

Dossier: The Mediterranean in Times of Multi-level Crisis: Pandemics, Mobilizations and Hopes for Change

Generational Inequality. The Youth and the Pandemic in the Euro-Mediterranean Region: The Toll, the Risks, the Opportunities and the Perspectives

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Health crises typically expose systemic inequalities among social groups, exacerbate their vulnerabilities and amplify their socio-economic exclusion. The Covid-19 pandemic has done precisely this. It has pushed young people in the Euro-Mediterranean region to greater levels of uncertainties about their present and anxieties about their future. Even prior to the pandemic, young men and women experienced considerable challenges that fractured their transition from school to work, delayed their plans to start their own families and complicated their civic and political lives. The waves of youth protests on both shores of the Mediterranean, over the last two decades, speak of the accumulated frustrations of young people with the policies that typically leave them behind. The pandemic, therefore, is not solely responsible for disrupting the critical milestones in the life cycle of Mediterranean youth, but has also certainly exacerbated the multiple marginalities from which they suffer and pushed them further into despair.

As I explain in the sections below, the short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic on the so-called “lock-down generation” have yet to be fully documented and analyzed. Yet, as devastating as the pandemic is, young people’s crisis response behaviour has been remarkable. Across the region, youth have volunteered and partnered with health workers, community organizers and leaders, as well as government representatives to maintain safe and healthy environments. They affirmed, once again, their capacity to act as innovators, problem-solvers, and researchers willing to

invest their time and energies in assisting the communities around them. However, their resourcefulness and resilience should be acknowledged, rather than romanticized; just as the pandemic should be taken by national leaders and policymakers as a serious opportunity to redirect their political capital and resources towards rebuilding their societies on more equitable, inclusive and sustainable foundations. The time for tokenism and empty promises is well over, as young women activists stated during the 2021 UN Women’s *Generation Equality Forum*, which brought together world leaders, youth organizations and activists.

The Pandemic as an Amplifier of Youth Vulnerabilities

The immediate consequences of the pandemic on young people’s lives, as studies are beginning to outline, are “systematic, deep and disproportionate” (ILO, 2020). At the outset, it is important to underscore that this impact is uneven and disproportionate precisely because *youth*, as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wisely reminds us, is but a *word*. As a word, *youth* conceals considerable differences between and among young people based on their gender, race, ethnicity, culture, educational attainments, sexual identities and health status. So, as practical as the various categorizations of youth might be (15-24, 12-24, or 15-29 year-olds), age groups grossly misrepresent the complex forces and realities that determine *how* and *if* youth can access resources to face adversity. Ultimately, youth’s experiences of the pandemic are shaped and mediated by the unevenly developed socio-economic, political and cultural environments of the Euromed region. The pandemic has

affected young men and women in vastly different ways in culturally conservative countries and communities where gender inequalities disproportionately overburden young women with unpaid labour, family care-giving and other daily responsibilities. Furthermore, the depth of youth vulnerabilities does not only correlate with their gender, class, health, ethnic, educational and occupational differences, even if these are extremely important markers. Their vulnerabilities are also determined by the broader institutional arrangements, political (in)stability and security considerations unique to their countries.

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Thus, one would expect youth to experience the pandemic in southern European countries in less severe forms than youth in fragile and conflict-affected countries, such as Iran, Syria, Iraq, the Palestinian territories, Yemen and Libya. In many ways, emerging studies confirm this is the case. Yet, the challenges youth are facing in southern European countries should not be understated, especially since many had also been experiencing vulnerabilities prior to the pandemic and have, therefore, seen their prospects of better lives diminish rather than improve.

Education in Crisis and the Digital Divide

While school closures have affected the educational trajectories of all young people around the world, Covid has confirmed that the digital divide in the Euro-Mediterranean region is both deep and deeply gendered, with immediate consequences on the lives of young men and women who are already geographically, economically and technologically disadvantaged. In a region where educational opportunities are dis-

similar within and between countries, the disruptions in youth's learning and schooling have varied in scope and severity since the beginning of the pandemic. Digital inequities have been particularly consequential within countries on the South Shore of the Mediterranean with limited resources to school administrators, teachers and students, as well as low levels of digital literacy and capacities.

The 2018 World Bank report *Expectation and Aspirations* provided a bleak overview of the overall educational landscape in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Although the region's average spending on education is higher than the world average, and despite a series of reforms to the sector over the last five decades, the learning quality and outcome are still considered the lowest in the world. Access to schooling, let alone quality education, is very much determined by class, gender and location (urban versus rural). Recommendations from the report urge the region's leaders to leverage digital technologies to provide efficient, effective and equitable access to learning for all (EdTech) and expand Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure to be able to reap more benefits from EdTech solutions.

While access to ICTs cannot solve all educational woes, they would have minimized the impact of Covid on school disruptions. Undoubtedly, some countries from the southern Mediterranean region (Egypt, Jordan and Morocco) have made remarkable strides in modernizing their information and communication technology infrastructure, digitizing sectors of the economy and government services, and providing e-health applications during the pandemic (Algeria). Despite this, the differences in digital access across the region are too significant to overlook. In 2018, while 90% of European households had domestic access to the Internet (with 33.5% fixed broadband subscriptions) southern Mediterranean countries hovered at an average of 61% with fixed broadband subscriptions as low as 7% in Algeria and Egypt. In addition, data on internet users show significant cross-country variability across the Euro-Mediterranean region. While 82.41% of the European Union population used the Internet in 2018, only 59.64% did so in North African and Middle Eastern countries – excluding the Gulf countries (El Kindi, 2020).

The pandemic has revealed significant variability in computer ownership and internet access even among southern European countries. In early 2021, an Italy

badly hit by the pandemic woke up to the reality that one third of its households do not possess computers and, therefore, run the risk of seeing their children left out of education, with school closures lasting several months. The rural/urban divide has also been observed in several areas of Spain, a country that realized in 2020 that over one in four of its citizens does not have reliable internet access, according to the Spanish trade union, UGT. Likewise, Greece and Portugal register marked inequalities, both domestically and compared to other EU Member States, in the access to and use of digital technologies.

The implications of these variations within and between countries on youth's education and professional training are enormous. Digitally developed countries have typically wasted little time in providing e-learning solutions to their youth during the crisis. However, the countries from this region, which have the highest youth populations, have shown the lowest levels of digital readiness to minimize the nefarious impact of the pandemic on education. Numerous e-learning initiatives and programmes were implemented in North African countries and other Arab countries through ministries of education in partnership with national and international organizations. Despite this, unequal digital skills, limited access to digital portals and rural/urban disparities have posed serious obstacles to youth's continuous learning. Millions of youth have either been left out completely from education or, as is the case of young girls, seen their access to e-learning opportunities severely diminished in favour of their brothers. The gender digital divide was one of the key issues raised by young activists in the 2021 UN *Generation Equality Forum*. Young Turkish activist, Selin Ozunaldin, co-founder of the Turkish chapter of Girls Who Code,¹ reported that "In Turkey, school is still taking place remotely from home. I was talking to a girl from the east side of the country, and she told me that she and her two siblings have to share their mother and father's mobile phones to enter their online classes. And their access to the Internet is very limited. Because there are three of them, each day, one of them had to skip class so that the other sibling could attend. This is happening across the country. This is not acceptable."

While the gender digital divide has been noticed in most developing countries, its severity is particularly disturbing in the Arab countries, which register the second highest gender disparities in the world in terms of accessing technologies. The gender divide has serious repercussions on young women's education and employment opportunities, as well as on their overall conditions and quality of life.

Persistent Unemployment

Studies on youth employment patterns over the last few decades confirm that youth have been suffering from endemic unemployment and underemployment at staggeringly high rates on both shores of the Euro-mediterranean region. Rigorous analyses have detailed the flawed economic, political and socio-cultural policies causing persistent youth unemployment. The global financial crisis and recession (2008), Arab democratic uprisings (2011), ongoing conflicts and displacement, as well as the Covid pandemic have all contributed to making an already bad situation worse. It is important to highlight here that youth's diminishing job opportunities and limited prospects in volatile markets result from policies and decisions over which they have little say and power.

In southern European countries (Italy, Greece and Spain), youth unemployment rates have remained persistently high over the last two decades averaging between 30 and 40 percent. These rates reached new heights after the 2008 recession, where the figures in Greece, for instance, soared from 22 percent to nearly 60 percent in 2013. Spain, Italy and Portugal saw a relatively similar pattern of youth unemployment, although the rates never reached those of Greece. (Eubanks and Wiczer, 2014). Across the Maghreb and other Arab countries, youth unemployment rates have rarely, if ever, dipped below 25 percent over the last three decades, while rates in Palestine and even Saudi Arabia have reached as high as 40 percent (Kumar, 2020). Recent numbers from oil-rich Algeria, put youth unemployment rates at nearly 30 percent over the last five years, leading up to the 2019 street protests that put an end to the 20-year presidency of Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

¹ www.npr.org/2016/06/24/483131204/can-coding-help-girls-take-risks

Gender differences in unemployment and underemployment are important to underscore in these contexts. The ILO *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2020* reports that the youth unemployment rates in Arab countries have increased at a much faster rate for young women than men between 2012 and 2020. For young women, the rate is estimated at 42.1 percent in 2020 doubling that of young men (19.8 percent). These statistics confirm not only the invariable impact of Covid on youth, but also the complex set of vulnerabilities that are exacerbated by the pandemic. An important group of marginalized youth not typically captured by the reported youth unemployment statistics is the so-called NEET – Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training. The percentage of youth who are disengaged from education and the labour market has been on the increase on both shores of the Mediterranean, even prior to the pandemic. For instance, in 2012, around 25 percent of youth were classified as NEETs in Jordan and Tunisia, and over 30 percent in Egypt and Palestine. European countries recorded an average of 16.5 percent among the 20- to 34-year-olds as NEETs, with Italy reaching nearly 28% just before COVID hit (Eurostat, 2020). The NEET group has been on the increase and, together with the unemployed and underemployed, is the most at risk of experiencing extreme, precarious living conditions and severe forms of exclusion.

Precarious Livelihoods

In fragile economies around the world, vulnerable youth have been hit the hardest by the economic impact of Covid. The 2020 ILO youth survey confirms that the pandemic has inflicted “a heavy toll on young workers, destroying their livelihood and undermining their career prospects.” Those who were fortunate to keep their work saw a considerable reduction in work hours and a contraction in their income. This is particularly the case of young people in unstable jobs and low-skilled, income-generating activities that provide no opportunity to engage in remote work. In MENA, it is estimated that 80% of youth in the region work in the informal sector of national economies. The effects of poor education, training and digital literacy, combined with the pandemic-related restrictions in mobility, and the economic slowdown, have caused millions of young people considerable losses in their daily incomes.

Loss or contraction in income have taken place in various forms and for various reasons. On the southern shore of the Mediterranean, loss of income for some youth has been caused by curtailed opportunities arising from their migration across the region. This is the case of Jordanian youth, for instance, many of whom migrate temporarily to work in the resource-rich Gulf countries. Travel restrictions caused by the pandemic severely curtailed these opportunities and caused job losses for existing migrants. For young women, Covid meant a greater reduction in incomes and work hours than for young men, and greater losses in productivity, as the 2020 ILO Survey and other studies confirm. This is because women are typically employed in sectors that are the hardest hit by curfews (informal economic activities), closures (education) and lay-offs (manufacturing and low-paid secretarial jobs). These are jobs with minimal to virtually no protection schemes (domestic work, agriculture). Since the beginning of the pandemic, vulnerable young women have had to deal with the combined effect of a triple burden: losing sources of income (where the job is paid), falling under the radar of Covid response packages (where these apply) and seeing an increase in household chores and caregiving responsibilities with greater exposure to the incidence of gender-based violence (ILO survey). The point here is not that vulnerable young men are not exposed to the same insecurities outlined here, but rather that young women experience additional layers of vulnerabilities given the entrenched gender disparities, practices and legal exclusions in conservative societies. Unsurprisingly, disruptions in education, employment and livelihoods have taken a heavy toll on the overall health and well-being of youth in the Mediterranean region, as elsewhere in the world. While youth's sense of “hopelessness” and anxiety has been documented in numerous studies prior to the pandemic, emerging research on the impact of Covid on youth's health indicates increasing mental and emotional distress among the young. The 2020 ILO *Global Survey on Youth and Covid-19* confirms that one out of two young people (15-29 of age) that responded to the questions on mental health are experiencing anxiety and/or depression. They ascribe this to increasing family stress, social isolation and an increased risk of domestic abuse and violence. The survey underlines that young girls experience higher rates of mental health problems than young men, largely because the pan-

demic has overburdened them with a greater number of stress-inducing responsibilities.

The Cost of Extended Youth Exclusion

For at least a decade prior to the pandemic, young people on both shores of the Mediterranean took to the streets to express their frustration at the nonresponsive national and international policies that have negatively impacted their lives. Young people's mobilizations before, during and since the Arab democratic uprisings of 2011, have focused on greater freedoms, opportunities and inclusion in the social, economic and political developments of their countries. Across southern Europe, similar demands have been made by the student-led protest movements, which led to the anti-austerity mobilizations in Portugal, Spain, Greece and Italy, in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis.

When the pandemic hit the world, none of the youth's grievances had been completely resolved, despite numerous political speeches and government promises. Many of the region's 10-year-olds who, just a few years ago, witnessed their brothers and sisters mobilize for justice and dignity on Cairo's Tahrir Square (2011), Istanbul's Gezi Park (2013), the streets of Spain (2015), Greece (2008, 2012) and Paris, are now well in their twenties. Many were not merely watching their brothers and sisters' grievances, but were fully engaged with the causes of the protests as well as their frustrating outcomes. Today, these young people are the victims of both the unfulfilled promises of the democratic uprisings and the amplified vulnerabilities caused by the pandemic. They are cognizant of the structural economic, social and political dysfunctions that the pandemic has laid bare.

The unsustainability of the growing gaps between political speeches and youth's everyday frustrations is costly, not only to the lives of the young themselves, but to the overall economic development and political stability of their countries and region. Virtually none of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals are achievable without meaningful investment in young people's presents and futures. Persistent youth exclusion and unaddressed vulnerabilities stand as serious obstacles to meeting the goals of the Barcelona Process, which seeks to narrow the gap in the living standards of people in the Euro-Mediterranean zone. No emergency rescue packages, however helpful these are, can re-

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solve systemic vulnerabilities and exclusions which prevent youth from reaching their full potential. Bigger, bolder and better youth-friendly policies is what the region needs to move forward with its youth.

Rebuilding in Times of Crisis – Covid and Beyond

Although the pandemic has revealed the nature and scope of youth's vulnerabilities, it has also foregrounded the extent of their leadership role, resilience and resourcefulness in times of crisis. Across the Euromed zone, young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds invested their time and civic energies in the service of their communities. Those with 2.0 skills, used social networking spaces to overcome geographical obstacles and lockdown restrictions. They circulated important information related to the location of health centres, availability of services, and distribution of food and other necessities. In Lebanon, Morocco and Jordan, youth organizations and youth-led initiatives focused on health awareness-raising, provided guidance on mental health during the lockdown and offered information and training on how to build resilience and mitigate the crisis. Despite autocratic governments' use of the pandemic to increase the surveillance and control of their citizens, youth managed to create informal collectives (Algeria), and lead and/or participate in community support initiatives, particularly in areas where government support was limited or non-existent. Likewise, across Europe the number of young volunteers, according to many reports, increased considerably during the pandemic, with the aim of alleviating the suffering of the elderly, the handicapped and the migrants. In France, for instance, the number of young members of the French platform *TousBénév-*

o/les has doubled since 2020, which according to its president, Isabelle Persoz, is one of the “few positive developments of Covid-19.” Reports from Spain, Greece and Italy all confirm the involvement of youth and the leadership roles many take on in neighbourly and intergenerational solidarity initiatives.

In addition, youth from both shores of the Mediterranean have contributed to research initiatives that document the impact of the pandemic on their lives and livelihoods. They have also formulated policy solutions and shared, with national and regional leaders, specific recommendations about ways of rebuilding their communities, countries and economies without leaving them behind. In fact, there is no shortage of recommendations from youth about how to reduce youth vulnerabilities and minimize their exclusion. A considerable capital of youth-formulated policies and reform ideas has been produced by Euromed youth in their numerous encounters over the last few decades. Since the pandemic, youth representatives from across the Euromed zone have participated in numerous webinars, forums and videoconferences to share their perspectives on the impact of Covid and the ways to mitigate its consequences.

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At this juncture, it is critical for government leaders and decision-makers to seize this historical opportunity to put into action the recommendations accumulated by youth to develop *pro-active*, rather than *re-active*, youth-focused and youth-friendly policies that address the root causes of their systemic exclusion. The post-Covid recovery plans should provide more than a temporary relief from a crisis. This is precisely what transpired from an interesting webinar organized by Reseau Euro Mediterranean France (9 June, 2020), on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on youth in the Euromed region. The 27 young participants (Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Italy, France, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Belgium) made a series of realistic and pertinent recommendations addressed to national and regional leaders that call for

effective commitment, coordination and collaboration among European and national institutions. In many respects, the recommendations made in this webinar reiterate similar calls made by generations of youth for decades now. One cannot help but sense the tenacity with which young people insist on being heard, taken seriously and included in the design and implementation of policies that shape and impact their lives.

Political discourses have been rife with promises, but rather short on delivery and implementation mechanisms. The time to put words into action is *now*. The peace and prosperity of the entire Euromed region depends on how inclusive and equitable the post-Covid policies are.

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