

THE FUTURE STARTS NOW: YOUTH AT THE HEART OF THE MEDITERRANEAN AGENDA

Barcelona, 24 January 2017

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The second UfM Regional Forum, which was held in the margins of the meeting of UfM Ministers of Foreign Affairs, was dedicated to youth. The overall theme was “Mediterranean in Action: Youth for Stability and Development”. One of the panels of this conference, entitled “The future starts now: youth at the heart of the Mediterranean Agenda”, was organised by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) acting as the Secretariat of the EuroMeSCo network. It aimed to discuss and analyse problems facing the Mediterranean youth nowadays, and in particular the lack of integration of youth in the economy and in decision-making processes, as well as explore possible solutions.



From left to right: Claire Spencer, Senior Research Fellow for the MENA programme and Second Century Initiative at Chatham House; Sara Hasna Mokaddem, International Relations Specialist at OCP Policy Centre; Senén Florensa, Executive President of the European Institute of the Mediterranean; Jorge Borrego, Deputy Secretary General for Energy and Climate Action of the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean; Hatem Atallah, Executive Director of the Anna Lindh Foundation; Tina Hočevár, Bureau member from the European Youth Forum; Dalia Ghanem-Yazbeck, El-Erian Fellow at Carnegie Middle East Center; Nathalie Tocci, Vice-Director at Istituto Affari Internazionali

The panel was introduced by representatives from the General Secretariat of the UfM, the IEMed and the Generalitat of Catalunya. Three prominent experts from think tanks belonging to the EuroMeSCo network gave a presentation that was followed by testimonials from two youth representatives. Before the debate with the audience, the Executive Director of the Anna Lindh Foundation presented the various projects the Foundation was dedicating to youth.

The Problems Mediterranean Youth Are Facing

Youth in the Mediterranean is an extremely diverse category. For analytical purposes, it is often more useful to consider youth as a representation of the entire society rather than one of its segments. However, in spite of this diversity (related to factors such as nationality, gender, religion, political belief, lifestyle and aspirations for the future among others), the panel largely agreed on the fact that young people in the Mediterranean, both from the North and the South, faced similar challenges.

Youth all over the Mediterranean region are (to varying degrees) confronted with inadequate education systems, unemployment, precarious working conditions and exclusion from political processes. In this context, some young people are tempted to emigrate, others tend to radicalize. While this latter phenomenon remains very marginal, it represents a worrying symptom and major threat for the Euro-Mediterranean stability as a whole. The MENA region has the world's highest youth unemployment rate with almost 30% of 15 to 29-year-olds out of a job¹. This figure is even higher in EU Mediterranean countries such as Greece, Spain and Italy.

A large number of young people in the Euro-Mediterranean region are said to be "in crisis". They live in precarious situations and this state is lasting increasingly longer. For many young people in South Mediterranean countries, not much has changed since they took to the streets six years ago over lack of employment opportunities, social exclusion and underrepresentation in political decision-making

¹ <http://www.arab-hdr.org/PreviousReports/2016/2016.aspx>

bodies. Rather than changing for the positive, the situation has actually deteriorated in many countries.

In short, young people both in the North and the South do not find opportunities that meet their expectations, such as getting an education or being in the position to have a family.

Besides these similarities, there are also important differences concerning the situation of youth in North and South Mediterranean countries, the most important one being the strong demographic development in the South, where about two thirds of the population are under 30, compared to ageing societies in the North. A consequence of the youth bulge in the South is that 60 million additional jobs are needed in the MENA region until 2020, according to UNDP numbers. Another important difference relates to social safety nets: Young people in the South are almost entirely dependent on their families rather than on state-sponsored schemes. This, of course, affects their ability to freely participate in society. Both of these factors – demography and autonomy – have to be taken into account when discussing the future of youth in the Mediterranean region.

A speaker argued that, despite some differences, there were also specific similarities between the youth in South Mediterranean countries. First of all, they are well-connected and active on social networks (for example, four times more than their parents in the Maghreb). Second, they tend to believe that tradition is



important in their lives. Third, young people in South Mediterranean countries live overwhelmingly in urban areas. And finally, the educational system is not fitted to offer them opportunities. These characteristics are central for understanding the consequences of marginalisation of youth, particularly in South Mediterranean countries.

Consequences of Marginalisation of Youth

The prospect of unemployment is a reality for many young people from different educational backgrounds. However, there is not just a lack of jobs, as was underlined several times during the discussion, but a lack of good jobs that match their expectations. With social contracts based on the provision of social welfare eroding and many governments cutting back, the public sector can no longer absorb the well-trained. This sentiment is expressed by the saying that “university is providing training for the unemployed”. Educational systems are widely seen as not up to the level when it comes to preparing young people for jobs in the private sector. The consequence is a lack of trust in the educational system often associated with the older generation. This distrust and the perceived lack of opportunities are reinforced by problems such as nepotism and corruption.

The generational gap also affects trust in institutions, including government, parliament and political parties. More than just distrust, marginalisation of youth reduces their desire to participate. The majority of young people in MENA countries do not vote in official elections and do not identify themselves with existing political parties, platforms or movements. Youth are excluded from decision-making even at the local level, which leads them to believe that they do not have the capability to make a change. Interestingly, this detachment from political processes is a phenomenon also observed in EU countries and is related – much like in the South Mediterranean – to exclusion and marginalisation. There is widespread dissatisfaction with traditional modes of political engagement, especially in countries where unemployment and social

exclusion are highest. This even affects youth engagement in non-governmental organisations.

At the same time, online networks have gained in importance, creating parallel spaces where youth can shape alternative discourses. One of the conclusions of the Mediterranean Forum of the Anna Lindh Foundation from last October was that there is a detachment of youth from traditional media, through which policymakers usually communicate. Youth are thus turning to alternative channels for expression, which can be both constructive and destructive. Lack of opportunities can for instance increase the dangers of extremism and radicalisation.

In this context, many young people plan to emigrate – no matter their sociological background. This, of course, leads to humanitarian concerns when young people embark on dangerous trips across the Mediterranean but is also a general concern and challenge for South Mediterranean authorities and societies.

The Importance of Engaging Youth

All participants in the conference insisted on the need to engage youth in policies, projects and platforms addressing their needs. Some panellists emphasised the role of their own institution in this respect.

Jorge Borrego advocated solutions involving the people from the region, emphasising the UfM's support to SMEs and efforts to create jobs. He mentioned the UfM projects Med4Jobs, Women for the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean University of Fez. With the Youth Climate Network, the UfM is trying not only to address youth issues but to actively involve youth in formulating policies and projects.

Maria Badia focused on the importance of reducing inequalities and increasing the cohesion of the Mediterranean region, referring to various development

initiatives supported by the Catalanian government, including the West Med Maritime Initiative, the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe and the second Morocco-Catalonia Plan. She particularly insisted on efforts to tackle youth employment.

Senén Florensa underlined the role of think tanks and particularly the work of the EuroMeSCo network, which disseminates research and reaches out to policy-makers. As an example, he mentioned the Joint Policy Study on youth activism that was coordinated by Silvia Colombo, from the Istituto Affari Internazionali. He also hinted to new strands of activities within the network that would target young researchers.

Hatem Atallah explained how his organisation relies on the work of research institutions and cooperates with regional actors in youth programming. One example of this is the Young Mediterranean Voices programme, coordinated by the British Council, which aims to train young people and create platforms so they can exchange and make themselves heard. A number of youth delegates



From left to right: Claire Spencer, Senior Research Fellow for the MENA programme and Second Century Initiative at Chatham House; Maria Badia i Cutchet, Secretary for Foreign and European Union Affairs from the Generalitat de Catalunya; Senén Florensa, Executive President of the European Institute of the Mediterranean; Jorge Borrego, Deputy Secretary General for Energy and Climate Action of the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean; Dalia Ghanem-Yazbeck, Eriean Fellow at Carnegie Middle East Center; Nathalie Tocci, Vice-Director at Istituto Affari Internazionali

will be invited to Brussels to discuss their views with the EU's High Representative, Federica Mogherini, this year.

Other measures already taken by governments and the EU were mentioned by the panel, for example the Euro-Med Youth Programme, EU support mechanisms for civil society associations and local development organisations, etc. However, there was general agreement that efforts made by all the relevant actors are insufficient and too slow at the moment. Considering regional demography, massive efforts are needed in the short term to empower youth and integrate them into society. If governments fail to do so, they will have to deal with the consequences in the future.

Outlook: Issues to be Addressed

The panel discussion, which also took up inputs from the audience, brought up the following issues to be addressed by policy-makers and other stakeholders. Arguments received varying degrees of attention as well as support by the discussants, so the order in which they are presented below should not be viewed as a reflection of the importance attributed to one issue over another:

1. Treat youth as an asset, not a threat.

Applying a security lens to the Mediterranean often results in youth being framed in a negative way. The association of youth to dominant discourses of extremism and radicalisation bears the risk of excluding a silent majority of youth. The focus should lie on education, employment and stability. In general, there was wide agreement among discussants on the need to treat youth as a positive asset and acknowledge their potential to contribute to economic growth.

2. Support human mobility, exchanges and regional integration.

Mobility has an important role to play to connect young voices across the Mediterranean. Increasing barriers and restrictions to youth mobility were

criticised. Young people from different regions need spaces for collaboration to identify common interests, exchange best practices, foster mutual understanding and solidarity. Young binationals have a role to play in binding societies together. With regard to regional integration and job creation, a study conducted by the IEMed and the Euro-Mediterranean Economists Association points to missed opportunities in terms of job creation as a consequence of a lack of economic integration (e. g. removal of tariffs and non-tariff barriers in the region, regulatory convergence and governance improvements...).

3. Provide conditions for inclusive growth.

The issue of employment as a key issue for Mediterranean youth was present throughout the discussion. Youth are prone to start new businesses and to adapt to a changing economy. However, as was mentioned during the discussion, the older generation has to provide the means to do this. The digital economy has a strong potential for the development of models for inclusive growth. Young people in the MENA region have digital skills and access to mobile phones and social media. Technologies like voice-activated software for mobile phones mean that people with little education or those living in rural areas – often without high-speed broadband connection – can participate in the digital economy. Youth can harvest the benefits of the sharing economy, which offers new employment perspectives. Current models of the sharing economy would have to be changed so that the people actually running the platforms take a higher share than the owners of companies (e. g. AirBnB, Uber, etc.). This would be a promising way to redistribute resources, considering that the trend is for governments to reduce public sector jobs rather than to create new ones. Inclusive growth requires the decentralisation of economies, meaning that entry barriers to the private sector have to be reduced. Two concrete measures in this area are decriminalisation of bankruptcy and legalisation of crowdfunding. This would help businesses in new sectors as well as the many small enterprises run by families that could turn into medium-sized enterprises with the potential to substantially reduce unemployment. At the moment, many young people are working in the informal sector with no legal protection. Providing

young people with real opportunities in the formal sector will also require efforts to fight corruption and limit market control of large corporations. Independent economies will be pivotal for overcoming not only economic but also social and political inequalities.

4. Improve education.

Another recurrent theme in the panel was the need to reform educational systems to improve the quality of education and better prepare young people for labour market demands. Besides new technologies, curricula should also include values, cultural knowledge, dialogue skills and attitude. This was echoed by voices from the audience, who argued that young people often did not feel confident enough to contribute to discussions.

5. Empower civil society and youth organisations.

Youth need the legal, political and social space to self-organise, as a member of the audience argued. This environment is lacking in some countries on both sides of the Mediterranean. Youth organisations could offer opportunities to people, provide them with skills (e. g. decision-making, communication, teamwork), integrate them into society (e. g. involvement of refugees) and thereby contribute to regional stability and human development. To develop the youth sector and ensure the diversity of youth organisations, accessible funding programmes should be put in place. A large number of civil society organisations working on youth issues already exist but there is a need for better coordination among themselves as well as training for more effective management. The panel also emphasised the need to promote social enterprises, which invest profits in rural communities, and mentioned the Moroccan Center for Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship – an organisation which supports social entrepreneurs – as a positive example.

6. Inform youth about existing initiatives.

A panelist proposed the creation of a centralised database of all regional initiatives launched by think tanks and other organisations in the region

addressed at youth (e. g. training programs, conferences, call for papers, seminars,...).

7. Let youth speak up.

Policies targeting youth have not worked in the past because the people who are the object of these policies are not consulted. Youth need to intervene more. This requires that youth be given the platform to speak up and be listened to. Cultural activities should be organised and spaces provided where young people can express themselves. Policy-makers should actively approach youth and field-based research should be undertaken in order to formulate action points that really address their needs. As a discussant from the audience added, this also means to be open to more radical opinions as long as they are not violent. Letting young people speak up could even serve as an effective method for de-radicalisation. It might be useful to let foreign fighters talk about their experiences upon return to their home countries, to listen to them and integrate them into their communities instead of locking them up. On the other hand, young people need to make an effort themselves, if they want policy-makers to take their opinions into account. This means to be an active part of a community but also to be competent and capable of making oneself heard.

8. Include youth in decision-making.

Youth should not only speak up and be heard, but they should have agency. This means to include them in the making of policies that shape their lives. There should be co-management structures and permanent representation of youth in policy-making (e. g. in institutions such as the UfM), a proposal that received cautious support from the panel and the audience. One discussant argued that physical representation of youth was necessary because political processes would not include their opinions otherwise.

9. Recognise youth issues as issues of society as a whole.

A conclusion which was met with wide approval was that youth issues cannot be limited to any policy area. Youth are affected by policies related

to employment, working conditions, housing, social assistance, family, gender, minorities, entrepreneurship, migration, security, etc. A panellist argued that there was a necessity to “de-youthise” recipients of policies, policies and policy-making. Youth should be mainstreamed into all areas instead of designing specific youth policies.



In the margins of the regional forum, a group of young researchers from the EuroMeSCo network exchanged views with Irene Mingasson, Head of DG NEAR Unit “Regional Programmes Neighbourhood South” of the European Commission, Rosamaria Gili, Head of Division, Arabic Peninsula, Iraq and Regional Policies, European External Action Service and Jérôme Cassiers, Chair of the Mashreq/Maghreb Working Party of the Council of the EU



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