Council of Ministers in April 2012, the youth policy document was drafted in the framework of a partnership between the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the former Youth Advocacy Process (YAP), and the United Nations Youth Task Force (Youth Forum for youth Policy 2012).

Defining the age bracket for the Lebanese youth to be 15-29 years of age, the document draws on the recommendations of the United Nations World Youth Report (2005), and adopts an ambitious policy rhetoric. It outlines policy recommendations in five sectors: demography and migration, labor and economic participation, education and culture, health and social integration and political participation (Youth Forum for Youth Policy, 2012). It further identifies manifold legal, political and cultural aspects that hinder youth empowerment, social integration and political participation. Most importantly, it proposes concrete amendments to laws that restrict youth participation in sociopolitical and economic processes such as reducing the age for establishing associations.

The 2012 youth strategy is the result of a participatory process with Lebanon's civil society on the one hand and of a mix of domestic and international synergies on the other. Outlined policy recommendations have been adopted and validated in the wake of consultative processes with various stakeholders. The latter included youth CSOs, youth wings of political parties, ministries, United Nations (UN) agencies, research centers, high schools and universities. Furthermore the policy process has benefited from the technical and financial support of UN Agencies.<sup>1</sup> The latter have closely cooperated with the Ministry of Youth and Sports and a coalition of youth NGOs. Partners and donors also include the

National Council of Swedish Youth Organizations, the Norwegian Embassy and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (Youth Forum for Youth Policy 2012).

Recognized by the Lebanese government via the Council of Ministers' Decree #80/2007, the successor of the YAP, the Youth Forum for Youth Policy, is entrusted with monitoring the implementation of Lebanon's youth policy recommendations and identifying concrete mechanisms so as to convert recommendations into action. It has drafted a technical and legal review of the youth policy, and has sought through workshops and multi-stakeholder deliberative processes to enhance youth participation in development and political life. In the last two years, it has focused on a variety of items ranging from revitalizing student councils in public schools to generating consensus among youth-led CSOs and youth wings of political parties on the nature and content of priorities to be proposed to the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The Forum has also deliberated on ways to build its capacity as an oversight body monitoring the implementation of Lebanon's national Youth Policy.<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding the existence of a national Youth Policy framework and a recognized partnership between Lebanon's government and youth CSOs, an ostensible gap between policy rhetoric and implementation characterizes Lebanon's youth policy frame. In fact, the endorsement of the Youth Policy Strategy has so far not translated into policy implementation. After the outbreak of Syria's conflict in 2011, political life in Lebanon has been gripped by a series of governmental deadlocks (Fakhoury, 2015). Institutional gridlock has thwarted the prioritization of youth-related policy issues especially when it comes to improving youth professional integration and participation in political processes. In this instance, the General Confederation of Workers in Lebanon has warned against the rise of youth unemployment amid political paralysis.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as parliamentary elections have been postponed since 2012, one of the youth demands -- lowering voting age— has not seen the light. Furthermore, the demands of the Youth Forum for Youth Policy have been sidelined in the light of national junctures such as the 2015 garbage crisis. As previously mentioned, the latter has provided youth-based CSOs with an opportunity to denigrate Lebanon's politics of sectarianism, which, according to many civil society organizations and grassroots actors, entrenches inefficient governance and corruption at the expense of citizens' wellbeing.

Notwithstanding the youth politics of outrage, the 2015 wave of activism against the garbage crisis has not fed into identifiable policy consequences. This has brought the blatant disconnection between Lebanon's political and youth-based public spheres into stark relief.

Adding to this, conflict spillovers from Syria's neighbouring war have contributed to sidelining youth-related matters in agenda setting. Forced displacement flows from Syria have added burdens to Lebanon's national agenda and infrastructure (FAO, 2014). Right after the adoption of the 2012 youth policy, security governance in the light of the threat of Islamic militant networks and the 2013 armed confrontations in the Northern City of Tripoli has dominated state affairs.

### **b) Cooperation with International Actors**

Analyzing the domestic frame's impact on the national youth policy is not sufficient to accounting for the dynamics of youth policies in Lebanon. Equally important is the role of external actors in shaping the agenda of youth politics.

In the post-war period, Lebanon's governments and local CSOs have closely cooperated with their western counterparts in projects targeting youth citizenship and civic engagement. This politics of cooperation cannot however be decoupled from the international community's development agenda. In the last two decades, Western actors have sought to advance democratic politics and western-led values in Arab Mediterranean countries (Nagle and Staeheli, 2015). Cooperation has particularly gained ground in the wake of the 1995 Barcelona Process led by the European Union (EU) and the post-2001 international agenda which has embraced the so-called 'democracy promotion' agenda. Promoting civil society's aspirations and empowering disenfranchised actors, such as the youth population, are perceived in this regard as requisites to advancing the politics of democratization.

Broadly speaking, major funding bodies that have dedicated substantial attention to youth empowerment in Lebanon are the EU, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, UN-related agencies and some foundations such as the Ann Lindh Foundation.<sup>4</sup> These international actors have developed a myriad of youth-

based programs, targeting job creation for the vulnerable youth, access to education and youth empowerment through intercultural exchange and dialogue.

Since the outbreak of the Arab revolts, international actors have revisited their approach to the Arab Mediterranean region with a view to strengthening the shaken polities' social cohesion. Gender and youth empowerment have emerged as key intervention sectors in this revamped politics of cooperation. The empowerment of vulnerable groups including the youth is for instance central to the review of the European Union's Neighborhood Policy (European Commission, 2015).

A key aid donor, the EU has integrated its politics of youth empowerment in Lebanon within the broader post-2011 agenda targeting stabilization and state resilience in its Southern Neighborhood. This agenda consists among other things in enhancing social cohesion through consolidating human rights and improving grassroots ownership over transition and economic processes (European External Action Service, 2014). Some of the EU's declared policy goals are to enhance youth participation in economic activities and civil society initiatives, and encourage exchange between the youth in Europe and Lebanon through mobility stays. Illustrative examples are the Euro-Med Youth Program which seeks to promote youth exchanges and networking,<sup>5</sup> and the Euro-Mediterranean Forum on Intercultural Dialogue (Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon, 2016). Another initiative is the EU-funded Support for Youth Development Project which aims to improve the institutional capacity ability of the Lebanese government and CSOs to develop youth policies (European External Action Service, 2016).

In the light of the Syrian refugee influx into Lebanon, international initiatives have devised youth-related projects within the larger context of the impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon. Such programs seek to improve access to education and protection for the vulnerable Syrian refugee youth, to mitigate tensions between host and refugee youth populations and to promote peace building initiatives among the youth (UNDP, 2013; UNFPA 2014).

Against this background, UN agencies have scaled up their engagement in youth-focused development programs to mitigate the spillover effects of the Syrian conflict. Their projects have centered on promoting youth entrepreneurship in addition to consolidating social cohesion among the Syrian and Lebanese refugee youth. Some of these projects have taken place in cities that have been either exposed to sectarian conflict or particularly affected by the Syrian refugee influx.

Developed under the framework of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Lebanon Host Communities Support Project (LSHP) has focused among other things on promoting job creation and entrepreneurial activities for the youth (UNDP, 2013).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Office in Beirut has initiated various youth-based projects centered on peace building and job creation. For example, the UNESCO-led project “Promoting the Culture of Living Together among Youth” has devised a series of peace-education activities among the Lebanese youth in Tripoli, the Northern city which has witnessed armed confrontations in 2013. The Tripoli-based project aimed through a series of workshops and painting exhibitions to foster artistic narratives around civil peace, dialogue and inter-youth solidarity (UNESCO, 2013). Another illustrative example is the Youth Community Centre in the Northern city of Qobayat. Resulting from a cooperative initiative between UNESCO and CARITAS, the centre seeks to foster through non-formal education and extra-curricular activities tolerance and socialization among the Syrian and Lebanese youth (UNESCO, 2016).

In the framework of the Youth Mobile initiative, UNESCO has organized workshops on integrating programming and computing skills in Lebanon’s education system. The aim is to help the youth develop mobile applications, boosting entrepreneurship (Lebanese National Commission for UNESCO, 2015).

In the broader context of Lebanon's war to peace transition, a myriad of international non-governmental organizations has developed specialized projects targeting youth citizenship, empowerment and conflict resolution. In some of these projects, cooperation with the youth is foreseen as an attempt to impact Lebanon's political structures. A case in a point is the International Alert's project targeting an enhancement of the politics of dialogue among the youth wings of Lebanon's political parties.<sup>6</sup>

The International Center for Transitional justice (ICTJ) has implemented a variety of youth-based projects seeking to address Lebanon's shaky culture of post-war reconciliation. An example is the 2012 oral history project called *Badna Nareef* (We Want to know) which consisted in sharing narratives between the Lebanese youth, family relatives and individuals who have witnessed the 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War (Badna Naaref 2012).

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Lebanon's 2012 national youth strategy is credited for privileging a participatory approach and generating partnerships among governmental and non-governmental stakeholders (UNESCO, 2015). Since then, the Youth Forum for Youth Policy has convened various deliberative processes with a view to discussing the youth strategy's implementation frame. In broader perspective, Lebanon has evolved into a vibrant terrain for youth-focused NGOs and grassroots groups. International donors have funded and supported youth-focused projects with the dual objective of empowering the role of the Lebanese youth in development and boosting Lebanon's social cohesion in the context of the post-2011 Arab upheavals. At the heart of international cooperative initiatives lie the themes of youth civic engagement, grassroots governance, conflict prevention and access to education and employment.

As underscored, Lebanon's political constraints have however thwarted the materialization of youth-related policies (Sawaf and Hoballah, 2011: 46; Youth Forum for Youth Policy and Youth Advocacy Process, 2012). While challenges facing the Lebanese youth -- namely unemployment, political conflicts and corruption -- are characteristic of several Middle East and North African (MENA) countries (Fargues 2008; Fehling et al 2015), one cannot dismiss the uneasy relationship between Lebanon's domestic framework and its youth policy frame.

Polarized political coalitions have in the last years hampered policy formulation and led to a decline in the legislature's capacity to propose and reform laws. Squabbling over political appointments has also deterred policy makers from revamping the National Employment Strategy, a core prerequisite to boosting the role of the Lebanese youth in development. Structural challenges related to a weak infrastructure and low economic productivity have indeniably impacted youth unemployment and the labour market's (in)capacity to create jobs matching young skilled job seekers (Abou Jaoude, 2015; Dibeh et al, 2016; Kawar and Tzannatos, 2013).

In yet another perspective, Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system provides limited formal opportunities for youth-based activist organizations to lay claims to the system and affect policy outcomes. Hurdles thwarting youth agency are hence to be contextualized in the general framework of Lebanon's governance mode which glorifies 'sects' instead of 'societal groups'. This governance mode, which allocates political and civil service positions in relation to religious quotas and upholds the supremacy of sectarian leaders in decision-making processes, downplays non-sectarian interests and projects. Most importantly, it undermines the citizenry's role in democratization processes and weakens what Welzel and Inglehart (2008, 129) call the 'human empowerment model'.

At this backdrop, practitioners and researchers can only assess the effectiveness of Lebanon's youth policy as an integral part of a broader dynamic. Addressing youth grievances and implementing recommendations stipulated in the national youth policy document require first and foremost reinvestment in the broader politics of democratization that has been derailed in the post-war process. Urgent steps hinge on reviving dormant political institutions so as to generate policies responsive to the youth and increasing the parliament's legislative activities in matters related to gender and youth justice. Indeed the Youth Forum for Youth Policy and the Youth Advocacy Process (2012) allude to the institutionalization of youth policies and to the issuing of youth-friendly legislation as pivotal steps inherent to the implementation frame.

Additional high priority measures revolve around revamping Lebanon's infrastructure that lowers economic productivity and reforming the employment system with a view to creating new job opportunities especially for Lebanon's skilled youth. A series of structural policy

reforms generating trust in state institutions, combating corruption and allocating resources empowering citizens are crucial to addressing youth perceptions of disenfranchisement.

Though pivotal to the polity's stabilization in the light of the post-2011 upheavals and mass migration flows from Syria, Lebanon's youth-related politics of cooperation with the international community ought to adopt a more 'homegrown' logic of implementation. In the absence of responsive and efficient state institutions, international projects can only have limited effects. Most importantly, decoupling Lebanon's politics of youth empowerment from dependency on external donors remains an illusory goal.

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## Endnotes

1. See UNICEF, National Youth Policy. Lebanon. Available from [http://www.unicef.org/lebanon/programs\\_8151.html](http://www.unicef.org/lebanon/programs_8151.html)
2. For a review of the Forum's activities, see the facebook page of the Youth Forum for Youth Policy available at <https://www.facebook.com/youthforumlb/?fref=ts>
3. See the statement of the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers available from <http://www.weeportal-lb.org/news/38-unemployment-among-youth-14poverty-lebanon-while-economic-actors-still-dwell-over-problems>
4. For a review of some of these projects, see Nagle and Staeheli, 2015.
5. See Euro-Med youth program <http://www.lebanon.euromedyouth.net/>
6. See International Alert, Youth Politics in Lebanon <http://www.international-alert.org/news/youth-politics-lebanon>



Researching  
Arab Mediterranean Youth:  
**Towards a New Social Contract**



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