EUROPEAN
POLICYBRIEF

POWER2YOUTH
FREEDOM, DIGNITY AND JUSTICE

TOWARDS YOUTH-INCLUSIVE POLICIES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

This document summarizes the findings of POWER2YOUTH's macro analysis which explores the policy and institutional factors of youth exclusion and identifies their policy implications.

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INTRODUCTION

While youth has been a long-standing public policy issue in the South and East Mediterranean (SEM) region since the 1990s, it has experienced renewed attention in public discourse and action, notably also by international donors whose interest in the issue had already increased in the 2000s as the so-called youth bulge theory started to proliferate, and has subsequently skyrocketed with the Arab uprisings in 2011 which have largely been framed as youth revolts against their political, socio-economic and cultural marginalization. But while 'youth' has increasingly become problematized, what is lacking is a more comprehensive understanding of youth and a multidimensional analysis of the exclusionary structures within which youth are pursuing their own agency. POWER2YOUTH therefore seeks to offer a critical understanding of youth in the SEM region through a comprehensive interdisciplinary and multi-level approach which explores the socio-economic, political and cultural life spheres of youth on three levels: the macro (policy/institutional), the meso (organizational) and the micro (individual) level. This policy brief condenses the findings of the macro-level analysis and highlights their policy implications.

The focus of research at the macro level has been on domestic governmental policies in *Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Lebanon,* and *Turkey*, but has also explored how these policies have been affected by the policies of international key actors such as the World Bank, the EU, or the US. Examined were four policy areas—*employment policies, family policies, migratory policies and spatial planning*—with an eye to two questions:

1. *How are 'youth' and the 'youth problem' represented in public discourse at the local, national and international levels?*
2. *How does public action both in terms of political discourse and concrete government policies influence the processes of youth exclusion/inclusion?*

How are 'youth' and the 'youth problem' represented in public discourse at the local, national and international levels?

Although youth is in part an age category and thus bears an essential biological attribute, the meaning and experience of being young is subject to social and historical processes. The relevance of this socially constructed category has changed over time depending on the prevailing development model. Over the last decades 'youth' has become increasingly central to policy-making, media and public debate whether as a symbol, as a target for public action or as a political actor in what has been called 'positivist youth development'.

The SEM region is not an exception to this global trend, although a *bipolar* discourse on youth has generally prevailed. In Tunisia, for example, youth is seen as a political and economic asset in building a new country after the revolution. It is seen as the carrier of dynamism and positive change. Parallel to this, the previous regime's discourse on 'unsupervised' youth as a fertile ground for extremism and violence is reviving. Similarly, in Turkey, youth is constructed as the future of society with the task of developing the country and sacrificing themselves for the nation. At the same time, youth is seen to be at risk and in need of being controlled and disciplined. This discourse is driven to its extreme in Egypt, where youth is divided into good versus bad. Somewhere between an asset and a threat, unemployed youth are perceived as a challenge to the stability of society and its ability to develop, as for example in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

This bipolar discourse hides very normative ideas on how young people should be and behave and at the same time stigmatizes potentially dangerous youth as those living in slums or marginalized areas. Also, the clear-cut dichotomous approach to youth has the effect of reducing to two broad groups what is a much more *diversified* category representing all the internal variety of society. More importantly, however, the prevailing conceptualization of and emphasis on youth tends to portray social marginalization as a residual consequence of the demographic youth bulge rather than as the product of concrete economic policies carried out by the regimes under the supervision of international actors. The adoption of youth as the most relevant analytical framework for the diagnosis of social and economic problems in the region has the effect of obscuring and undermining alternative analytical frames such as class, thus downplaying broader (and potentially disruptive) social and economic conflicts and nurturing inter-generational gaps. Extremism is not set into relationship to explosive social conflicts and the failed development model, but to young people themselves, who can be dealt with by a mix of repression and education policies.

How does public action both in terms of political discourse and concrete government policies influence the processes of youth exclusion/inclusion?

In the last decades, public authorities in the region have been seriously concerned with youth unemployment and public action has prioritized employment creation programmes tailored to the educated unemployed. Such programmes have generally tended to focus on youth, even though unemployment is not solely a youth problem. Moreover, employment programmes remain situated in the current development model even though it has failed in the past decades to produce sufficient and sustainable/decent employment. Self-employment and entrepreneurship have been at the core of national employment strategies in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Lebanon and Turkey, and all countries have framed youth unemployment as an education problem whereby education does not match the needs of the market. Education becomes increasingly tailored to the market, instead of, for example, to class and social differences. These policies have failed to lead to inclusive growth. Unemployment remains high and the inclusion in the labour market which these policies have produced has frequently been subordinate and adverse—that is, informal, temporary and low-income labour, not covered by health insurance, thereby sustaining or even reinforcing inequalities. Taking Tunisia as an example to highlight this point, youth unemployment, among graduates specifically, has increased dramatically, accompanied by the push of the vast reserve of youth in precarious and insecure employment conditions and exacerbating inequalities particularly between young people living in poor marginalized interior areas and those living in the big coastal cities. The government answered this with a strong impetus for self-employment and improvement of the employability of youth through training and professional internship programmes.

These programmes, however, failed to provide long-term, stable and sustainable solutions to youth unemployment, and were biased against the regions of the interior. Since the uprising, the discourse on youth and employment has been reframed and besides the educated unemployed, young people working under precarious conditions and young people who are not in education, employment or working (so-called NEETs) are also addressed. But while the discourse is changing, policies continue along old schemes, remaining firmly based in the neo-liberal market agenda.

The uncertain economic situation which this labour market situation leads to is further exacerbated by high housing costs, resulting in delayed marriage and late cohabitation of young people with their parents, which in turn creates intergenerational tensions and complicates transitions to adulthood. When defining youth and its transition to adulthood, youth is mainly constructed in relation to the family. In Tunisia, as in other Arab countries and in Turkey, marriage is considered as the moment of transition from youth to adulthood and the family thus controls the emotional and sexual life of young people. In face of precarious and low-paid employment conditions, this transition to adulthood is delayed, prolonging the dependency of youth on their family of origin. While youth are increasingly delaying marriage, public discourse and action continue to sustain the normative model of adulthood, according to which forming a family within legal marriage signals the passage to adulthood, a rather explosive mix of policies and norms which bears the potential of social and intergenerational conflict. Sons and daughters remain under the influence of their family until later ages, while the economic and social context reinforces their dependency.

In the last few decades, family solidarity has become central—even in the public discourse in Morocco for example—to fill the gaps of the public social support system. Also in Turkey, youth need the family as a safety net, which makes the young dependent on their families, forcing them to follow the rules of the family and hindering them from being autonomous, self-deciding individuals. The family thus takes on a new centrality, which applies even more to contexts such as the Occupied Palestinian Territories where, due to the occupation, families and especially women witness the increasing interference of the extended family in their affairs. But while families are taking on increased importance, this is not matched by state policies which support this institution. Rather, youth are instrumentalized to support the family institution. In Turkey, for example, youth are portrayed as an instrument to support the family, as a 'demographic opportunity'. Women are a heavily fought-over object in the public discourse in all observed countries in this respect, be it in relation to the issue of premarital sex which is widely practiced as marriage is delayed, the criminalization of young single mothers, young women as a demographic instrument with family support centralizing on women, etc. Furthermore, due to limited social welfare systems, women are often driven into the role of care givers. In Turkey, for example, when it comes to the care of the elderly, the state does not open care institutions but supports households, thereby situating care in the private sphere, making women stay at home since care work is paid by the state (but without social security), and also keeping persons in care (i.e., disabled) in the household, dependent on their families.

Migration plays the role of a possible opt-out of this trap for young people, and Southern Mediterranean governments have promoted migration as a safety valve which alleviates unemployment and the potential for social conflict. Most countries (except for the Occupied Palestinian Territories which are a specific case in this respect) have supported emigration and have set up agencies which help emigrants to find jobs, encouraging them to send remittances and make investments in their home country. These policies have been pillars in dealing with the issue of youth unemployment on one hand, and in fostering development at home, on the other. Successful emigrants have even been publicly celebrated, for example in Lebanon. At the same time, the issue of brain drain is increasingly addressed, for example in Turkey and Morocco, through scholarships or investment opportunities. All countries have policies with which they seek to strengthen relations with diaspora communities, even though not all countries address issues such as voting rights of expatriates. But while migration is a key policy issue for all countries observed, migration policies are not youth-sensitive, even though migration is mainly composed of young people. Furthermore, even though migration has played the role of a safety valve, this option is becoming increasingly limited as the EU—which besides the Gulf countries is a major attraction pole for migration—continues to securitize migration and to impose this securitized conceptualization on its neighbouring countries. While countries like post-uprising Tunisia tried to counter the EU's discourse, focusing

more on issues such as human rights, brain drain, etc., they have now given in to compliance with the EU approach. This reinforces a context where the immense number of refugees and migrants in the region is addressed through a security rather than a rights perspective.

To conclude this section, labour, spatial, family and migration policies have led to a tension whereby the state is re-deploying in line with the liberal development model which leads to exploding social conflicts that necessitate more intensive social control by the state. This is not pursued through social policies, but mainly through repressive security policies on one hand, and co-optation policies on the other. Youth policies in countries such as Morocco and Lebanon have tended to de-politicize youth and its role in political and social change, to co-opt youth organizations, or to repress them. In Egypt, youth centres set up by the regime have been tools to co-opt youth and have mainly catered to urban, educated youth, thereby excluding rural youth problems. The Moroccan National Council of Youth and the Future (CNJA) in the 1990s is a good example of a political tool to supervise and control the political activities of youth groups. Furthermore, often only specific youth groups are included in such national youth platforms. In the Lebanese context, for example, Palestinian youth are excluded; in the Moroccan context, youth groups from Western Sahara. The same applies to international donors who are supporting only some youth organizations and are also advancing their own geopolitical agendas through youth policies. They tend to de-politicize youth by shifting their focus away to local issues as in Lebanon, or lead to donor-dependence with organizations losing their roots in local society, as has happened in the Palestinian context.

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POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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- Adopting youth as the most relevant analytical framework for the diagnosis of social and economic problems obscures and undermines alternative analytical frames such as class, thus downplaying broader and potentially disruptive social and economic conflicts. Unemployment needs to be understood in the context of the neo-liberal reforms of these countries and how the latter have changed their class structures. Self-employment and education policies tailored to the needs of the market will not be able to address this enormous structural change and large social inequalities. Key to stabilizing SEM countries will be:
    - labour policies which guarantee a minimum wage and workers' rights, and which fight labour market conditions conducive to informal labour;
    - education policies which are explicitly tailored to diverse social groups and not the needs of the market only;
    - and a boost in social policies, for example in the area of housing, across spatial divides.
- Social policies which are taking the family as the main target of action, hinder the independence and autonomy of young people. Care policies should not incentivize young women to stay at home and thus in a situation of deep dependency. Child-support policies should focus on both parents, not the mother only. Public policies (and services such as housing, health and education) should be constructed so as to empower young people, so that they do not need to wait until marriage and/or such time as they live in a separate house (and indirectly until they find a decent job) to be seen as an adult, autonomous and capable of making decisions by themselves.
- The budget and the services for empowerment of young people are quite limited and the EU could include a structural social fund into its revised neighbourhood policy. A possible increase and spread of social services will be not be sufficient to develop the well-being of young people. Thus, policies should be 'youth friendly' so that young people will not hesitate to ask for the services, and/or so that the services can respond to the needs of the young people.
- Young people should be included in the decision-making and policy-making processes so that they can define their own needs and ask for the things they want themselves. Youth councils or national youth platforms have to be representative of a variety of independent

youth groups and must have independent powers in the political system so that they cannot be instrumentalized as a platform of co-optation.

- Undifferentiated youth/social policies create inequalities. Within youth, the whole variety of a society is mirrored. Therefore, cultural, class, gender, ethnicity and other divides should be taken account of in youth and youth-related policies. Actions in diverse policy areas should be better linked, for example through inter-agency and inter-bureaucracy coordination.
- Migration policies should be youth sensitive and advance a rights agenda. So far, the EU has focused only on a certain class of young people—the well-educated—in its mobility policy, while all others fall into readmission policy. The refugee crisis has shown how far removed from reality this focus has been. A multilateral Mediterranean platform on migration is urgently needed, in which youth organizations have to be included not only to account for their rights and needs, but also to help European countries in integrating a wave of mainly young migrants.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

POWER2YOUTH aims 1) to advance theory and extend knowledge on the dynamics of youth exclusion and on the factors fostering youth inclusion through a multi-level (macro, meso, micro), interdisciplinary and gender-sensitive theoretical approach, 2) to generate a new body of interdisciplinary and multi-level qualitative and quantitative data on youth in the SEM region, 3) to include a gender-sensitive approach in all research dimensions of the project, 4) to assess the applicability and relevance of other experiences of socio-economic transformation in Europe and elsewhere in the world, 5) to address the challenges facing the SEM region in relation to youth, 6) to build a regional knowledge base, to integrate youth perspectives into academic research and policy debates through focus groups and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with young people, youth-led organizations and organizations that target young people, as well as a youth survey/poll in each of the six case study countries, and 7) to provide policy insights for fostering youth empowerment in the SEM region.

POWER2YOUTH conceptualizes youth simultaneously as 'human beings' and as 'future adults', as 'beings' and 'becomings' and acknowledges that youth is intersectionally experienced, depending on many dimensions such as cultural, class, gender, ethnicity, etc. Exclusion is conceptualized as a process which is the product of exclusionary power relationships. Processes of exclusion/inclusion are produced at the intersection of different axes of power stemming from privileges and disadvantages, structured not only on generation, but also on gender, class, ethnicity and other social divides that act to create differences and inequalities among youth themselves. As youth experiences differ alongside such divides, intersectionality has been mobilized as a methodological tool to study how various forms of marginalization, domination, exclusion, hierarchization and sublaternization intersect to generate patterns of social integration for various groups of youth.

Youth are also agents of change. For the purpose of our research, agency is generally defined as the ability to act according to one's own desired goals. In this sense, agency is more than purely observable action as it also implies the meaning, motivation and purpose that people bring to their activities. However, taking distance from the neo-liberal view that actions by individuals are taken for the greatest individual benefit by free and autonomous actors, we conceive agency as embedded within society, meaning that young women and men do not make their choices 'freely'.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME   A Comprehensive Approach to the Understanding of Youth Exclusion and the Prospects for Youth-led Change in the South and East Mediterranean (POWER2YOUTH)

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FURTHER READING

Destremau, Blandine, and Myriam Catusse (2014), *Policy-Institutional Factors of Youth Exclusion-Inclusion in the South East Mediterranean. Concept Paper for Macro-Level Analysis*, POWER2YOUTH Working paper No. 2 (December), http://www.power2youth.eu/publications/publications-for/Conceptual%20and%20methodological%20framework.

Paciello, Maria Cristina, and Daniela Pioppi 2014), *A Comprehensive Approach to the Understanding of the Dynamics of Youth Exclusion/Inclusion and the Prospects for Youth-Led Change in the South and East Mediterranean*, POWER2YOUTH Working Paper No. 1 (December), http://www.power2youth.eu/publications/publications-for/Conceptual%20and%20methodological%20framework.