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PRIORITY ISSUES IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE ARAB REGION

IMPACT OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION ON SOCIAL COHESION

Summary

This paper provides a brief analysis of some of the underlying causes which have led to popular uprisings in the Arab region over the past two years. It argues for the importance of social cohesion and social harmony in Arab societies, putting specific emphasis on youth as a demographic group with distinctive needs and interests. It also highlights the key role that youth can play in building and maintaining social cohesion.

The paper reviews the situation of youth prior to 2010 and the obstacles to their social inclusion, in contrast with reform initiatives undertaken more recently by some countries. It emphasizes the need for bolder approaches to promoting youth participation and civic engagement. It finally recommends the World Programme of Action for Youth as a guiding framework to develop national youth strategies that adequately address the participation gap.

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Introduction

1.   While uncertainties about how the situation will unfold in the Arab countries that have witnessed popular uprisings since 2010 remain, there does not seem to be much divergence on the causes of those uprisings. The recent historical developments in some of the Arab countries are, according to most analyses, the consequence of a long-term and mutually reinforcing relationship between development failures, exclusion and poor governance. Popular outbursts, which have taken different forms across the region, are first and foremost a call for profound reforms that guarantee dignity, inclusion, social and economic equity and stability, freedom and justice for all.

2.   Pressures from the youth population in particular, defined here as the 15-24 age group, are strongly evident in many Arab countries, putting the region at a crossroads. Governments can either become more representative, fair, responsive and engaging with youth, or they can continue to ignore them, thus exacerbating the feelings of suppression, exclusion and vulnerability, usually resulting in escalating social tensions and instability. Until the picture becomes clearer and Governments adopt a bold approach to address the needs of this specific age group, youth across the Arab region continue to face a dual challenge. On the one hand, development issues are still hindering their economic empowerment and social well-being; on the other hand, the lack of participation is reinforcing their exclusion, isolation, and feelings of marginalization and vulnerability. This dual challenge is increasingly taxing social cohesion between Arab youth and their communities, thereby putting Arab societies at risk of escalating tensions and unrest.

3.   This pressure is particularly acute as the Arab population is a young one. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in their 2010 Revision of the *World Population Prospects,* youth represented 19.3 per cent of the total population of the member countries of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in 2011. Those youthful societies are becoming increasingly conscious of their needs, aware of their rights and mindful of their interests. Consequently, the failure of Governments to understand and respond to those changes may have grave consequences on social cohesion and well-being across the region.

4.   Under the right conditions, a youthful population can foster favourable long-term conditions for social cohesion. As recognized by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, a key condition for youth to be able to support social well-being is an approach to policymaking that enables them to participate meaningfully in decision-making about the future of their communities: "Young people who have opportunities for participation in their communities have a better chance at successfully transitioning to adulthood. Those who are marginalized and lack such opportunities are more likely to feel alienated and hopeless and engage in high-risk and antisocial behaviour".[1]

5.   This report aims to show how some long-term trends of marginalizing youth have been harmful to social cohesion in Arab countries and proposes solutions to improve the situation. It first explains the concept of social cohesion; outlines the role that youth can play in fostering it; and analyses the trends of youth exclusion in Arab societies prior to 2010, which have undermined social cohesion and contributed to cause the uprisings. It then proposes new policy approaches that aim for youth empowerment, highlighting participation as a key factor of that goal. The report discusses that argument in light of existing examples from the region and of global good practices on youth policymaking, which have used the World Programme of Action for Youth as a guiding framework. The report concludes with a number of recommendations to Governments on how to reach out to young Arab men and women and engage them to better address the social challenges faced across the region.

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[1] United Nations (2009), p. 12.

I. THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL COHESION

6.   The concept of social cohesion has been debated in policy circles since the 1990s. Many definitions of the concept exist, which focus in varying degrees on the interlinked issues of social inclusion, social capital and institutions.[2] Given the situation of Arab countries, and particularly the recognition by young people of the failure of institutional mechanisms to ensure social inclusion as a driver of discontent, this paper will focus on the first and third pillars of social cohesion. It will define it as "the dialectic between instituted social inclusion and exclusion mechanisms and the responses, perceptions and attitudes of citizens towards the way these mechanisms operate".[3] Social inclusion and exclusion mechanisms include public, private and civil society organizations which aim to provide social, material, symbolic and political support to citizens, enabling them to reverse the discriminatory mechanisms embedded in society and engage excluded members in a meaningful realization of their own empowerment, thus leading to greater societal and economic participation and an improved quality of life. Those institutions could include, inter alia, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, religious institutions and political institutions such as political parties, parliaments and consultative mechanisms.

7.   This definition illustrates the role of a range of different objective and subjective factors across the socioeconomic, civic and political fields which contribute to social cohesion, and the dynamic relationship between them. For example, it recognizes that the impact of objective improvements in mechanisms working for social inclusion is likely to be limited in the absence of governmental legitimacy. It also shows that social cohesion operates at different levels: it can be built by governmental institutions or smaller civil society institutions as well.

8.   Therefore, social cohesion has horizontal and vertical dimensions, and objective and subjective elements, as table 1 shows. The horizontal dimension of social cohesion refers to the ties that bind the members of a society together in a sense of common purpose, benefit or challenge, overcoming the potential ethnic, linguistic, religious and class differences which may exist. The vertical dimensions, meanwhile, are the relationships that populations have with authority figures, primarily the State/Government and their related institutions; the sense of whether those institutions are functioning fairly and efficiently; and the extent to which ordinary citizens can influence those institutions to increase their fairness, responsiveness and efficiency. Finally, the objective and subjective components relate to the dialectic referred to above: whether those institutions objectively work well to reduce exclusion, and whether people subjectively feel as though they are promoting inclusion and social justice.

TABLE 1. DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL COHESION

	Subjective component	Objective component
Horizontal dimension	General trust in other members of society (possibly sharing similar grievances)	Social participation and vibrancy of engagement processes and social support networks
	Willingness to cooperate and help others, including those from different social groups	Volunteerism and donations
	Sense of belonging and self-identification with society	Presence or absence of major inter-group alliances or cleavages
Vertical dimension	Perception of institutions and their functioning	Institutional mechanisms for bottom-up engagement
	Confidence in institutions	Level of political participation (e.g. voting, representation in political parties)

Source: Adapted from Chan et al. (2006).

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[2] For a broader discussion of the concept and of those three pillars of social cohesion, see Jenson (2010).

[3] ECLAC (2007), p. 18. This publication also argues that social cohesion is both a means and an end, both an object of public policy and a way to provide a proper institutional framework that ensures the achievement of development goals.

II. YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL COHESION IN ARAB SOCIETIES

9.   Social cohesion appears to be a critical factor for the stability and well-being of Arab societies, as it supports economic development and the creation of strong socioeconomic institutions, and assists in building societal resilience, particularly in turbulent times. Youth have a significant potential for advancing society-wide cohesion goals, especially when they form a large proportion of the population as they do in the Arab region (see table 2, which shows that the percentage of youth in selected Arab countries has been high since 1970 and is likely to remain so, even if it will probably decrease in Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates by 2050). The current generation of young people in the Arab world is the best educated one in the history of the region, bringing new ideas, immense energy and using new technologies and experiences to reach out, network and find solutions to social development challenges.

TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH IN SELECTED ARAB COUNTRIES

	Egypt	Iraq	Jordan	Morocco	Palestine	Saudi Arabia	Sudan	United Arab Emirates	Yemen
1970	19.7	18.3	18	16.7	18.6	18.4	19	19.8	19.8
1990	18.9	21	21.6	20.2	20.3	17.9	19.4	15.8	17.9
2010	19.7	19.6	21.5	19.6	21.2	18	19.7	16.1	22.1
2030	16.9	19.4	17.9	15.4	19	15.6	19	10.4	20.5
2050	13.7	17.9	14.3	12	17.3	12	17.3	8.1	17.8

        Source: Calculated from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2011, *World Population Prospects: the 2010 Revision.*

10.   In discussing youth, it should be noted that young people do not themselves form a homogeneous group: young men and women face different challenges and have access to different opportunities because of their genders, while they are also separated by factors such as social class, ethnicity, religion, location and health status. However, youth in general share the fact that they are in a period of transition from childhood to adulthood, which involves a number of important experiences likely to set the tone for the rest of their lives, including moving from education to work, family formation and engaging in civic and political life. If those transitions are smooth and youth are able to achieve their goals of integration, then the stage is set for long-term social cohesion. For example, in relation to employment, if youth are able to develop their skills and have access to decent work, they will be able to achieve their goals and thus live with a sense of dignity and belonging. However, if they are unable to access such opportunities or meet their goals, they suffer from material poverty, frustration and take significant risks by engaging in anti-social and disruptive activities, thereby disrupting social cohesion and national stability.

11.   Youth can play an important role in advancing social cohesion if effectively engaged and supported. To date, however, Arab Governments have not been effective at creating enabling environments for youth to achieve that goal. Rather than acknowledging youth for their work, and engaging them in genuinely participatory consultation and decision-making processes which can contribute to address social, economic and political challenges within existing governance systems, youth have been excluded across all spheres and at all levels. Arab Governments have created a situation where youth are not heard nor appreciated in their respective societies, feeding a sense of disheartenment, disenfranchisement and even rage. In addition to undermining social cohesion by creating a sense of exclusion among a large proportion of the population, this situation further endangers social cohesion, as youth have been forced to go outside the frameworks of existing Government systems to express their needs, grievances and frustrations.

12.   Based on that analysis, this paper suggests participatory development as a means for overcoming the exclusion of youth and supporting social cohesion by the development of youth policy. Participatory development is achieved through involving the largest number of actors from social and political forces in designing public policies, supported by stakeholders from the civil society and the private sector. It is a framework that guarantees equal distribution of national wealth and provides opportunities to all citizens to employ their skills and capacities in the advancement and progress of their societies. Participatory

development therefore directly relates to social inclusion. Indeed, it improves the identification of social challenges and the effectiveness of the institutions that are built to address them, as all concerned stakeholders are engaged in both processes. It also improves the perceptions and attitudes of all actors who both participate in achieving development and benefit from it. Given the size of the youth cohort and the transitional status of their socialization, it is particularly important to involve young people in the processes of participatory development. Providing structures for increased youth participation in policy development and implementation processes is therefore essential for social cohesion. The next section will consider the extent to which Arab countries were engaging their youth in participatory development processes prior to the outbreak of social uprisings in 2010.

III. YOUTH PARTICIPATION BEFORE 2010

13.   While Arab countries have succeeded in making significant progress towards the achievement of many Millennium Development Goals and targets, development policies were not specifically targeted at youth as a distinctive sociodemographic cohort with specific developmental needs and priorities. Rather, development policy focuses on society at large, working to improve indicators of human development and access to social services following an issue-based thematic focus rather than a beneficiary-based needs analysis, thereby losing the focus on young people as a special category[4]. The result was that Arab youth did not have their rightful share of the benefits of development, and their perception of the effectiveness of adopted policies and services was further affected by the lack of opportunities for their participation in policymaking processes.

14.   The manifestations of this failure in social inclusion mechanisms are clear: for instance, in 2009, Arab youth unemployment stood at 23.4 per cent for the Middle East and 23.7 per cent for North Africa (and 30.9 per cent and 31.7 per cent for young women), the highest regional levels in the world and ten percentage points above the global average of 13 per cent.[5] Meanwhile, those youth who could not access decent employment found themselves subject to a vicious cycle of vulnerability to the informal economy, unemployment and disempowerment. This failure of labour market policies and institutions in the public and private sectors had dire consequences not only on the socioeconomic interests of youth, but also their sense of inclusion as members of society. Unable to achieve their goals of transition to decent work, youth became frustrated and their frustration threatened social cohesion and stability at the national and regional levels.

15.   On the political front, youth in most ESCWA member countries are generally allowed to vote at the age of 18 or 21. However, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Unit database *Parline*, (http://www.ipu.org/parline/parlinesearch.asp) only Bahrain, Libya, Morocco, Qatar, the Sudan and Tunisia allow youth to run for political office. In other countries, the minimum age for candidacy ranges from 25 to 30, thus excluding youth from direct participation in formal national decision-making processes. Representation in elected institutions at the local or national level is very limited, often because of youth-unfriendly regulatory frameworks, but also because political parties, which are allowed to exist and compete in elections in most Arab countries, fail to engage and support the participation of younger generations.

16.   National institutions such as parliaments or consultative councils are traditionally elected or appointed to serve as forums to discuss, debate and legislate, while ensuring that the rights and interests of those they represent are protected and their voices expressed. Most parliamentary work is done at the level of committees, which are generally encouraged to hold public meetings and engage various social groups in their proceedings. In most Arab parliaments, however, youth issues are often under the mandate of committees with sectoral focus, such as on social affairs, cultural affairs and sports, and there are few mechanisms enabling the participation of youth in public debates as a means to inform and influence policymaking.

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[4] ESCWA (2011), p.51.

[5] ILO (2010), p. 63.

17.   The objective fact of the exclusion of youth from the political sphere for many years built up towards subjective feelings of disengagement, indicated by the low voting turnout rates: in Egypt for instance, where only 16 per cent of eligible youth cast their vote in the 2005 presidential elections.[6] Institutional exclusion had therefore bred negative perceptions and attitudes among youth towards political processes and the institutions of the State, feeding feelings of disconnection and distrust, and harming the vertical dimension of social cohesion.

18.   Furthermore, youth participation in civil society was also limited: the governing bodies of civil society organizations tended to exclude youth and limit their activity to programme implementation and service delivery. Even among youth-serving organizations in the region, few are dependent on youth input and administration. As a result of those trends, youth participation in voluntary activities was as low as 2 per cent of 15-17 year-olds and 3.2 per cent of 18-24 year-olds in some countries.[7] As with political life, institutions which are supposed to foster the inclusion of different members of society actually made no effort to engage youth. Young people thus felt disconnected from those institutions as well, which undermined social cohesion in its horizontal dimension.

19.   The high levels of youth unemployment and low levels of youth engagement in political life and civil society organizations and processes suggest that systems in place failed to ensure that youth were adequately prepared to become constructive members of society. Young people, in turn, recognized the "discrepancy between reality and … rhetoric":[8] while they were mentioned in public speeches, there were few avenues for them to participate meaningfully in policymaking processes or in the socioeconomic, political and civic spheres. As a result, young people became "alienated and distrustful of … public policies"[9] and institutions. Those feelings, exacerbated by the economic difficulties faced by youth, caused major breakdowns in social cohesion.

20.   Realizing that this state of affairs is unsustainable and witnessing the impact of the recent social and political events on their stability, Arab countries are becoming more conscious of the urgent need to seriously respond to the calls of different groups in society, particularly those of youth. There is little disagreement on the need for a thorough and rapid renegotiation of the social contract, with special emphasis on the distinctive needs of the young generation. The next section will review the initiatives that are currently being implemented by Arab countries in order to address youth participation.

IV. POLICY APPROACHES TO YOUTH ISSUES IN ARAB COUNTRIES

21.   A recent review of youth policies in the member countries of ESCWA indicated that only six countries were implementing national youth policies in 2008, and that only two national youth strategies considered youth participation in decision-making as a priority.[10] Another five countries were also in the process of developing national youth policies that aimed at addressing a wider range of youth issues. By 2012, as Arab countries began to show a renewed interest in developing national youth policies in the aftermath of the uprisings, this trend accelerated. Countries across the region, even those which experienced relatively milder events than Tunisia and Egypt, became more concerned with engaging young people in participatory development processes and with benefiting from the demographic dividend that youth can provide. Table 3 illustrates that trend.

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[6]   Egyptian Cabinet Information and Decision Support Center and Population Council (2010), p. 18.

[7]   Ibid.

[8]   Wardany Y. (2012), p. 37.

[9]   Ibid., p. 39.

[10]   ESCWA, forthcoming, *Technical Report on Emerging Youth Issues, Priorities, and Policies in the Arab Region.*

TABLE 3. YOUTH POLICIES IN THE ARAB REGION IN 2008 AND 2012

Category	2008	2012
Countries with existing youth-specific policies	Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine and Yemen	Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine and Yemen
Countries in the process of developing youth-specific policies	Iraq, Lebanon, Qatar, Syrian Arab Republic and United Arab Emirates	Iraq, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Syrian Arab Republic, United Arab Emirates and the Sudan
Countries addressing youth via mainstreaming in development policies	Kuwait, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Oman, the Sudan and Tunisia	Kuwait, Libya and Oman

Source: ESCWA, forthcoming, *Technical Report on Emerging Youth Issues, Priorities, and Policies in the Arab Region.*

22.   The development of youth strategies and policies should aim for two kinds of objectives: it should first help to meet the needs of young men and women and realize their potential by improving the quality of services delivered to youth; it should also establish or restore the trust and confidence of youth in the social institutions that interact with them. Therefore, a participatory approach is needed, not only because it would help to identify the problems in the services delivered from the perspective of the beneficiaries, but also because it provides a means for building the trust of young people in the system and establishing their ownership of the content, development process and implementation of policy. The process of developing a national youth policy can be a crucial first step towards changing young people's perceptions of social institutions and their positive engagement.

23.   Arab countries have adopted different approaches to promoting youth participation, ranging from enacting specific legal and constitutional clauses that foster and mandate youth participation, to supporting civil society-led initiatives for youth participation and engagement, or to simply advocating for youth engagement as a part of larger social engagement and outreach activities. However, systematic mechanisms for youth participation that enable the active and continuous participation of youth in political, socioeconomic, cultural and all other aspects of social life only exist in a few Arab countries. Examples of those mechanisms are illustrated in table 4.

TABLE 4. EXAMPLES OF APPROACHES TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN ARAB COUNTRIES

Bahrain	Lead Agency: General Organization for Youth and Sports
	Mandate: N/A
	Role: Engaging youth through the "National Youth Perceptions Survey" and the "Youth Voice Campaign". Both exercises involved a purpose-built bottom-up consultation process to engage youth in the formulation of a national youth strategy in 2005.
Jordan	Lead Agency: The Higher Council for Youth
	Mandate: National Youth Strategy, Phase II (2011-2015)
	Approach: Governed by the strategy, pillar 1 of which is to enhance the engagement of youth in political life, via a combination of capacity-building activities, advocacy for youth engagement and a number of theme-based dialogue forums.
Morocco	Lead Agency: Consultative Council for Youth and Civil Work
	Mandate: Articles 33 and 170 of the 2011 Constitution
	Approach: Provide consultation to the executive branch of Government by youth groups, thereby directly engaging them in the policy formulation and development processes.
Saudi Arabia	Lead Agency: Ministry of Economic Planning
	Mandate: 9th National Development Plan
	Approach: Undertake a national consultation process with youth groups to understand their needs and priorities and engage them in the development of a national youth strategy.
Yemen	Lead Agency: Cabinet of the Prime Minister
	Mandate: Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative for the Transitional Process in Yemen (Clause 15-G)
	Approach: The Cabinet established a taskforce headed by the Minister of human rights to create a national platform for youth engagement as part of the transitional process.

Source: ESCWA, forthcoming, *Technical Report on Emerging Youth Issues, Priorities, and Policies in the Arab Region.*

24.   In Yemen, for instance, a mechanism for youth participation does exist, namely the youth consultative council which was created in 2007 with the objective of providing guidance for the implementation of the national youth strategy and feedback on it. However support for this council was insufficient and it has been unable to hold any youth engagement sessions since 2009. Following the uprising in the country, which started with youth protests at Sana'a University, a new mechanism was formulated to achieve the specific objective of youth engagement in the context of the transition of Yemen. However, that mechanism is not fully institutionalized yet.

25.   There are other examples of positive steps towards greater youth participation. In Morocco and Jordan for instance, permanent structures were created in 2011 to engage youth groups in policymaking.[11] The new Constitution of Morocco provides for the creation of a youth and civil society consultative body to facilitate the engagement of youth at the policy level. The election system was also reformed in 2011 to ensure that the national parliament included a higher number of young people: this was done by introducing a national party list only for young candidates. A similar measure had been adopted a few years earlier to allow a higher representation of women in the Moroccan House of Representatives.

26.   Table 5 provides a detailed description of the case of the National Youth Strategy of Jordan, clearly showing that Jordan has put youth civic engagement and community participation as key objectives for the second phase of its national youth strategy. Building on the implementation and feedback received after the first phase, Jordan has devised ten components for its strategy which address a number of issues relating to the position of youth in society, their social well-being and their role in reaching social cohesion. A rigorous consultation process with youth and youth organizations in Jordan has led to an agreement on the following focus areas:

TABLE 5. COMPONENTS OF THE NATIONAL YOUTH STRATEGY OF JORDAN (PHASE 2, 2011-2015)

	Component	Focus areas
1	Civic engagement	Civil rights and duties; citizenship and national identity; democracy and political reform processes; dialogue; youth parliaments
2	Community participation	Political participation; volunteerism and community service; participation in civil society organizations; participatory decision-making; pacific resolution of conflicts; considering the role of gender in building a diverse society
3	Character building	National values; national code of conduct; national honour
4	Cultural development	Cultural sovereignty and heritage; countering the negative effects of globalization
5	Good governance	Transparency; accountability; anti-corruption; protest mechanisms against injustice
6	Sustainable development	Geo-political development; socioeconomic development; cultural development; recreational endeavours; development security; technology for development
7	Social transformation	Changing attitudes; discipline and responsibility; participation; elements of social transformation (environment, energy, climate change, demographic transition, etc.)
8	Human security	Employment; health; environment; education; vocational training
9	National security	Justice, equality, and equal opportunities; solidarity and national unity
10	Safe environment	Safe upbringing; counselling; behavioural reform; countering the use of drugs, smoking and other bad behaviours

Source: http://youth.gov.jo/uploads/file/estratej%202011-2015.pdf.

V. OBSTACLES HINDERING YOUTH PARTICIPATION

27.   Obstacles to a greater participation of youth in decision-making at the level of social inclusion institutions can be categorized into three clusters: administrative and structural obstructions, social and cultural obstructions, and political and legal obstructions (see figure I). Each of the three clusters comprises

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[11] Youth is defined in Jordan as the ages ranging between 12 and 30 years. In Morocco, representational lists consider youth as lasting till the age of 40.

a range of obstacles that negatively influence the participation and engagement of youth. It should be noted, however, that the obstacles within each cluster are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Thus, an integrated approach is needed to tackle those issues and clusters in a holistic manner.

Figure I. Obstacles to Arab youth engagement

Source: Adapted from ESCWA. 2010. Enhancing Civil Society Participation in Public Policy Processes.

28.   Within each cluster, the obstacles vary in severity, priority and effect according to national circumstances, youth priorities and the range of developmental challenges. Table 6 provides a range of examples of those challenges in the region.

TABLE 6. EXAMPLES OF OBSTACLES TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Cluster	Obstacle
Administrative and structural	• Lack of socioeconomic development institutions focusing on youth (e.g. providing training, microcredit or information technology infrastructure); • Poor internal organizational structure and administrative neglect in youth development (e.g. corruption, favouritism and unaccountability); • Lack of youth-specific development indicators and tools for measurement of the well-being of youth, their participation and their economic situation; • Limited public investments and funding for youth-centric social services (e.g. higher education, cultural spaces and recreational avenues).
Social and cultural	• Lack of youth capacity to seek leading roles in society; • Gender-specific social barriers hindering the participation of young women; • Reinforcing the adult-centric society and high power distances that discourages adult-youth partnerships and communication; • Lack of youth-specific social protection services such as youth unemployment benefits, universal healthcare and insurance.
Cluster	Obstacle
Political and legal	• Limited opportunities for youth groups and organizations to influence political life; • Lack of youth-specific engagement, participation policy and institutions; • Legal age-based barriers hindering the participation of youth in political processes; • Non-recognition of the role of youth in society via the lack of legal provisions for youth engagement.

Source: Adapted from ESCWA. 2010. Enhancing Civil Society Participation in Public Policy Processes.

29.   Arab societies have generally been exclusive with regard to which groups dominate politics and governance institutions, and who decides what set of policies should be in place, what policies should be changed and what policies need not exist. Therefore, rather than being responsive to social cohesion objectives and to the real needs of the groups targeted by those institutions, Arab societies are subject to the shifting political commitment of the controlling groups and their varying willingness to enact inclusive measures, making the process of policymaking arbitrary and top-down rather than systematic and bottom-up.
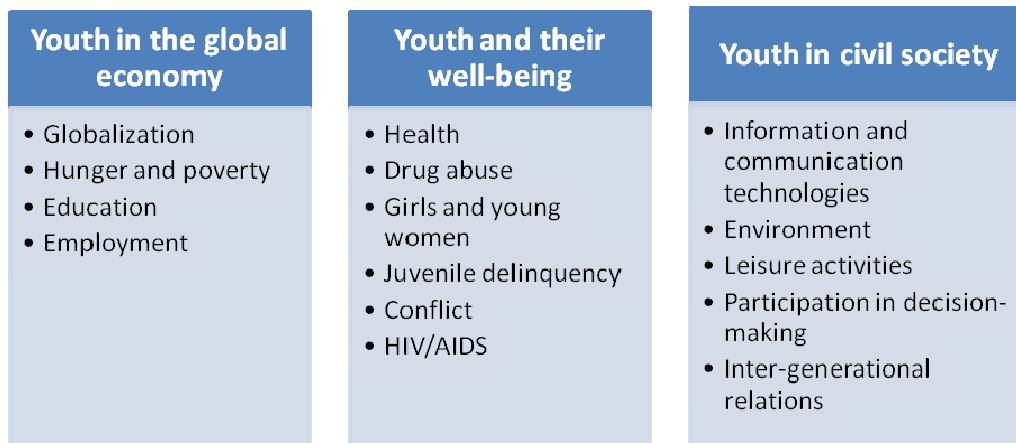
30.   Such exclusionary practices exacerbate the level of inequality between youth and adult populations, adding political hardships to the economic and social exclusions faced by youth. The consequences of this triple exclusion for social cohesion are potentially drastic: as youth become frustrated, they are less concerned with their societies, posing a bigger threat to the social cohesion of the society as a whole.

31.   A review of the impact of the recent events indicates that Arab countries are gradually starting to open up to facilitating youth engagement and are taking measures to foster youth participation and representation, as discussed earlier. However, it is also evident that additional and bold efforts are needed to strengthen youth engagement processes, which should not remain only ad-hoc or restricted to the national level.

VI. ENABLING YOUTH PARTICIPATION THROUGH THE WORLD PROGRAMME OF ACTION FOR YOUTH

32.   On a global level, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) in resolution 50/81 of 13 March 1996 as an overarching and guiding framework for the development of national youth policies, addressing a wide range of youth issues including participation. WPAY has evolved in 2007 to incorporate additional components reflected in three interrelated clusters that address civic, political and socioeconomic areas of youth development towards social cohesion.

Figure II. The focus areas of the World Programme of Action for Youth

Youth in the global economy	Youth and their well-being	Youth in civil society
• Globalization • Hunger and poverty • Education • Employment	• Health • Drug abuse • Girls and young women • Juvenile delinquency • Conflict • HIV/AIDS	• Information and communication technologies • Environment • Leisure activities • Participation in decision-making • Inter-generational relations

33.   WPAY proposes an interrelated package of interventions that need to be implemented in an integrated manner at the national level with equal focus on the various issues and priorities in the areas of the development of youth, their well-being and their participation in society. WPAY enables youth engagement through guiding the process of the development of a national youth policy and of its implementation at the national level.   It proposes a cross-sectoral national policy framework that focuses on the targeted sociodemographic cohort in a youth-centred development approach. In particular, it recommends the use of a participatory approach that ensures a bottom-up participation of youth in influencing the design of policies and the identification of priorities, given both the instrumental importance of capturing the knowledge of youth about the problems that they face, and as a means of emphasizing the inherent value of participation in policymaking processes.

34.   The strength of WPAY lies in its comprehensiveness and its flexibility. By providing guidance on a wide range of subject areas, it provides a model for integrated approaches and advocates for a holistic vision of the well-being of youth, rather than a narrow one focused solely on economic indicators. Thus, by using WPAY, Arab countries can develop structures and institutions that support and mainstream youth participation in all aspects of policy development and in socioeconomic, political, cultural and other programmatic areas. This new institutional set-up is a central requirement towards maintaining social cohesion and effectively engaging youth in Arab countries. Moreover, WPAY acknowledges that each country will take into account its own national priorities, resources and historical experience in the implementation process. Therefore, in adopting WPAY as a guiding framework, policymakers can pay specific attention to the unique attributes and needs of youth across the region, in various countries, and in different social divisions or geographic regions, ensuring that appropriate inclusive policies are be adopted.

35.   ESCWA is currently conducting activities to support youth development in member countries, based on WPAY and focused on the provision of advocacy and capacity-building to member countries. The aim is to enable member countries to design holistic and integrated policies for youth development and for strengthening the role of youth in their societies. Those activities revolve around four main aspects:

- Advocating for the WPAY approach to youth issues and policies and encouraging Governments to formulate national youth policies;

- Strengthening the individual and institutional capacities of member countries to help them formulate national youth policies and related plans of actions, currently supported by a development account project for building the capacity of technical-level officials involved in the formulation and implementation of youth policies;

- Monitoring the responses of countries to WPAY and their progress towards achieving goals and targets regarding youth;

- Conducting research analysis on the situation of youth in domains of relevance to help identifying the problems and challenges they are facing and formulating appropriate youth policies that target them as a distinct sociodemographic group.

36.   In this regard, ESCWA is currently implementing a Development Account project on "Strengthening capacities of policymakers in the ESCWA region to formulate national youth policies and plans of action: responding to the World Programme of Action for Youth". Through this project, ESCWA has developed a reference manual to be used by policymakers in the process of developing national youth policies and programmes of action under the WPAY framework. ESCWA is also developing two complementary tools to the manual, undertaking a regional survey on indicators relating to youth development, and is working with Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Tunisia and Yemen to accelerate reforms of national youth policies in 2013.

VII. CONCLUSION AND KEY MESSAGES

37.   The direct role of Arab youth in the political situation in some of the Arab countries has highlighted the deficit in and failures of institutions and mechanisms, both in terms of youth inclusion and in putting in place robust foundations for participatory development. This paper has shown the importance of the concept of social cohesion in the Arab region and the role that youth can play in strengthening social relations, and fostering mutual trust among members of society and confidence in its institutions. It has drawn out the dimensions of the social exclusion suffered by youth and shown how the lack of systematic involvement of youth in participatory development has contributed to diminishing social cohesion. It has shown that Arab countries recognize the need to listen to and engage with youth across the region both in countries which have witnessed social uprisings and in those which have not, and has analysed the elements of their responses. Finally, the paper has identified the remaining obstacles to achieving youth involvement in participatory development and has proposed WPAY as a framework to assist Arab countries in achieving their goals regarding youth.

38.   The following key messages have been identified, based on the analysis undertaken in this paper:

(a)   There is a pressing need to address the gap in communications between Governments and youth and the lack of participatory development mechanisms for youth, starting with the acknowledgement of youth as deserving members of society and identifying them as key partners and stakeholders in the socioeconomic well-being and prosperity of their respective societies, with the support of national youth policies guided by the WPAY framework;

(b)   Most countries have recognized the problems that they face and are taking steps to upgrade the responsiveness of their institutions through national youth policies. However, while there are some encouraging signs that some of those policies are integrating permanent platforms for youth participation, in general the capacities to ensure the systematic participation of youth remain weak, unorganized and fall short of the WPAY recommendations, thereby taking the risk that the dissatisfaction of youth will not be resolved by those reforms and that those policies will not address the social cohesion gap, resulting in further instability and unrest;

(c)   Consequently, it is recommended that Arab countries continue to build their capacities to implement effective youth-focused participatory development mechanisms and institutions in order to ensure social cohesion. Such institutions should be permanent, should seek to engage youth across class, gender and other social boundaries, and be advised by a youth-centric agenda set by youth. They should be tailored to provide support, protection and capacity development for youth and youth organizations as prerequisites to their full and effective engagement in the policymaking process.

39.   Based on those insights, a number of broad outlines of activities and reforms can be suggested to member countries which are formulating their national youth policies in line with WPAY. Those activities and reforms aim to strengthen participatory development processes which include youth in Arab countries and can be adapted to the national conditions of each country as appropriate. They could include the following elements:

(a)   Undertaking a participatory approach to develop indicators on youth and social cohesion based on the specific situation of each country. This would enable Governments to identify weaknesses and gaps across the different dimensions of social cohesion and target interventions accordingly. Those indicators should be monitored on a permanent basis, and reviewed on a regular basis to ensure their continued relevance;

(b)   Developing national mechanisms, through a dialogue platform for example, to enable systematic youth engagement and participation, providing opportunities for youth and youth groups to express their views and work together to influence national policies and play a role in decision-making mechanisms;

(c)   Improving the access of young people to information, with a view to enabling them to make better use of their opportunities and participate in decision-making; and to ensuring that they know their rights and responsibilities;

(d)   Respecting the freedom of association, and encouraging and promoting youth associations; providing financial, educational and technical support and promotion for the activities of youth associations;

(e)   Taking into account the contribution of youth in designing, implementing and evaluating national policies and plans through the creation of institutions for youth consultation and enabling youth to participate in democratic processes;

(f)   Encouraging increased national, regional and international cooperation and exchange among youth organizations;

(g)   Inviting Governments to strengthen the involvement of young people in international forums;

(h)   Reducing the age of political candidacy for lower houses of legislative bodies to match the voting age as a means to ensure that young people are able to participate in political processes, and strengthening the status of national youth ministries, councils, commissions and parliamentary committees.

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