

Chapter 2

Will the Arab youth reap the harvest of the “spring” any day soon?

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Normally when we need to know about something we go to the experts, but we tend to forget that when we want to know about youth and what they feel and what they want, that we should talk to them.

– Kofi Annan, Former UN Secretary-General

INTRODUCTION

The outcomes of the current political, social and economic transformations rippling across the Arab world due to the collective awakening and synchronised activities of millions of young men and women since December 2010, will be well remembered by historians in the years ahead since it marks an unprecedented turning point for modern history in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), if not across the world. Disconnection remains the dominant feeling among the Arab youth now challenging their governments, as enormous energy and talent are being unleashed, striving to restore, if not recreate, some of the basic constitutional and social institutions in the fields of governance, economy, freedom, social welfare, culture and media and diplomacy. The situation has also forced large-scale socio-economic and political upheavals onto the agendas of the newly elected governments to harness and nurture the aspirations and expectations of the youth. So far, none of these expectations has been materialised. Rather, the socio-economic exclusion of the “Post-Arab Spring youth” is climaxing, as feelings of social marginalisation, pressures of poverty, corruption and human rights abuses are still perpetuated. This paper highlights, accordingly, some current reflections on the main features characterising the state of the socio-economic and political disconnections Arab youth are still forced to put up with, in such a delicate transitory period in the life of the region, and suggests some operational measures for policy makers to alleviate the burden of unemployment and social exclusion.

POST-REVOLUTIONARY YOUTH FRUSTRATION

Politically, the three years of Arab uprisings opened more doors of confusion and dismay than windows of promised future for the youth. Today, the majority of youth still feel disenfranchised from the political process in their countries. "They do not seem to have a grip over the course their countries are moving to and the new institutions of governance that emerged do not seem to correspond with the role the youth exercised", a recent poll conducted by Al Jazeera Center for Studies concluded. The same report found that most of the 8 045 of women and men aged 17 to 31 surveyed from three Arab Spring nations did not believe that their recently elected parliaments represented them. In Tunisia, for instance, more than 80% did not feel that they were represented by the deputies of the Constituent Assembly; 72% of young Egyptian respondents reported that they did not feel represented by their MPs; and in Libya, 62% of young people said that their National Conference did not voice their aspirations.

Economically, the region's downturn and the fiscal deficit, coupled with mismanagement of resources, poor governance and mismatch of the education system with the needs of the market have negatively affected the labour market. The result of this is an alarming increase in unemployment among the youth, especially newly graduated students. A recent study conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO: 2013) has revealed that the Arab Spring revolutions were not of much benefit to the Arab youth across the Middle East and North Africa region in terms of employment: unemployment has increased by about 5%, reaching 27%; Egypt and Tunisia top the list with nearly 30%, Morocco's rate is at 27%, and Algeria's 21.5%. Furthermore, the study pointed out that four out of ten young people in the region were living in poverty, while 40% of young people were faced with low wages that did not meet their basic expenses, forcing many of them to live with their families. Finally, the report highlighted that the region has remained below the minimum acceptable volume of work relative to its population, where the ratio stands at 43.6%, compared to the international average of 60.3%.

These economic and political indicators reveal that the Arab youth is not facing a brighter future, as economic and political performances since the outbreak of the Arab Spring continue to disconnect young Arabs from all social fabrics. This predicament is what has given birth to a huge swell of the young population experiencing multidimensional frustration, alienation and disconnection. To devise long-term programme policies for reconstructing sustainable national youth policies, Arab decision makers need first to grasp the needs, expectations and dreams of the youth: an urgent question that begs an answer in this regard is, "are the new Arab leaders ready to bridge connections through which young people can reconcile themselves with politics and reconnect with their societies and restore their civic spirits?" This is not a "yes or no" question. It requires a sincere engagement in a constructive auto-criticism of a decade of failing youth policies.

The last decade has delineated a general decline in basic social services in the Arab region, mainly due to the withering role of the state and the lack of comprehensive social plans. On the one hand, a comprehensive youth social policy has been, and still is, lacking in the region. Although economic development is said to be a vital element

for social development, it does not necessarily ensure a fair redistribution of wealth within society, nor does it provide equal access to basic social services. For instance, in the decade that preceded the Arab revolutions, the Gross Domestic Product of the region was steadily growing at a healthy rate; yet, economic opportunities and living conditions among the youth were plummeting, due to the overspreading spirit of inequality, corruption and social exclusion. National strategies for youth social inclusion have mainly been targeting specific sectors of people living in extreme poverty; but there has been no rights-based approach in support of the vulnerable, and no sustainable strategy for ensuring the basic needs of all citizens. In the same manner, currently developed social action plans in various Arab countries are generally limited to a series of safety nets. They lack a comprehensive vision based on national strategies for social development, including public health, education, job creation and a comprehensive national social security plan.

On the other hand, the forces of globalisation, the open market economy and the heavy and costly requirements of modern forms of education have greatly extended the period of youth and delayed the age associated with ensuring professional status and getting married. Although youth today is defined by the international community as the life-span between 15 and 24, most young men and women in the MENA region join this population segment well into their thirties, if not later. So, even the demographic factor does not help young people connect to their generation. Furthermore, the enormous and rapid increase in a young educated Arab population, particularly among females, has made it even harder for them to become financially and socially independent by finding jobs commensurate with their education, leaving home and setting up a household as part of a married couple. Consequently, the breaking of social ties and loss of social support, unstable living conditions and lack of legal and political rights and security have chased away more than 10 million people from the Southern Mediterranean Arab countries to migrate to developed countries with more social and economic opportunities (Martín 2009b); and a yearly migration flow of 200 thousand people is expected in the period between 2010 and 2020 from Southern Mediterranean Arab countries (approximately 2 million new migrants for this 10-year period). This is a huge migration flux which is already, and will continue, posing big socio-political, economic and legal challenges for host countries (mainly Europe) that are already trying to decipher solutions for the plight of their own youth. As to those young people who remain in their countries, they will continue to insist on achieving their full potential, social justice and equity, the right to hold their governments accountable and more space to express their identities freely.

TOWARDS A HOLISTIC REGIONAL STRATEGY OF YOUTH CONNECTION

Politically, the Arab region has been beset by economic and political challenges which have often linked its young men and women to social unrest and instability. Many foreign policy experts and development practitioners consider young men the group most at risk for involvement in violence and extremism. This view is particularly predominant when it comes to the Arab youth. The consequences of not fully developing and harnessing youth's potential could be dire, including significant economic losses, armed conflict and political and social upheaval and instability. The youth are

more likely to become frustrated because of legitimate grievances, including a lack of feeling of connection, lack of employment opportunities, low educational attainment, little participation in decision making and low social mobility. In this volatile context, greedy and opportunistic politicians could even exploit these grievances by involving these frustrated youth in violent overthrows of legitimate governments.

Economically, there is an increasing realisation that the level of youth unemployment is not simply a mirror of the business cycle, but a persistent structural issue that has distinct causes and requires distinct solutions that cut across fiscal, labour, social security and education policies. For too long, positive aggregate growth figures were hiding the underlying causes of the unrest: unemployment, high inflation, authoritarian rule and a lack of economic opportunities for the majority of the population, especially younger generations. Today, Arab policy makers should realise that a financial system that serves only 20% of the population is a key ingredient in the recipe for political instability. Indeed, economic and financial youth connection in the Middle East and North Africa region lags behind other parts of the world. According to the global financial inclusion survey (Findex), MENA ranks last in regional comparison on financial inclusion. On average, only 18% of adults have an account with a formal financial institution compared to a global average of 50%. At the same time, working age youth comprise one third of the Arab World and one quarter is unemployed, which means that countries in the MENA region need to create 80 million jobs in 15 years (International Monetary Fund 2013). The Manpower Group believes that “the ability to acquire, organize, and apply knowledge to solve business problems – human talent – has become more important than any other form of capital in ensuring economic success for both businesses and individuals”.

The youth’s needs for education, employment, freedom, and political participation are central to the political stability and economic development of the region. These needs might differ among groups within countries (by gender, education level, ethnicity and health status) but the potential feeling of connection they might cultivate is the same across all young generations. Conversely, the size, energy, enthusiasm, innovation and dynamism of youth are assets that can be harnessed for the MENA region’s development with appropriate policies that address adequately and qualitatively the question of connection. When youth’s societal conditions are catered for, young people become a valuable source of human capital as well as consuming power in economic production, which would improve the total productivity in a region of the world where capital formation is limited. When employed, young people could be a reliable source of demand for the economy through their consumption activities. In addition, the Arab youth represents a potential new class of entrepreneurs that the region urgently needs in order to prosper.

As the Middle East undergoes an economic revival, it must address three main challenges: 1) updating and building knowledge on the state of young people to inform effective policies and programmes focusing on the quality of jobs as well as levels of employment; 2) developing policies and programmes that go beyond job creation and assist young people in accumulating critical assets during their transition years; and 3) these interventions must help forge a new social contract that includes a buoyant private sector and an active civil society. The contract must be based on a new development model in which youth connection will be

at the core of decision makers' agendas, before they indulge in any policy making. I think the first step towards youth social inclusion starts with including young people in designing policies and formulating implantation measures. This does not mean that every single young person has to be surveyed; but simply the inclusion of civil society working in the youth field, youth workers, NGOs and the private sector as long-term partners of official bodies. Maybe then, the Arab youth will start reaping the harvest!

CONCLUSION

Fact and research-based findings have shown worldwide that social exclusion causes far-reaching damage to the living conditions, emotional life, socio-economic participation and health status of young people, leading to intergenerational inheritance of poverty, insecurity in living standards, political and social isolation, feelings of estrangement and unhealthy lifestyles. The outcome is either an ideologically, politically and socially disconnected group of angry people, ready to terrorise innocent lives in the name of fake ideological promises (Al-Qaeda militants) or another more optimistic group hoping to reconnect with their nation who chose to revolt against totalitarian regimes (the Arab Spring youth). During the peak period of the Arab Spring, there was a lot of talk in many of the neighbouring countries about how the youth were an important resource, representing the future. Now is the time to advance in the direction of realising an ambitious vision to place this generation at the centre of development in the region. Having young people as key partners in finding tailored solutions, and ensuring their participation in decision making and service delivery, will be key. That has to translate at a policy level. One of the major recommendations is to help support and bring voice to the youth movements in more formal venues of decision making. Young people need to be brought into the mainstream socio-political and economic institutions. It is true that some governments and agencies have already started to do that. But the practice of youth connection needs to move from sporadic action to a standardised regional strategy, as is the case among states of the Council of Europe, whose model of youth social inclusion and experience in youth connection, youth policy and youth work is considered among the best worldwide.

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