



DIALOGUE SNAPSHOT

Youth Engagement

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the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

Youth Engagement

The global youth population accounts for nearly a quarter of the world's total and is steadily increasing. Despite their significant demographic presence, youth representation in political and civic arenas remains alarmingly low. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, only 2.6 percent of Members of Parliament globally are under the age of 30. This severe underrepresentation is often interpreted by older generations as a lack of interest or engagement among young people in political processes. However, this assumption is starkly contradicted by numerous instances of youth activism and involvement in critical global issues, particularly in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic. Young people today are characterized by their tech-savvy nature and innovative approaches to problem-solving, utilizing unique methods to mobilize support for various causes. From climate change protests to movements challenging ruling elites and addressing social inequalities, the youth have consistently demonstrated their active engagement and commitment to shaping the world around them.

Recognizing the critical need for meaningful youth participation in political and decision-making processes, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2250 in 2015. This landmark resolution emphasized the importance of including young people in discussions and decisions related to peace and security. Building on this momentum, the United States announced the creation of a global Youth Democracy Network in March 2023. This initiative, in collaboration with the Community of Democracies, aims to strengthen intergenerational ties, enhance connections among young people worldwide, and promote the development of robust democracies and respect for human rights.

However, these efforts to foster youth political engagement have faced significant challenges amidst the rising tide of authoritarianism, populism, growing inequality, and widespread economic crises. These factors have collectively posed the risk of further marginalizing and radicalizing youth, who are already struggling to find their place in the existing political structures.

In response to these pressing challenges, the Hollings Center hosted a two-day dialogue meeting in Istanbul, Turkey, in September 2023. The event brought together a diverse group of participants to explore strategies for encouraging youth political and civic engagement, preventing radicalization, and sharing best practices. The dialogue



Members of Parliament under the age of 30 throughout the world is a mere 2.6%. Yet, the population under the age of 30 makes up approximately half of the globe. Source: [Sebastian Castelner](#).

specifically focused on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, where young people constitute over half of the population. The discussions aimed to delve into the unique issues and opportunities faced by youth in this region, recognizing their potential as key drivers of positive change and development.

What is “Youth?” – A Complex Identity

One of the key conclusions from the meeting was that "youth" is a complex term that transcends mere age, varying greatly depending on context, locality, history, and environment. This variability makes the concept of youth non-monolithic and difficult to define universally. Participants commented that the perception of youth has been romanticized, idealized, feared, and stereotyped, with global discourse shifting from seeing youth as cross-cutting multiple topics to a singular topic of identity. Youth are often viewed either as “hopeful peacebuilders,” placing unrealistic pressures on them, or as “threats,” with desires for their pacification to maintain the status quo. This puts young

people in a difficult position. Fail to achieve and they risk alienation and compounding challenges. Achieve too much and risk blowback and suppression.

Consequently, participants noted that the term “youth” is being applied as a subjective and assigned identity, often tied to ulterior motives. The term’s lack of concrete meaning gives it fluidity that can easily be coopted or misinformed. The dialogue sessions further explored various perceptions of youth, discussing the dichotomy between seeing them as ‘troublemakers’ or ‘victims’ versus ‘agents of change’ and ‘peacebuilders.’ Participants identified that cultural norms, economic trends, and media portrayals all influence the public perception of “youth”, which requires a more complex and multifaceted understanding.

Participants deemed that the need to better conceptually understand “youth” is of critical importance. In the MENA region in particular, a sense of identity and belonging play substantial roles in the social and political contexts of states in the region. And, given that “youth” is generally perceived as a transitional state, information about the needs, social trends, and political identity of youth remains in a constant flux. Multiple participants called for a more active and comprehensive study of youth trends, as current efforts are insufficient or outdated before long. They noted the need for an intersectional approach that looks at overlapping identities and their connections to societies to better understand these dynamic roles.

For the purposes of the rest of the dialogue, participant analysis about “youth” as a concept centered on four predominant perceptions. The first was youth as a protected pre-citizen class. The second focused on youth as assets for societal growth. The third gauged the possibility of youth as agents of change. And lastly, participants considered youth as threats to order.

Disenchantment and Disengagement: The Path to Radicalization and Extremism

Participants highlighted a growing disenchantment among youth with both formal and informal political processes. This disenchantment is not limited to a single region, but is a global phenomenon that requires greater understanding. The failure to grasp the challenges and issues faced by youth, participants argued, increases the likelihood of their disengagement, leading to radicalism, and even violent extremism. Participants noted how historical contexts in the MENA region have shaped youth engagement, highlighting a recurring pattern of disenchantment with political class and political parties. Participants

described cycles during the periods of pan-Arabism, Arab nationalism, political Islamism, and the Arab Spring during which youth engagement played a critical early role. However, the ultimate failure of these movements to achieve promises of respect and dignity, accelerated youth disenchantment. This disenchantment often leads to either disengagement or radical responses, affecting both formal and informal societal processes.

Some participants analyzed populism in the Arab world, noting that populism has historically served as a means for young people to challenge colonial powers and elites. In previous generations, populism had the effect of engaging youth when state and societal institutions supported youth engagement. Those institutions played a critical role in translating the causes of youth into change. In some individual cases, youth would even sacrifice personal autonomy in support of causes for change. Even so, the effect on individuals could be empowering.

Today, however, even populism may not provide sufficient outlet for many in the MENA region to engage formally or affect any change. Multiple participants at the dialogue espoused personal frustration at the outcome of the 2011 Arab Spring, seen predominantly by outsiders as a youth movement driven by the power of social media and informal engagement channels. Over a decade later, the hope by many for substantial change in leadership and politics has faltered, and many of the grievances held by youth back then remain. This discouragement begs the question of what happens when movements championed by youth are defeated. Participants cited many examples of how political and social defeat leads to feelings of alienation, cooption, and ostracization. The most prominent example utilized by participants was the failure of the Arab Spring. One participant highlighted a growing disillusionment when the governments under both Mohammad Morsi and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi failed to achieve youth aims and suppressed leaders of those movements. Another participant commented how the failure of the peaceful protest movements in Syria and the subsequent descension into civil war created the perception of futility of non-violent resistance. Multiple participants also noted the case of Tunisia, once the positive example of Arab world democratization, regressed back into dictatorship.

The cycles of failure and suppression create sentiments that can lead to radicalization, extremism, and social and societal detachment. Participants wanted to better understand



The promise and ultimate failure of the Arab Spring in 2011 served as an important case throughout the dialogue discussion. Driven by the youth of the time, the long-term effect of the period now serves as a source of disillusionment and disengagement. Source: [Hang Dihn](#).

the transformative routes for such negative progression. They hoped that better understanding will lead to more positive options in the future.

Social Media: Potential and Challenge

Youth political engagement, often occurring via informal channels like social media, remains complex and contextual. Participants explored both the promise and peril of social media throughout the dialogue noting that it is a critical outlet for engagement for many youth throughout the world. Participants noted that social media provides one of the few “open” spaces for opinion and dialogue, if individuals can access it. It can also provide access to the larger world and help to alleviate feelings of isolation and repression.

While these platforms are perceived as open spaces for engagement, they are not entirely safe due to security threats from repressive states, corporations, and bad actors. Even when anonymity is believed to be preserved, the use of advanced tools by malicious actors

and the increasing deployment of artificial intelligence is exposing more actors on social media. Participants further discussed how nefarious actors, including government regimes, corporations, and violent extremists have coopted social media platforms as tools for suppression and recruitment. ISIS/DAESH was specifically cited as an example and how the group utilized social media successfully to radicalize individuals through manipulated perceptions of belonging and dignity. Participants called for further efforts to build resilience against violent radicalization online.

Participants noted that even in the face of cooption and misinformation, social media can provide great benefit if utilized positively. A participant remarked that social media campaigns, especially in rural areas, were considered effective for civic education and mobilization. Engaging youth under 18 was deemed essential to create a sustainable pattern of political behavior. Building relationships with influential actors and leveraging digital spaces were highlighted as key strategies.

Civil Society Organizations: Another Outlet for Engagement

As participants discussed growing distrust by youth in formal and informal institutions, they looked for other avenues that could help to spur political and social engagement in a meaningful way. Civil Society Organization (CSOs) provide an outlet for democratic engagement by youth. Often these groups are driven by young people and devoted to causes favored by the youth in the community. Even when societies are more repressive, one participant argued that CSOs give youth an opportunity to practice democratic norms within these organizations. They can help to assign purpose and convey personal dignity.

Some participants emphasized the need to avoid over-relying on these organizations to address youth frustrations and grievances. These organizations are experiencing heightened stress, which impacts their workers and often leads to unrealistic expectations among youth, potentially causing further disengagement. Additionally, CSOs often operate with limited financial resources and under government surveillance. Furthermore, they also depend heavily on donor culture, which can result in efforts that fail to adapt to local needs, reinforce existing classism, and be perceived as neo-colonialism.

Fostering Youth Engagement: Promising Initiatives and Collaborative Solutions

Despite the numerous challenges discussed, participants believed that the desire by youth to engage remains present, and if positively encouraged could produce promising results. They identified several programs and initiatives that have shown potential in maintaining and enhancing youth political engagement. Initiatives like these could also help to limit the influence of negative actors and prevent political and social disengagement of youth. By the conclusion of the dialogue program, the following suggestions and examples were offered by participants.

- Education programs in Jordan on election analysis and accountability were highlighted as effective in promoting political literacy and engagement among youth.
- Digital literacy programs aimed at combating the misuse of technology were also discussed, recognizing that while technology continues to evolve rapidly, equipping young people with the skills to use it responsibly can mitigate some of the associated risks.
- Successful peer-to-peer engagement initiatives, both within countries and internationally, were cited as fostering a sense of community and shared purpose among youth.
- Mentorship programs in Tunisia were mentioned as examples of effective cross-generational dialogue, helping to bridge the gap between young people and older generations and promoting mutual understanding and collaboration.
- Emphasizing the importance of connecting digital mobilization to real-world engagement, participants advocated for a hybrid approach that leverages the strengths of both online and offline platforms.

In conclusion, the discussions during the Istanbul meeting highlighted the complexity and multifaceted nature of youth engagement in today's world. Moreover, the dialogue sessions underscored the need for youth to "own their own answers" rather than solely channeling their energies toward criticizing older generations. By fostering positive collaboration and creative solutions, young people can play a pivotal role in addressing the challenges they face and contributing to the development of more inclusive, equitable, and resilient societies. While challenges remain, there is also a sense of optimism about the potential for youth to shape a better future. By recognizing and addressing the unique

issues faced by young people and by fostering meaningful intergenerational collaboration, there is hope for a more inclusive and democratic global society.



The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations around the world. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Türkiye.

To learn more about the Hollings Center's mission, history and funding:
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