



ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

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The role of youth in demanding bolder climate action and influence the global, national, and local climate agenda

Youth are one of the strongest assets of the Mediterranean region with over 60% of the population under the age of 30. This figure makes the Euro-Mediterranean area one of the youngest regions in the world.

The role of youth is critical as drivers of change and contributors to policymaking, evaluation, and implementation. However, they are often left out of the processes that shape their futures, even though their participation could partially contribute to their empowerment by building their own capacities and personal development, upscaling their capacities to foster transformative innovation.

Despite some governments having recently taken significant steps in promoting space for the youth in the decision-making process, it seems that the voice of young people is not yet fully heard in policy-making processes as they are hardly considered by governments.

The active participation of the youth is nonetheless elementary for the implementation and the success of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development and the Paris Agreement, the latter reaffirming in its preamble the intergenerational equity as the guiding principle shaping climate action. For these reasons, institutions should provide mechanisms for youth to participate in policy deliberations and contribute in setting priorities that are in tune with the concerns of the new generations.

Global governance is facing several environmental, social, economic, and political challenges linked to the climate crisis, but has failed to act with the speed and gravity required by the emergency. At the same time, we are witnessing a strong mobilization gathering Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), individuals and movements campaigning for a societal change, with the youth at the forefront, ready to take a leading role.

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Within these international and local circumstances, young activists are getting a high degree of attention drawing more and more young people into the movement. Consequently, the representatives of youth climate movements have been invited to participate in UN climate conferences. This is partly because young climate activists are perceived as having a greater moral integrity, with their own agenda and a strikingly direct message chastising political leaders for their lack of action.

Challenges for young climate activists

One of the main challenges faced by youth in the Southern Mediterranean region is the current political situation in many countries, where there are many obstacles to civil society activism. Another challenge is the pandemic which has prevented youth from several countries to come together to discuss and agree on regional subjects. Moreover, much capacity building and training is needed within the regional and national CSOs to help run things more efficiently. Nevertheless, in the South, Arab governments are surprised with Arab youth involvement in the worldwide movement against climate change, and some stay prudent and vigilant. Building trust between climate activists and governments is therefore key.

Social media and internet

The youth, as the most intensive users of digital tools, are making the best use of social media to launch online campaigns for climate. Although social media activism is important to gather support among peers and create networks for a common cause, it has also the capacity to influence and impact the political and legal systems if used effectively.

These online tools offer young climate activists and leaders a chance to gain and share different perspectives from mainstream media narratives. Thus, it is important that young movements spread the right message, hit their target groups, and understand development phases for social media activity. Activism and awareness raising require long-term efforts and involvement that go beyond the social media to engage populations. The youth movements could spark a transformation if a critical mass is mobilized, showing a new path forward for others to follow and step forward to lead this change on the ground.

Effective actions and initiatives to empower young climate and environment activists

In spite of being concerned about their futures, many youths do not perceive a connection between politics and their daily lives and struggles. Research has shown that most youth have a strong desire to actively engage with their communities but know little about the decision-making process. Enabling access to the decision-making process may build trust



between youth and institutions. They are fairly qualified to support and monitor the transition towards equitable and sustainable policies. They could also gain from these experiences knowledge and self-esteem to become leaders and take an important role in their societies.

Climate action and the energy transition also present an opportunity for the youth to apply their skills to these promising and critical fields while taking on new roles as energy professionals, decision makers, entrepreneurs, and leaders. This requires governments and industries to prioritise and invest in capacity-building for youth, women, and marginalised groups to overcome the knowledge gap, social disparities, and meet the needs of the societies for a just and green transition.

This generation of young people has also proven to be innovative, entrepreneurial, and well-versed in technological know-how. Considering the undoubtedly important role that young people have already played in solving challenges to advance the green transition through entrepreneurship and innovation, governments should facilitate this further by helping local start-ups compete with international developers and providing micro-credits. Moreover, energy clubs, climate/energy hackathons, youth energy awards, mentorships, calls for proposals, incubators and accelerators are decisive and much needed to support their development. Apprenticeships, internships, and entry level positions should be equally promoted to build skills through work experience.

Successful examples from the region: UN 2020 Global Climate Action Awards winners

RISE2030 is a community-led initiative that focuses on empowering women and youth, through capacity-building, and improving living conditions through access to education and employment. RISE2030 launched the first all-women solar team in Lebanon to challenge the gender stereotypes in the male-dominated construction sector. Thirteen female trainees installed a solar system at a waste sorting and material recovery facility in Qaraoun. The project was implemented in the Federation of Bouhayra Municipalities, which serves more than 18 municipalities around the Qaraoun Lake.

The community members were trained and educated to design and install an on-grid solar photovoltaic system that would cover 100% of the facility's daily need for power, and later a second team installed a solar tree in the public garden. In addition, the management team leading this project is composed of mostly women, with a total of 147 women involved and benefiting from the activity. The project also helped female-led small businesses prepare and sell their rural processed food through the women's association of the town. The project was hailed as a national success, as the first all-women team in solar energy in Lebanon.



Finally, this example shows that youth organisations can build on the strengths of their territories, in order to turn challenges into opportunities when local strategies are well-designed and implemented. We need young climate leaders from both shores of the Mediterranean to work in a strong cooperation to advance the regional climate agenda.

