

# Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission  
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



## Expert meeting on South Mediterranean youth co-operation Strengthening knowledge for evidence-based youth policy and practice Brussels, 12-13 December 2016

### Policy Brief on Advancing Youth Research Drawing on the expert meeting results

#### Background and context

On 12 and 13 December, the EU–Council of Europe youth partnership hosted a group of 20 participants – policy makers, youth workers and researchers – in an attempt to bridge the gap between the three groups and to discuss the dynamics and challenges leading to effective evidence-based policy making in the South Mediterranean. The meeting focused on connecting the experiences of researchers, practitioners and policy makers who work in the area of youth in order to come up with a set of practical proposals and recommendations that could be integrated in their work to strengthen evidence based dialogues.

Specifically, experts were invited to do the following.

1. Take stock of the knowledge on youth and research being carried out by different stakeholders.
2. Identify gaps in research in areas covered by the EU–Council of Europe youth partnership and areas of interest to the partner institutions.
3. Analyse the role of research in the current Euro-Mediterranean youth co-operation initiatives and the relevance to policy and practice.
4. Contribute to designing a process of strengthening knowledge dialogue in the field of youth in the South Mediterranean and connecting them to the Pool of European Youth Researchers<sup>1</sup> (PEYR).

#### Key findings

Some of the key findings and areas of discussion are presented in the following sections.

#### Knowledge on youth

- When addressing youth issues, it is a must to have **inclusive dialogue** with young people, policy makers, practitioners, researchers and donors.

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<sup>1</sup> The **Pool of European Youth Researchers** – or **PEYR** in short – is a unique initiative on the European level and it represents a contribution of both the Council of Europe and the European Commission to evidence based policy-making in the field of youth. (<http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/peyr>)

- Young people do not form a homogeneous group; **similarities and differences** in terms of gender, economic and social background, disability, education, etc. will need to be taken into account when devising policies.
- Young people in the Southern Mediterranean countries make up the majority of the population; therefore **all policies must be relevant for young people**. In addition, youth policies are not independent or separate from other national policies.

### Research

- Language used in communicating research results will depend on the audience. Yet not all research results can be translated into **policy-friendly language**.
- **Quality research** is important for making informed policy decisions.
- Research results can be used at different stages of the policy-making process. Working with an **advisory group** that includes practitioners and researchers will allow research results and applied knowledge to be available for decision-making processes.
- The impact of **research evidence** on decision making is not measured.

### Dialogue between policy makers and practitioners

- Strengthen **two-way communication**, learning and initiatives between researchers and practitioners.
- **Personal contact** between researchers, practitioners and policy makers coupled with structured dialogue facilitates communication of results and outcomes.

### Areas for improvement

- Streamlining knowledge sharing between researchers and policy makers.
- Demonstration of the added value of research-policy interface in creating an enabling environment to facilitate a conducive and **structured dialogue** between stakeholders.
- Understanding **etymology and local context** for enhancing research recommendations is critical to strengthening a research agenda relevant to the local reality.
- Combine research findings and practitioners' knowledge to provide relevant recommendations for better policy reform in order to address the perception among young people of "**Vertigo**" and that the **system is fixed** for example by corruption, *wasta*<sup>2</sup>, the older generation, national political elites, the "West", and globalisation.
- Targeted and strategic approach to granting applications. Limited resources make funding and the **role of donors** important factors in research and policy-making processes.
- **Stronger research networks** need to be established and developed.
- **Empower young researchers** in the South Mediterranean and support/strengthen their capacity for writing, research proposal writing, networking and lobbying.
- How can youth research affect policies in practice?

## Research evidence in decision making

### State of play

In order to define what needs to be done, in small groups, the participants discussed what is missing, what exists, or what was needed in re-structuring the role of evidence based research in decision-making practice.

<sup>2</sup> An Arabic word that loosely translates as "**nepotism**", "**clout**" or "who you know". It refers to using one's connections and/or influence to get things done, including government transactions such as the quick renewal of a passport, the waiving of traffic fines and getting hired for or promoted in a job. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wasta>.

## 1. Networks

- There is no clear research network/platform which is causing a weak collaboration between European youth researchers (inside and outside Europe).
- The lack of a link/connection between local researchers and Western academia is problematic for creating networks and building their capacity.
- There is a small, rather closed network of research groups/individuals focusing on youth.
- Weak collaboration between European youth researchers outside Europe.

## 2. Policy

- Policy makers' mandates change more often than researchers can develop and produce knowledge.
- Policy makers are distant from target groups.
- Policy makers are not a homogeneous group at all levels; it was suggested that building on good practice of co-operation with local-level policy makers could help develop national and regional co-operation.
- Youth policies per se are either non-existent or not activated/implemented in most South Mediterranean countries.
- Policy making is generally not evidence-based.
- There is a gap between stated policy intentions and implementation.
- Compartmentalised and fractured knowledge (lack of an interdisciplinary approach).
- Sometimes policy-making processes lack transparency and accountability, and do not take account of the results of evidence-based research.
- There are no effective mechanisms for building trust, dialogue, feedback and evaluation between policy makers and researchers.
- Policy focus and outcomes are often driven by opinion, ideology and interest because policy makers are accountable to their constituents, political party and government.
- Policy makers generally rely on statistics and quantitative data (poll results, opinion surveys, etc.), and often ignore qualitative data findings produced by research.

## 3. Funding

- EU-funded research projects are too heavy and have a reputation of imposing focus.
- Weak public-private funding partnership.
- Gaps in funding research responding to society and policy needs. Funds are not always available for issues that may be of immediate need in society, because most funding is set with mid- or long-term planning.
- Research agenda and topics are often not discussed between researchers, policy makers and donors.
- Donors are usually not part of the debate, yet they are usually influential and could be perceived as being a directing hand/giving hand/punishing hand. Donor funding has a strong influence on research, policy and government work. It is important to define the role of the donor (as a directing hand/giving hand/punishing hand).
- Donor funding for youth research in the South Mediterranean is usually inadequate and often poorly aligned with national priorities.

## 4. Research

- In many South Mediterranean countries relevant youth studies and research specific topics are not a recognised discipline, resulting in a gap in research and basic data about the main challenges and situation of youth in that part of the region.
- Western-driven academia discourses are accepted with difficulty in the Southern Mediterranean region.

- There is a need for different kinds of “knowledge on youth” providing multidisciplinary approach.
- Certain research work requires a long time before the results are published, which means that in some cases by the time the findings and results are out, the topic of research is no longer relevant or that it does not respond to the present reality.
- There is a lack of informed research-based policy recommendations, linking practitioners’ knowledge and research findings.
- Research results focus on differences and don’t reflect the similarities between the regions (North-South).
- There is a need for a South-South research co-operation, networks and terminology specific to the region.
- There is a need to incorporate more researchers in the field of youth, as well as provide learning opportunities and knowledge exchange between researchers in the Euro-Mediterranean region.
- The terminology and local context varies, especially as there is no common understanding of concepts between researchers on the different sides of the Mediterranean.
- Increasing dialogue spaces between researchers, practitioners and policy makers, will allow researcher to better identify priority areas for studies and research.
- Difficulties and gaps in accessing research knowledge and results from Southern countries (especially as most of it is in Arabic).
- There are not many researchers working in civil society organizations in order to combine the researcher-practitioner perspective, and bridge everyday practice with academic research results.
- Some research results are not connected to local knowledge and reality.
- Due to the gap in research capacity between both sides of the Mediterranean, as well as the shortage in translated research, there is a lack of comparative data.
- Most of the research results and work done in the South of the Mediterranean does not provide an interdisciplinary approach, but rather a compartmentalised and fractured knowledge.
- In some cases research topics in-focus topics are inconsistent with current or local needs.
- Taking the local context into account, it is necessary to re-adapt some research tools and methodologies to fit better with the local setting.
- Reductionism on Euro-Mediterranean research topics.
- Research work in Southern Mediterranean countries may, in some cases, be considered ‘unsafe’ especially when it comes to sensitive research topics or working in certain areas. Researchers can be denied access to information or places, and may fear for their personal safety and security.
- Research is needed to both help develop the policy and to evaluate the policy.
- No mapping of stakeholders or available information on research work including what has taken place previously or of what is being developed currently.

*“Sometimes there is a mismatch between research findings coming from academia and the implementation on the ground and real life practice”*

## 5. Youth

- Structured mechanisms to channel young people’s voices in policy formation are not always available. There is a clear difference in levels of youth engagement between urban areas and rural areas (more engagement in urban areas). Young people may have a stronger presence at grassroots and civil society level but are not as present/visible in political life.
- Young people do not constitute a homogeneous group, therefore research and policies will need to reflect this diversity and take it into account.

- Adaptive resilience. Young people are able to respond and adapt to challenging situations in their environment. They find unpredictable approaches to address their needs. This is not always reflected in policy.
- There is an intergenerational gap.
- Young people’s choice of “no action”.
- Similarities and differences in how civil society organisations function.
- When it comes to youth policies and research there is a fluidity of categories and approaches, mixing formal/non-formal/informal.
- Gap between education/capacity building /requirements of the market, and the influence of having “connections” or *wasta*.
- Looking for new platforms to spread and access knowledge.
- The conditions of young people in countries without a separate youth policy and those with a separate youth policy are significantly different. Existing youth policy provides a framework for young people engagement.
- Youth as “hope of the nation” and as “threat to the nation”, it all depends on how policy makers channel young people’s energy.
- There are a number of inclusion/exclusion factors allowing youth to be better equipped and engaged in policy making and decision-making processes, this includes socio-economic situation, education, skills and knowledge, locality (urban/rural), opportunities available, etc.

## Challenges and gaps

Despite the common agreement among stakeholders on the importance of mainstreaming evidence-based policy processes, there is still a wide gap between theory and practice. Using research could be simply a symbolic act to lend legitimacy to a decision. During the two-day meeting the discussions of the participants indicated some areas where there are clear common challenges and gaps recognised equally by researchers, policy makers and practitioners. Some of these areas include the following:

### *a) Language and communication*

It is important for both researchers and policy makers to use a common language when addressing the same issue in order to build a common understanding of it. The language and criteria used in academic journals and research papers may not necessarily be easily understood by policy makers and practitioners. Therefore, when presented to policy makers or practitioners, the results and findings of academic research need to be simplified, made easy to understand and must define actionable recommendations. Understanding the target audience will influence the language and approach to presenting research outcomes. Political will, creating incentives and advocacy are important elements when it comes to translating research into policy-relevant material. The problem of language may not only exist between researchers and policy makers, but also among researchers themselves. Etymology and language may differ radically between the different countries in the South Mediterranean, making it important to understand the local context when discussing research results and recommendations.

### *b) Priorities, timeliness, relevance and timeframe*

When it comes to agenda setting, participants have highlighted the occasional disconnect between research agenda and political priorities or community needs. Policy makers often rely on researchers when it comes to identifying trends, solutions and analyses of both current pressing challenges and long-term issues. This clearly shows a strong need for making academic research results accessible as well as relevant to current concerns. However, occasionally research and policy priorities may not always match. For instance, researchers may want to address a potential challenge or issue outside of the political agenda, which policy makers do not consider a priority or relevant to local or national concerns. Furthermore, delays in using research for policy are common. Timeliness and suitability of research findings is of great importance, as research material may be available yet are not used by

policy makers until much later. Time is an important factor when it comes to using research findings. As mentioned previously in the section on research, the time-span that most research work requires to be complete – in some cases several years – ranging from preparation until the actual publication of the work, means that by the time the results are out national priorities may have shifted, breaking the synergy between policy and research.

It is clear that there is a need for a more focused and highly tailored research agenda to address the specific questions facing policy makers in the South Mediterranean that takes into account the political situation in the region. Most priority-setting exercises in the region have been carried out with a top-down approach, involving like-minded experts and politicians and rarely incorporating evidence-based research work. Understanding the regional and national socio-economic context would be fundamental to understanding political perspectives and how to influence change in policy and practice. Integrating research results into policy formulation could also be pursued through public demand, media pressure and economic considerations, among other things. The shift in the mind-set of policy makers in the South Mediterranean following the Arab Uprising in 2011 opened the door for researchers to use social media and other means to inform and reach out to others in order to indirectly influence policy-making processes. However, a more structured approach would need to be established in order to allow for a better research design and link to practice and policy, making research relevant and applicable to the local context.

*c) Political instability and turnover at different levels*

Typically in democratic political processes, a systematic transfer of power is to be expected. This provides a great diversity of ideas and ideologies within the political institutions of the state. Nevertheless, this change has an undesired impact on research priorities and the availability of funds. Over the past five years most South Mediterranean countries have been suffering from political instability and conflicts resulting in economic challenges and disruptions. Turnover of political leaders and their cabinets, as well as bureaucracy, have crippled, stalled and hindered research projects, especially as most South Mediterranean countries did not invest in research as a priority in their national strategies. The political turmoil and unfavourable situation for research work/policy has resulted in the neglect of research, researchers travelling to seek better opportunities abroad and poor evidence-based policies. It goes without saying that the political will to support research can go a long way in shaping the research agenda and developing more reliable evidence-based policies.

*d) Mutual mistrust*

The relation between the relevant stakeholders - research and policy, or practice - is usually marked by mistrust and poor communication. This could be due to a mismatch of priorities, as mentioned above (point c), or a conflict between research findings and institutional interests. In order for research to feed into and inform policy, as well as facilitate the use of evidence for practitioners, it would be necessary to establish an environment of dialogue among stakeholders, and create open processes for exchange. This will need to be coupled with accountability for policy implementation or improved co-ordination between different policy sectors.

*e) Research quality*

The quality of research can vary dramatically in different environments, but it need not always be the case. Researchers have expressed concern about reduced access to some research materials as a result of privacy regulations, bureaucracy, obstacles to travelling (caused by security or the need for permission or visas), censorship (including self-censorship) and the lack of an adequate translation (if any) of good research practices and methods for some South Mediterranean countries where research standards may not be the same as in European countries. Research methods can also vary because of the context, the information available and the environment in which the research is conducted. The publication and dissemination of research results are integral to knowledge sharing and advancing investigation.

f) *Funders/donors*

Are researchers free to choose their areas of work or are their priorities based on funding availability? When it comes to the relationship between researchers and policy makers or practitioners, donors are seldom mentioned despite their relevance. Donors are a fundamental part of the equation. Their support could influence the choice of research themes and priorities, as well as the expected results. Despite the availability of funding frameworks, research remains underfunded in many countries. Poorly funded research might not be as extensive or reflect accurate results or trends. Investment in high-quality research is important if the results are to be used in policy making. This investment should also be extended to the translation and dissemination of the results. Structured collaboration and support of both state institutions and donors would allow for better research outcomes, especially within a clear state strategy. Furthermore, the donor could request that researchers work within an umbrella NGO or a specific network, which threatens new researchers and those who want to work independently.

g) *Young people*

Young people were the core subject of this meeting. Despite existing good practices when it comes to youth work, both practitioners and researchers face similar challenges when approaching decision makers in an effort to change policies. Participants highlighted that youth issues are cross-cutting in nature and are affected by state and non-state policies and strategies. Although a number of countries have youth-targeted policies, it is safe to say that national policies on health, economy, education, employment, etc. have an equally strong impact on youth even when they are not the main target. When addressing youth issues, research initiatives and projects need to take into consideration matters such as: the similarities and differences between young people within a country and between countries; the difficulties in identifying youth researchers in South Mediterranean countries; the influence of the environment and political/economic context in determining youth priorities and needs in a given country; the different levels of engagement and participation of young people in policy-making processes; and, in many cases, the lack of meaningful dialogue where young people are heard.

*“There is a need for more evidence-based funding and more engagement between researchers and practitioners to build trust and partnership.”*

### **Where does research stand in the South Mediterranean?**

When it comes to researchers’ participation in shaping and influencing policies, it is necessary to reflect on where they (and their institutions) stand on the ladder of participation. What role do they play? And what are the power dynamics with other stakeholders? If the ladder of participation is applied<sup>3</sup> then youth research in South Mediterranean countries is between step 3 (tokenism) and step 5 (consulted and informed), depending on the country and policies implemented. Support for evidence-based research and practitioners’ work should demonstrate to policy makers the added value of youth research in policy formation.

Systematically using available research and practical knowledge in policy making would lead to more effective decisions. It is the responsibility of the state, and its institutions, to set priorities and make

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3. See sociologist Roger Hart’s book *Children’s Participation: The Theory And Practice Of Involving Young Citizens In Community Development And Environmental Care* for UNICEF (1997): [https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/ASTC/00e37246-8bd9-481f-900c-ad9d6b6b3393/UploadedImages/Ladder\\_of\\_Participation\\_1.pdf](https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/ASTC/00e37246-8bd9-481f-900c-ad9d6b6b3393/UploadedImages/Ladder_of_Participation_1.pdf)

informed policy decisions through consultations with researchers, practitioners and relevant stakeholders. When this dynamic is interrupted by conditions such as weak research, the non-participation of some of the stakeholders, a mismatch between research and real community needs, a lack of funds or resources, or a failure to take into account the opinion or input of stakeholders, the developed policies are likely to produce ineffective outcomes for the community.

## Recommendations and proposals

### What next?

Over the course of the two-day meeting, the discussions demonstrated that despite the gaps and challenges there is a degree of success in communicating results, making an impact and establishing an effective communication between researchers, funders and stakeholders. Participants spoke of good practices which could be reproduced or adapted to national realities. The aim of these practices is to ensure the representation of the interests of young people in different arenas and improve and systematise a consultation process between researchers and stakeholders. The group highlighted the following practical recommendations to improve efficacy.



### Appropriate structure

- Establish structural dialogue mechanisms – for example, advisory boards – to engage young people, experts, researchers and stakeholders when it comes to addressing youth issues.
- Support tutoring/mentoring structures and co-research projects between the global South and North, particularly in collaboration with local and young researchers.
- Streamline responsive research mechanisms in order to inform/advise policy makers in a timely manner.
- Find new ways/participatory mechanisms to set research agendas (themes) involving young people, researchers and practitioners, through policy-related funding.
- Strengthen two-way communication and learning between researchers and practitioners.
- Reinforce youth programmes and research that promotes youth resilience.
- Identify monitoring mechanisms to measure and evaluate the impact of research on decision-making processes.
- Develop projects and campaigns to support youth research in the South Mediterranean, in order to share and demonstrate the added value of their work in policy formation.
- Increase funding sources and engage donors in the dialogue process.
- Establish a mechanism allowing those involved, especially researchers, to see the impact of their work and provide relevant data on how this work was used, explain how the results were disseminated and detail the next steps or any follow-up to the research results.
- Establish a platform that would connect and build good communication between European and Arab researchers, motivating them to co-operate and exchange good practices and research results.

### Positive relationships

- Facilitate the productive exchange of ideas and information.
- Encourage stronger links between practitioners.
- Promote the bringing together (empowering) of young researchers.
- Maintain open communication channels to inform stakeholders of the latest research findings.

- Based on research findings, identify and disseminate actionable messages in non-academic language, tailored towards the target audience/target group.
- Promote research, policy and community engagement activities.
- Enable information sharing (formal and informal) between researchers and policy makers through personal contact.
- Engage diverse stakeholders in evidence-based policy conversations.