

Youth in the Mediterranean: Challenges and Cultural Opportunities for Change

Azza Karam. Senior Advisor on Culture, United Nations Population Fund, New York

Youth make up the most numerous and, at the same time, most disadvantaged group in the Arab region in terms of visibility and employment. The opportunities for personal development of the young in these countries are, indeed, very limited, especially for women, particularly owing to social shortcomings in education and culture. The effects of globalisation, moreover, can be a double-edged sword, given that while providing tools to get to know other cultures, they can contribute to the increase of violence and terror. To avoid this, the young must become agents of cultural change and be able to participate critically at the heart of societies in the Arab world.

Youth between the ages of 15-24 constitute the largest age group among Arab populations of the Mediterranean, representing more than one third of the total inhabitants of the Arab region and approximately 20% of populations in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, Jordan, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia.¹ Though the largest age group population-wise, youth, nonetheless, face the greatest challenge in terms of employment. All countries in the region have witnessed an increase in youth unemployment rates between 1991 and 2007 with some exception of some of the Gulf countries. In fact, youth constituted an estimated 44% of the total unemployed in the region – according to the *Report on the Millennium Development Goals in the Arab Region 2005*.

The latest unfolding events in Gaza serve to underline how the Arab region is in the throes of critical political, economic and social change, in addition to being beset by major developmental challenges – exacerbated by the ongoing global economic recession. Amongst the most vociferous forces to contend with are implicit and explicit accusations that the region is a breeding ground for terrorism. This accusation is increasingly difficult to ignore when we realise the high incidence of suicide bombings not only within the region but by the Arab youth diaspora and the youth of Arab (and Islamic) descent living in the European parts of the Mediterranean.

In assessing the situation of youth in developed economies, the United Nations *World Youth Report 2007* highlights that “Though notable progress has been achieved, there are

1. All of the opinions expressed in this paper belong to the author alone, and are not necessarily representative of any organization, staff or board member.

still major differentials in youth development opportunities within and between the developed market economies. There remain large numbers of young people who are unable to access the benefits of national growth and development and participate fully in society. Inequalities in youth development are apparent in all countries for which data are available, including those in which social welfare systems are well established. Inequalities are often linked to factors such as class, ethnicity, race, gender and migrant status.”²

Many youths see globalisation as a multi-faceted phenomenon which raises expectations, needs, and ways of interaction, marking a significant difference from youth experiences in previous generations

Events in Greece show that youths are, for better or worse, making their presence and their voices heard – and not always in “peaceful” ways. At the same time, in the United States, it has been argued that the election of Barack Obama as the next President was made possible in large part due to the energy and commitment of a cross-section of youth from around the country. Moreover, movements for environmental change are increasingly being led by youth from around the world. Although a cliché, it is nevertheless a reality – youth can make or break the peace and stability of our planet.

A number of workshops, conferences and publications in and on the Arab and Mediterranean region highlight how it is that young people themselves see some of these developments, particularly in light of globalised communication and networking. Many youths see globalisation as a multi-faceted phenomenon

which raises expectations, needs, and ways of interaction, marking a significant difference from youth experiences in previous generations. The consequences of globalisation on Arab youth can be assessed in terms of cultural, social, economic and political dynamics.

Youth, Unemployment and Gender Challenges

Unemployment is a key reason behind widespread poverty and its consolidation. It “holds youths hostage” at a time when every one of them is looking towards achieving a certain level of relative independence, finding their own identity, or even choosing a partner in marriage. The International Labour Organization points out that Arab youth (in the MENA region) suffer from unemployment at the rate of 12.2% annually. In fact, the 2004 ILO Report indicates that this, combined with diminishing, labour rights decreasing wage value, and the introduction of an average of 2.5 million youths into the annual labour market, significantly aggravates the reality of unemployment. The report also stresses that female unemployment exceeds that of males by 50%, while youth unemployment reaches 39% in Algeria, compared to 50% in Palestine, and 25% in Egypt. Although unemployment can be found in all Arab states, it does not have the same features. In the Gulf States, for instance, economic institutions prefer foreign workers who are less costly (in terms of wages and maintenance), whereas privatisation and structural adjustment have exacerbated unemployment elsewhere.

Young women in the Arab region are doubly disadvantaged, as both age and gender considerations tend to limit their employment opportunities. Some women are able to find jobs,

2. Available at http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wyr07_chapter_7.pdf.

often after overcoming serious obstacles, but a relatively large number choose not to participate in the labour market at all. Female labour force participation has increased in many parts of the world over the past two generations, but in the Middle East and North Africa the gender gap in employment has remained wide; in 2005, the labour force participation rate of 25.1% for young women was one of the lowest in the world and well below the rate of 54.3% for young men in the region. These percentages represent the proportions of actively seeking employment. Only a quarter of the region's female youth are looking for work, and a significant proportion will not be able to find jobs; unemployment rates for this group in 2004 stood at 26.4% in the Middle East and at 46.8% in North Africa.

Globalisation tends to marginalise youths with less education and fewer skills, which, in turn, contributes to increasing poverty rates

Much research indicates that while it was assumed that globalisation, with its economic mechanisms, would open new labour markets for Arab youth, what in fact transpired was that Arab markets as a whole were swamped with products from exporting countries. This occurred, as subsequent United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports argued,³ through monopolising Arab markets and turning them into consumer ones. Moreover, globalisation tends to marginalise youths with less education and fewer skills, and worsen health care conditions in production and income-generating circles, which, in turn, contributes to increasing poverty rates. These same mechanisms of global market integration, however, do manage to work

for a limited number of youths who are fortunate enough to possess the right skills and abilities to harvest these fruits, thereby to a large extent perpetuating the social and economic inequities within Arab societies.

There is general agreement among researchers and labour specialists that there are institutional obstacles hindering the creation of job opportunities. Labour markets tend to be traditional, narrowly defined, and inflexible, which in turn weakens labour mobility across the entire Mediterranean region. In addition, the lack of effective integrated support for small enterprises plays a role in creating various patterns of unemployment among youths, especially in conflict-ridden middle income countries, e.g. Palestine and Iraq, or those that suffered from civil wars such as Somalia, Lebanon, Sudan, Djibouti and Algeria.

In UNDP's *Arab Youth Report*, participants stressed that fighting unemployment and poverty, and creating job opportunities for youth, is a significant challenge facing Arab governments, particularly since youth represent more than one third of the total inhabitants in the Arab region. Additionally, they maintained that the existing poverty and employment policies are not based on a sound analysis of labour markets.

While UNDP's *Report on the Millennium Development Goals in the Arab Region 2005* states that youth education and employment is one of the basic means of youth empowerment, youth in the region considered governance to be another key issue. They argue that democratic governance mechanisms provide an institutional framework for youth to participate in society, hold authority accountable, and ensure transparency in the managing of state affairs.

3. UNDP's Arab Human Development Reports of 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005. Also a 2006 joint UNDP-DESA Report entitled: *Arab Youth Strategizing for the MDGs*.

Many Arab youths are quick to point out that the contemporary Arab landscape suffers from a crisis of youth political empowerment, manifested in a sense of uncertainty and insecurity among them. This, in turn, heightens their sense of isolation, prevents them from dealing constructively with challenges, and militates against constructive political participation. Many youths perceive democratic governance as an enlarged sphere of participation through elected local councils and effective parliamentary and party-based presence. In UNDP's *Arab Youth Report*, as well as the Arab League's *Youth Report 2006*, many suggested various mechanisms to encourage youth participation in these frameworks, such as allocating seats for young people in these structures. Others, however, were of the opinion that encouraging broader and more genuine societal participation in general would eventually result in reaching the sought-after political empowerment of youth.

Many Arab youths are quick to point out that the contemporary Arab landscape suffers from a crisis of youth political empowerment, manifested in a sense of uncertainty and insecurity among them

Specific dynamics of youth political participation in occupied and conflict-ridden countries are important to keep in mind. The last decade witnessed an unprecedented increase in the number of youths engaged in armed conflicts, either as victims or as participants. This is especially the case since 10 out of the 22 Arab countries are currently either under occupation, undergoing civil war or handling border disputes. The importance of the rehabilitation and reintegration of young combatants, as well

as those rendered disabled by the conflicts, is critical to pave the way for their constructive social, economic and political participation in the respective polities. The emphasis on focusing on marginalised and disabled youth segments of the population, however, is not only limited to conflict and/or war-torn societies. On the contrary, this needs to be a critical feature of, on and with youth.

As for young women's political empowerment, in spite of many of the gains over the last few decades, many analysts would concur that it will take a relatively longer time to achieve equality in political representation, particularly as cultural attitudes and behaviour remain difficult to change. Unemployment still records its highest rates among women, as does poverty, and women represent 60% of the illiterate population of adults in the Arab region. The most important indicators of the gender gap can be found in women's share of the Gross Domestic Product – a reflection of the harshness of the life Arab women lead: while women's share of GDP constitutes 50% of men's in all developing countries, it drops to 29% only in the Arab region. Such percentages decrease significantly in countries like Oman (16.6%) and Saudi Arabia (16.5%).⁴

There are a number of obstacles to women's development, in particular practices such as violence against young women (e.g. female circumcision), honour crimes, and early marriage which occur both in urban and rural areas. Early marriage can be especially damning for entire generations. Young mothers themselves suffer from numerous physical and social challenges, being unable to continue their education and thus marginalised in any job market, not to mention a series of reproductive health problems (which form 12.5% of the total health problems in the Arab region). At the same time,

4. UNDP-DESA Report *Arab Youth Strategizing for the MDGs*.



Paul Fusco/Magnum/Contacto.

these young mothers may not be best qualified to care for their own children, either in terms of knowing how best to care for them physically, or financially. While there are some encouraging signs of steps being taken to raise the age of early marriage by law in several Arab countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Yemen to name but a few) the fact remains that even existing laws are often too easily breached.

A UNICEF-conducted study during a workshop jointly organized by UNDP and UNDESA (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs) in Bahrain in 2005 indicated that 48% of people infected with HIV/AIDS are women. In most instances, the study asserts, these women are being infected by their husbands who either have extramarital affairs, or are drug addicts, or through tainted blood transplants. Effectively, therefore, HIV and

AIDS add a new and burning challenge to the realities of young Arab women.

Globalisation and Culture

The United Nations *World Youth Report 2007* summarises some of the major global trends on and around youth in the following way: “The review of regional experiences suggests that young people the world over are in a better position than past generations of youth to contribute to development. However, there are still far too many who face barriers and constraints arising from their backgrounds or from the social environment in which they live. Regardless of their place of birth or current residence, young people continue to experience similar sets of difficulties that impinge on their healthy

and timely transition to adulthood. Apart from health, education and employment issues, such areas as poverty reduction and the availability of opportunities for volunteer work and for the advancement of young women and girls continue to present a challenge.”⁵

It can be argued that while the cultural and economic impact of globalisation on Arab youth was relatively rapid and direct, the social and political consequences are still unfolding. There appears to be a consensus among scholars, human rights activists and youth leaders alike that globalisation appears to pose an alternative reality to traditional understandings and practices understood as being integral to Arabic heritage – gender relations, religious identity and obligation and social responsibility, or charity and volunteerism being cases in point. These challenges reflect on values, habits and behaviours of young people in particular and also influence linguistic, artistic and intellectual production. This, in turn, plays havoc with institutions concerned with social upbringing, so that globalised culture has become perceived by some as a direct threat to youth identity and their sense of belonging. This “threat” becomes even more significant with diminishing educational and economic levels.

Clearly, however, the cultural impact of globalisation differs from one country to another, and even within each country. On the one hand, globalisation can be seen in hybridised forms of music, fashion and rebelliousness against “tradition”. On the other hand, economic globalisation is mirrored in scores of unemployed youths, or those who have been unable to utilise their degrees effectively and are marginalised in unsuitable professions, and those who are completely occupied with obtaining their basic needs.

While the negative consequences of globalisation are a source of consternation in the

Arab region, the media – as a global mechanism – constitutes a mix of both challenge and opportunity. The challenge is primarily to governments confronting rapid transformations in societies with the flow of socio-political information and material. But youths are also challenged by the massive influx of information through mass media which leaves them “caught between two worlds” (the real conditions they live in, which, in many cases, are far from what they see, hear, and grow to expect).

Globalised culture has become perceived by some as a direct threat to youth identity and their sense of belonging. This “threat” becomes even more significant with diminishing educational and economic levels

But many would agree that globalisation represents an opportunity for youths to express themselves in different ways and across spatial boundaries, and thus to grow in cultural interaction and experiential knowledge. Nevertheless, whether a challenge or an opportunity or both, there is little doubt that the most effective way for Arab youth to confront globalisation is to continue to master information and communication technology (ICT). ICT, it is argued, is a double-edged sword. While it is the means to communicate terror, it also has the potential to become a tool to enhance a sense of Mediterranean identity, coalition and capacity building to confront violence and ignorance.

Culture, Religion and Politics

Ten to twenty years ago, the confluence of religion and mainstream political activism was

religious landscapes, are also shaping the religious politics of years to come. They are (and will be) doing this as active participants within religio-cultural political movements, as well as being actively opposed to them. The forms of participation and opposition will differ, and this is where emerging political ideologies and cross-cultural communication with art (music, paintings, drawings, sculptures, videogames, and the like), will form an important part of these landscapes.

Conclusion: Youth as Gatekeepers of Change and Agents of Cultural Change

Youths participating in religio-political movements become just as critical gatekeepers (and re-inventors) of traditions as their older counterparts. As often violent rhetoric and actions around the Mediterranean (from Greece and Spain to Egypt, Algeria and Morocco) show, right-wing ideologies are being championed by youth from the age of 15 to 30. The UNFPA *Youth State of World Population Report 2008* reviews the case stories of young men and women from around the world, who grapple with many of the above joint cultural political and economic challenges. In their own words, young men and women share their daily life stories, wherein each works to enjoy and transform their own cultural surroundings through tackling poverty, prejudice, conflict, as well as stereotyped roles and expectations. The Report concludes that: “The cultural experience of young people is a hybrid of many different elements. Because young people are not limited by their parents’ experiences and

memories, they are generally flexible and dynamic. They have the potential to become agents of change. The complex streams of culture have intense effects on young people, leading them to challenge gender stereotypes in sport; to become champions of other young people in their passage to adulthood; to adapt international music to the realities of local life; to bring new communication technologies to one of the most isolated regions on earth; to rise to the top echelons of government; to live in peace in a land at war; to escape child marriage and claim the right to choices in life. By doing all this, and more, young people are changing themselves and their cultures.”⁷

Youths participating in religio-political movements become just as critical gatekeepers (and re-inventors) of traditions as their older counterparts

The Report recommends that development programmes must be tailored to support young people “to negotiate a place in their society... [to acquire] the skills to embrace their local culture: to change... harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation or child marriage; and support... better information and services for their sexual and reproductive health, and the prevention of violence against women.”⁸ Such programmes should therefore be deeply rooted within an understanding and respect for cultural ways, cultural knowledge – including power relations, politics and economics. The Youth Report endorses the case made by the main UNFPA *State of World Population Report 2008*⁹ for culturally sensitive approaches, which would equip development programmes to help make human rights and gender equality a real-

7. Available at http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2008/en/youth_conclusion_endnotes.html.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Available at <http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2008/en/index.html>.

ity in all societies, and have young people as the most visible champions.

However, the essence of culturally sensitive development approaches, herein defined as those which use an accountable, systematic and inclusive lens of institutions (governmental, civil society, religious, etc.), actors (scholars, activists, young and old, secular and religious communities, ethnic minorities, races, gender, and so on), and environments (external and internal), does not only require an awareness of youth. Over and above this awareness, a culturally sensitive developmental approach demands that the cultural gatekeepers and agents of change be the centrepiece of initiatives – from conceptualisation to implementation to evaluation. This, in turn, means including the insights, voices and efforts of youth – but also devising the means to hold them as accountable as their other counterparts.

A culturally sensitive developmental approach demands that the cultural gatekeepers and agents of change be the centrepiece of initiatives

To date, most of the recommendations made on and for youth have understandably and justifiably focused on areas of poverty reduction, education and employment. These are critical areas, but tackling them alone without an equally rigorous and systematic targeting of youths as agents of cultural change will mean more of the same. Small steps when we need giant leaps to counter the rhetoric of violence and destruction. Interestingly, the *World Youth Report 2007* includes in its recommendations the following: “To preserve cultural heritage and diversity and encourage participatory dialogue.” Indeed, culturally sensitive approaches to developing youth must prioritise and, indeed, include as integral, the areas of music and art – in equal measure to initiatives to counter poverty, provide better education tailored

with adequate and sufficiently remunerative employment.

Music is a universal language that transcends the sensory, emotive, and sometimes even the physical boundaries of body and soul. Art is a medium to communicate collectively and reach across otherwise wide spasms of silence and distress. Both are nourishment for the soul and an opportunity to uplift body and spirit in togetherness. After all, which culture does not have an artist who has been able to communicate across class, gender, ethnicity, community and nation – and who has come from a background of poverty? By what right have international policy makers and development practitioners seen these domains as less deserving in importance than the nourishment of food, water and sanitation – particularly when the latter emphasis has yet to prevent a sense of injustice so deep as to inspire violent confrontations?

This is not to argue that we should see culture as only art and music, and prioritise the development of these over all else. On the contrary, what is being called for here is a culturally sensitive approach which includes the artistic energy of youth in the weaving of its very fabric of design and implementation. In order to do so, perhaps a way to begin would be to at once address the sceptics while harnessing the potential in a scientific documentation – create a cross-cultural youth observatory which can collate and analyse the mass of cross-cultural exchange, creativity, and output of Mediterranean youth over the last century, focusing on case studies where conflict, dire poverty, environmental degradation and political instability have characterised the lives of people in select countries from both sides of the Mediterranean. I am prepared to bet that this focus on the youth cultural agents of change for peace have a much stronger potential for successful transformation in the long term than their counterparts, as cultural gatekeepers of violence, have had in the short term.



Anni Karoumi.