

Chapter 1

Readjusting public governance frameworks towards youth demands and inclusive growth

Despite the prominent role they played in the civil uprisings in the early 2010s, MENA youth are trapped in an observer status. Five years after young men and women took to the streets to call for more democratic governance and economic opportunities, they are facing limited opportunities to influence policy making. Moreover, access to decent employment, quality education and affordable healthcare is restricted for many. With the serious deterioration of the security situation in some countries, a whole generation of young men and women is facing the risk of social and economic exclusion. In line with the OECD New Approaches to Economic Challenges (NAEC) initiative, the OECD report, “Policy Shaping and Policy Making: The Governance of Inclusive Growth” as well as the OECD Guiding Principles for Open and Inclusive Policy Making, this chapter introduces the argument that MENA governments need to readjust their public governance arrangements towards the demands of young people to make inclusive growth happen and deliver tailored public services.

A popular narrative says youth are the future. In light of the demographics and the massive challenges faced by young men and women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, this storyline must change. With a staggering share of 70% of the Jordanian population under the age of 30, for instance, policies in favour of youth are not only an investment in the future but in the well-being of today's population.

In most countries in the MENA region, youth¹ make up more than a quarter of the population, with growing demographic pressure and unemployment rates exceeding those in all other regions of the world (Assaad and Levison, 2013). Young people's exclusion from a fair share of the economic progress over recent decades has produced a pattern of rising income inequality. Worrying figures from OECD countries show that income inequality has translated into higher poverty rates with a shift in the age profile of the poor, with children and youth being particularly vulnerable to increasing poverty rates (OECD, 2016a). The absence of effective public institutions to represent youth needs and youth-tailored strategies has left young men and women at the margin of society with restricted access to social safety and limited access to public services of good quality.

Despite average annual growth rates in real gross domestic product (GDP) of almost 5% in MENA countries between 2000 and 2010, the economic upswing did not translate into increased job creation and economic opportunities (IMF, 2015).² Instead, over the last few years, youth unemployment rates have skyrocketed up to 51% in Libya, 39% in Egypt and 38% in the Palestinian Authority (World Bank, 2016). While young people feel that living costs are on a steady rise, wages stagnate. Youth inactivity in terms of the share of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) is nowhere higher than in the Middle East and North Africa, especially among young women (Yassin, 2014). This pattern presents a significant risk of excluding youth and in particular young women from full participation in public life as recognised by the OECD Recommendation on Gender Equality in Public Life. Despite improvements in the access to higher education, more than 30% in Morocco and more than 50% of all youth in Yemen are not enrolled in secondary education. The failure of government to deliver quality services across all segments and age groups of society comes at high social costs. It risks pulling apart the social cohesion and erodes trust in the state as a steward of youth interests. Indeed, youth in the MENA countries covered in this report unanimously report lower levels of trust in government than the age group of 50+ (see Chapter 3).

Young people in the MENA region are subject to a highly volatile political environment and external shocks. Following the serious deterioration of the security situation in Syria, Yemen, Libya and other countries, many have been forced to flee their homes. In Yemen, as of end 2015, for instance, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that around 170 000 individuals have fled to neighbouring countries and that about 2.5 million people were internally displaced during 2015 (UNHCR, 2016). Considering that half of the Yemini population was under the age of 19, an entire new generation risks growing up in an environment of armed conflict. Countries hosting large refugee communities such as Jordan and Lebanon face the challenge of providing basic access to education and health services in a context in which capacities are already scarce.

OECD evidence suggests that public governance matters for breaking down the barriers to inclusive growth which it defines as “economic growth that creates opportunity for all segments of the population and distributes the dividends of increased prosperity, both in monetary and non-monetary terms, fairly across society” (OECD, 2015a). The role of public governance – the system of strategic processes and tools, as

well as institutions, rules and interactions for effective policy making – has been recognised in the OECD New Approaches to Economic Challenges (NAEC) initiative and the OECD report, *Policy Shaping and Policy Making: The Governance of Inclusive Growth* (OECD, 2016a). It argues that public sector strategies, tools and processes should be aligned towards inclusive growth outcomes across the policy-making cycle (*policy making*) based on a more inclusive process of identifying policy challenges and implementation (*policy shaping*).

For young men and women in the MENA region to become a driving force and beneficiary of more inclusive growth, governments need to readjust existing public governance arrangements. With a view to the arrangements in place, youth are suffering from a two-fold marginalisation.³ Young people play a marginal role in shaping policies. In a context in which their voice in the public discourse is silent and access to the critical stages of the decision-making process is blocked, they are unlikely to become a source of creativity and scrutiny. Despite the fact that students were among the most active drivers of the civil uprisings in the MENA region, calling for more transparent, inclusive and accountable governments, opportunities for youth associations and activists to influence policy outcomes still remain fairly limited.

Moreover, youth considerations in public policies and strategies are largely absent. As a multi-dimensional field of public policy, youth considerations should be mainstreamed and co-ordinated across various ministries and departments (e.g. employment, education, health, family, women, culture, and sports). A whole-of-government (WoG) approach to youth policy can break down silo-based approaches and deliver youth-dedicated policies and services in a coherent manner both horizontally and vertically across government, for instance in the form of a national youth policy. In turn, when youth considerations are mainstreamed across departments and government agencies, sectoral policy frameworks are flexible enough to internalise the specific needs of youth. The current fragmented approach tends to favour narrow initiatives at the expense of the coherent deliver of pro-youth policies and services.

In recent years, the attention of policy makers and international organisations has been directed towards training youth to increase their skills and facilitate their integration into the labour market. The OECD Action Plan for Youth aims at giving youth a better start in the labour market by tackling the youth unemployment crisis and strengthening young people's long-term employment prospects. The Action Plan is complemented by a forward-looking skills strategy, measures to promote youth entrepreneurship and financial education tailored at the younger cohorts (OECD, 2016b). Recent publications follow this trend. The report *Investing in Youth: Tunisia* (OECD, 2015b) looks at ways to strengthen the employability of youth during the transition to a green economy. "NEET youth in the aftermath of the crisis" (Carcillo et al., 2015) also describes the characteristics and living conditions of youth not in employment, education or training. The paper "Tackling youth unemployment in the MENA region" by the MENA-OECD Competitiveness Programme (OECD, 2015c) discusses government strategies to promote economic inclusion by creating decent, well-paying and secure jobs for youth.

The OECD Youth Dialogue on 27 October 2015 in Helsinki shed light on the importance of making young people's voices heard in political decision-making processes. With Ministers from OECD and MENA countries, youth representatives were given the opportunity to discuss policy solutions that matter for building stronger, fairer and more inclusive societies. However, despite an increasing awareness of the importance of giving young people an active stake in shaping policy debates, only a handful of papers

explores the connections between good public governance, youth engagement and youth-tailored policy outcomes. These papers provide useful insights into the governance parameters to foster their engagement, however, they typically apply a narrow focus, such as the civic engagement of youth (Mercy Corps, 2012).

This report aims to close that gap. Against the background of the two-fold challenge outlined above – the exclusion of young people from the policy cycle and the lack of mainstreamed youth concerns in public policies and strategies – this report outlines pathways for governments to “bring them in”. By “bringing youth in”, this report understands that governments provide systematic opportunities for youth from all backgrounds to shape the policy agenda with effective mechanisms in place to hold policy makers accountable. In light of the limited opportunities for today’s youth to access the political arena, it suggests that policy makers should apply a “youth lens” to open government⁴ tools and traditional forms of policy making. With OECD support, some MENA countries have started to encourage openness, transparency, accountability and more participatory approaches through the Open Government Partnership. By applying a youth lens to open government tools, MENA governments could direct their focus from a rather abstract notion of “citizens” as a target group to an immediate beneficiary (and potential contributor to the elaboration and implementation) of public policies and services.

Moreover, a whole-of-government approach⁵ to steer youth policy across different departments and agencies should build on a shared perception that governance matters. It requires a new understanding that youth can play a productive role in governance processes and areas that have been left at the discretion of policy makers, including in purportedly technical areas such as the allocation of public expenditures. Bringing pro-youth perspectives into the mainstream of government activities requires strong political will and a long-term commitment to overcome piecemeal reform and short-term responses.

Notes

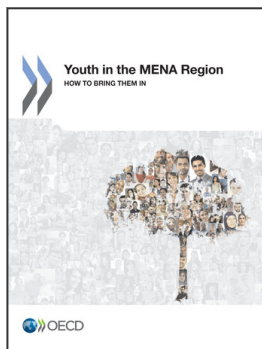
1. This report will use the United Nations definition of “youth” as those between 15 and 24 years of age. For some purposes, particularly the analysis of the school-to-work transition, this age range may be extended to include young people between 24 and 29.
2. The GDP growth rate refers to the average of the countries covered in this study except for the Palestinian Authority for which no data was available.
3. In line with the definition in provided by the OECD report (2016a), *Policy Shaping and Policy Making: The Governance of Inclusive Growth*, this report understands public governance as the “strategic processes and tools, as well as institutions, rules and interactions for effective policy making.”

4. The OECD defines open government as: “The transparency of government actions, the accessibility of government services and information, and the responsiveness of government to new ideas, demands and needs” (OECD, 2005).
5. This approach can in many ways build on the established principles and experience of gender-responsive programming and public governance reform. Indeed, gender-responsive programming and pro-youth programming share many features, not only because half of youth are women, but because youth and women alike too often suffer from exclusion, inadequate public services, and limited opportunities for participation, not only in governance but also in local development and the national economy.

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