Executive summary

Five years after what has become known as the Arab Spring, young men and women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region still face considerable obstacles in becoming a driving force for social and economic development in their countries. MENA youth are facing higher unemployment levels than young people in any other region in the world. While around 15% of young people aged 15-29 in OECD countries as a whole are not in education, employment or training, inactivity levels for the age cohort 15-24 are as high as 25% for young men in the Palestinian Authority and around 41% for young women in Egypt. As the share of 15-29-year-olds exceeds 30% of the working-age population in most MENA countries, there is an urgent need to create decent opportunities for youth in both public and private sector to play a productive role in all areas of life, in particular by creating the space for youth to raise their voice and shape policies that reflect their realities and aspirations.

In the absence of inclusive institutions supporting dialogue and change, traditional forms of political engagement do not attract a significant share of young people, largely because these are dominated by older people and rigid structures discouraging young people to get involved. Contrary to the popular belief that young people are not interested in politics, recent evidence shows that a majority of MENA youth not only express a general interest in politics but are looking for ways to engage. While not all the youth-led civil society organisations that emerged during the political transformations in some MENA countries still exist, many have been successful as watchdogs, holding government accountable and offering new channels for young people to make themselves heard. Some countries have made efforts to create or strengthen youth representative bodies, such as national and local youth councils. However, there remain many untapped opportunities, such as innovative forms provided by digital technologies.

In line with global trends, some MENA countries are currently formulating or implementing integrated national youth policies cutting across different policy domains. By involving youth in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of a holistic youth strategy, governments can ensure that programmes and services respond to their needs. In previous efforts, however, lack of clarity in responsibilities, limited capacities for co-ordination and the absence of effective accountability mechanisms made implementation difficult.

As of today, results from the World Gallup Survey suggest that young people are dissatisfied with the performance of government in the MENA region. While young people in OECD countries express greater trust in government than their parents, albeit at a very low level, MENA youth have less confidence in their political representatives than the older generation. For MENA youth to become a driving force for and beneficiary of more inclusive growth, exclusive governance arrangements need to be tackled decisively to adjust the existing legislative, institutional and policy frameworks towards their ideas, needs and concerns.

Using open government tools to engage youth

In line with the efforts undertaken to render policy making more inclusive and informed, for instance through the Open Government Partnership, MENA governments could use open government tools such as access to information, citizen engagement and digital technologies to promote youth engagement. Access to information frameworks increases transparency, and can empower youth to participate and scrutinise government action. The availability of youth-disaggregated and integrated data is also critical for targeting youth-specific challenges in a holistic way. Governments could work with youth associations, civil society organisations and activists to formulate national youth policies. Creating or strengthening the role of youth representative bodies contributes to the emergence of more inclusive institutions to make young people's voices heard. Finally, young people increasingly grow up as "digital natives", and web-based consultation methods, social media and online public services could be used more effectively to engage them.

Involving youth in public governance processes

In their role as students, workers, customers or voters, youth present a vulnerable target for corruption and undue influence. Governments could strengthen integrity frameworks in partnership with youth, media and independent institutions, for example by raising the awareness of integrity standards among young people, and engaging them in monitoring the implementation of policies and programmes and reporting corruption.

The public budget is a powerful instrument for turning national strategies into reality, and election pledges into tangible improvements. Governments can engage youth in the strategic allocation of public expenditures, for example by publishing a "Citizen's Budget" highlighting youth-related expenditures, using participatory budgeting approaches, and improving young people's financial literacy.

Public sectors in MENA countries, unable to formally hire any more skilled graduates, are increasingly resorting to informal employment. Furthermore, they often lack good human resources management (HR) practices. To address these challenges, governments could reinforce standardised and merit-based recruitment and promotion, monitor contract-based hiring, and introduce better HR resource planning and management as well as placement systems in schools to help students enter the job market.

MENA countries could take a more inclusive and youth-sensitive approach to regulatory policy. For example, regulatory impact assessments and cost-benefit-analysis could help governments anticipate the share of costs and benefits among different segments of society, including youth and relevant sub-groups. In addition, reviewing the stock of existing legislation could help foster an economic environment encouraging business activity, youth entrepreneurship and job creation.

Local youth councils can help identify needs and hold authorities to account. Young people could also be encouraged to volunteer and participate in the development of their municipality or neighbourhood. Governments should work with local universities and technical institutes to help youth acquire job-relevant skills.

Young women often confront a double challenge of both gender-based and youth-based barriers. To address this double challenge, governments could undertake a systematic review of legislation to eliminate all forms of discrimination, in particular those affecting young women; elimination provisions in workplace regulation that discourage young women to apply for jobs; integrate the demands of young women in national youth strategies and gender equality strategies; gather sex- and age-disaggregated data sets to promote better informed policy decisions; and increase the opportunities for young women and women associations to participate in all spheres of public life.
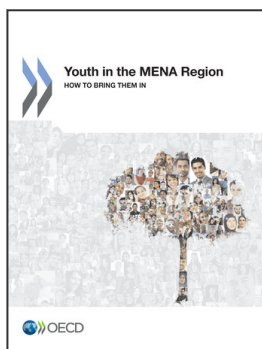
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Youth in the MENA Region
How to Bring Them In