



Looking towards ARDD's opportunities in the future:

Jordanian youth and their decision-making processes regarding their futures



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Perspectives series – Part 2

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processes regarding their futures**

“Looking towards ARDD’s opportunities in the future”

Perspectives Series

“Looking towards ARDD’s opportunities in the future” three-part Series, which Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development launched based on the research findings of the “Women’s Access to Economic Justice Through Legal Empowerment” project supported by Ford Foundation, looks into perspectives going forward to address three themes that reflect some of the most important concerns of Jordanian youth, Syrian refugee women and recently arrived Arab diaspora/Shataat to Europe.

The Series reviews the importance of these themes and their implications for our Arab societies in the region and in the Shataat/ Diaspora and questions the solutions and prospects available to them in the current situations. It also highlights the perceptions of the current situation of youth and refugees’ choices in the light of the difficulties of economic empowerment, as demonstrated by Ford Foundation Project’s research on the obstacles to obtaining suitable work opportunities and the impact of poverty faced by large segments of our societies. In conclusion, the Series proposes studies’ directions with the goal to ultimately develop evidence-based policies that could contribute to solutions and alternatives towards more empowered, secure and coherent societies.

The first part of the series “Regional Responses regarding the Integration of Europe’s Recently Arrived Arab Diaspora/Shataat”. It examines the potential of civil society organizations in the MENA region to contribute positively to the ongoing European dialogue on the integration of the recent Arab Shataat/diaspora.

The second part “Jordanian youth and their decision-making processes regarding their futures” addresses the issue of out-migration of Jordanian youth, which has consistently been noteworthy. This paper addresses the factors that affect the decision-making processes of Jordanian youth regarding migration and all the relevant dimensions, it suggests further studies and analysis needed to bridge the gap between what young people want and lack.

The third part entitled “Gendering decision-making in mobility and insecurity; the necessity for including Syrian women and girls in discussions on potential return” highlights the importance of giving more attention to the inclusion of Syrian refugee women and girls in the ongoing dialogue on return.

Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD)

Founded in 2008 in Amman-Jordan, Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD) is a Civil Society Organization seeking to foster transformative change towards an empowered, resilient and just society in Jordan and the Arab World. ARDD supports marginalized individuals and communities—including refugees and migrants—in acquiring and enjoying their social, political and economic rights, through legal aid, psychosocial support, media and grassroots mobilization, and research and advocacy to raise stakeholders’ awareness locally, regionally and internationally about the challenges that vulnerable persons face in Jordan and the Arab Region.

Abstract

In this paper we address the issue of out-migration of Jordanian youth, which has consistently been noteworthy. We consider the factors that influence the decision-making processes of Jordanian youth regarding migration in a way that consciously takes individualistic motivations into consideration while attempting to recognize certain patterns and commonalities among this specific age cohort. Within this analysis, we recognize the ways that young people are often reduced to either a 'resource' that must be mobilized or taken advantage of, or a social hazard that is to be placated and controlled. We also look into opportunities for growth by analysing existing gaps that relate to youth and migration such as unemployment and recognize the considerable mismatch between skills gained in academia and the needs of the labor market. Further, we look into the ways that prolonged periods out of education and employment, and difficult transitions from education to work, can further increase youth exclusion and frustration while also considering social and cultural elements of exclusion, with specific attention to gender.

Many factors influence the decisions - or desires - of young Jordanians with regard to migration. It is important to focus on structural changes that directly influence the well-being of youth. Ultimately, we believe that the opportunity to close the gap between what young people want and what they lack is present and requires studying and analysing the problems of disadvantaged youth with the goal to ultimately develop evidence-based policies.

Problem Statement

For over a decade, and according to situational analyses for youth,¹ the society of Jordan has continuously had one of the highest concentrations of youth in the world. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan defines youth as individuals between the ages of 12-30, as identified by the national youth strategy 2005-2009. While youth policy has continued to gain priority on the global, regional, national, and lo-

cal levels, in the case of Jordan, until the recently launched youth strategy which was launched early July 2019, there has been no successor of the one which expired in 2009. This has resulted in the continuation and exacerbation of various interconnected challenges for this group, which constitutes over 70% of the overall Jordanian population.

With a median age of 22.5,² this means that a major cohort of the Jordanian population is currently on the cusp of mature adulthood and dealing with

the many implications of this critical moment in their lives. The issue of out-migration of Jordanian youth has developed differently at various socio-political moments over time but has generally consistently been noteworthy. In 2010, a study by the European University's Migration Policy Centre showed that among Jordanians aged 15-29, 37% of these youths desired to migrate.³ Against this backdrop, discourse on out-migration of Jordanian youth has been attempting to address the ways in which motivations for migration might be addressed, or even reversed. However, a 2017 Gallup report on the Potential Net Migration Index revealed that 19% of the overall population and 27% of Jordanian youth sought to migrate out of the country.⁴

This paper will consider the factors that influence the decision-making processes of Jordanian youth regarding migration. This will be done in a way that consciously takes individualistic motivations into consideration while attempting to recognize certain patterns and commonalities among this specific age cohort. In an attempt to identify where and when certain drivers play a role in influencing migration, different scales and levels will be taken into consideration. This includes the recognition that “drivers

may operate in different locations... and may influence migration over different timeframes,” with a particular attention to the observation that the malleable nature of conditions that influence migration may “be quite different from those that perpetuate it across time and space.”⁵

There is also an important distinction to be made between the different types of push factors for migration, and the ways in which the combination of these factors create the conditions induce or encourage migration.

Opportunities for Growth

When examined from a more detail-oriented lens, it can be observed that within Jordan’s “highly educated population” – individuals with bachelor’s degree or more – the Gallup report also showed that 29% of this group wants to migrate. An OECD report on Jordanian youth policy found a considerable mismatch between skills gained in academia and the needs of the labour market, which is a central component of the youth unemployment crisis in Jordan that has pushed young people to aspire toward ensuring their livelihoods elsewhere.⁶ Unemployment in Jordan has risen to 18.6 percent in 2018. Among people

aged 20-24, unemployment stands at 37.7% - in a country where 70% of the population is under 30.

It must be acknowledged that the mere consideration of migration is most often a privilege unattainable to the most marginalized in a society. Instead, the young people who seriously consider migration or aspire to it are those with the relative space and resources that make it somewhat of a real possibility.

An important point to consider here is the faith – or lack thereof – that Jordanian youth have in the social contract. Young people are taught that if you work hard, and if you accomplish certain standards of success, your efforts will directly translate into opportunity. Further, while Jordanian youth have high access to education – 60.5% of 25-29-year-olds have a secondary or higher degree – the quality of that education is often found to be inefficient.

Evidently, 53% of unemployed youth in Jordan have a university degree; many of them have gone even further academically. Further, prolonged periods out of education and employment, and difficult transitions from education to work, can put youth at risk of skills deterioration, further increasing exclusion from quality jobs. This reality plays a huge role in the massive frustra-

tion experienced by the youth, and ultimately leads to a complete disillusionment that fuels the desire to seek alternative conditions for opportunity.

Social and Cultural Elements

However, in terms of the motivations related to youth and migration, there are many multi-faceted, interconnected issues to consider. These include various manifestations of socioeconomic, national, religious, political, sexual, and gender dynamics that are negatively affected by a lack of social, economic, and political prospects. When this is considered alongside often intense societal pressures relating to the milestones of independence and adulthood, and in parallel to various demonstrations of structural barriers to political participation and civic engagement, a clearer picture of the complexity of the young Jordanian's experience can be painted.⁸ These societal pressures – or the inability to divert them due to various constrictions – can lead to a prolonged sense of 'waithood,' as conceptualized by Diane Singerman, who systematically called attention to the consequences of social exclusion for young people when they are unable to cross the threshold of 'growing up' and ultimately find

themselves stuck within a ‘stalled transition to adulthood’.⁹

In order to effectively analyse these issues relating to youth, it is important to recognize “the distinction between young persons as an age cohort and youth as a social category.” Christoph H. Schwarz and Anika Oettler present four stereotypes that colour perceptions of ‘youth’ on the global level:

1. Youth are feared as dangerous, violent, fanatic, and hostile;
2. Youth are seen as helpless, vulnerable, disoriented, paralysed, and in need of protection or help from outside;
3. Youth are appreciated as an innovative human resource, as talented, dynamic, inspired, and productive;
4. Youth are admired as heroic, altruistic, idealistic, courageous, lionhearted, and visionary.

Christoph H. Schwarz and Anika Oettler argue that, considering the complexities of young people’s lives and the component parts of their social situations, factors such as cultural, class, and gender have a determinant relationship with their ability to act as ‘youths’. Citing Asef Bayat, Schwarz and Oettler go on to state that the

very “experience of youthfulness” as it is “related to being young,” or the “series of mental and cognitive dispositions, ways of being, feeling, and carrying oneself that are associated with the sociological position of structural irresponsibility” are not immediately granted to an individual by virtue of being a certain age.

As social category, and as supported by the arguments of authors Maysoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock, the ‘youth’ is a double-edged sword by which individuals of a specific age group are seen as either the unpredictable threat to the fabric society or the romanticized compasses driving society into a hopeful future. When applied to young people from the Middle East and North Africa, this stark dichotomy of identification can easily be seen in the case of the Arab Spring. When the 2011 uprisings began across the region, various national policies were being critiqued in a way that viewed youth as the passive victims of inefficient governance structures and severely strained conceptualizations of the social contract. Simultaneously, the INGO landscape across the region attempted to frame the youth as beacons of innovation and potential, with a view to ‘empowering’ young people.¹⁰

Evidently, whether viewed from a mac-

ro perspective or on a localized basis, young people are reduced to either a 'resource' that must be mobilized or taken advantage of, or a social hazard that is to be placated and controlled – making them the embodiment of both potential and risk.

In order to fully consider the various layers of marginalization within which Jordanian youth dwell, it is imperative to reject an overarching, definition of 'Jordanian youth' and to recognize the influences of physical, tribal, socio-economic, legal, national, and gendered variables that affect highly individualized – yet, often inter-sectional – experiences of the aforementioned structural variables. These factors include family and religion, which all young Jordanians interviewed by the OECD in a 2018 report placed specific importance on, stating that "the family is instrumental in developing young people's attitudes and values." This is, in part, centred on the concept of support, which was relayed by Jordanian youth as a key factor to "subjective well-being."¹¹

This implies that young Jordanians place particular importance on support networks and relationships, and would take these conditions into account when considering major life decisions such as migration.

One of the most prominent components of the universal understanding of young adulthood is independence. In the context of Jordanian culture, the actualization of independence is often reliant on both social and economic factors. While in certain parts of the world the independence associated with young adulthood is directly linked to living independently, this is not the case within Jordanian society. For young Jordanians, marriage is perhaps the starkest signifier of independence, and most often, marriage is a pre-requisite to 'moving out' of the family home.

In recent years, Al Jazeera has reported that while, generally, "marriage is the social marker of adulthood," the average age for marriage in Jordan is age 24 for women and age 29 for men. Even in comparison to global statistics, this is "one of the highest ages in the world for men to be getting married for the first time."¹²

While this reality can be observed from a number of perspectives, when considered in the context of social pressures and expectations, it is evident that this delay in marriage – or perhaps even lack of the desire or ability to marry – can be seen as a push factor toward out-migration for young Jordanians. Choosing to migrate for educational or economic purposes al-

lows these young people to side-step social and cultural barriers to independence, and to do so while avoiding the pitfalls of social stigma and taboos.

From a gendered lens of analysis, it is especially evident that Jordanian women are systemically socially, politically, and economically practices marginalized. Both in terms of governance and social control, the potential of Jordanian women is constrained and limited even more so than their male counterparts. While progress has been achieved in terms of addressing imbalances in education for Young Jordanian women, these have not translated into social, economic, and political advances.¹³

The “gendered dimension” to the issue of marginalization leaves young women virtually invisible from the public debate beyond symbol or token. Beverly Milton-Edwards argues that “institutionalized patriarchy along with the resilience and reification of tribal networks further excludes young women and reinforces social attitudes that tend to either inhibit or banish them from the public space.” In an increasingly globalized world, many young women are well-informed of the Women’s Rights movement and the ways in which it rejects the out-dated dichotomy of the feminine private and masculine public. For many young women,

this serves as a factor that makes migration look especially appealing.

Youth and Civil/Political Engagement

Considering the limited extent to which the education system cultivates active citizenship among young people, social institutions are the key stakeholders in youth political and civic engagement but are constrained by a lack of coherence among a diverse set of institutions across different sectors. While the Ministry of Youth (MoY) is the leader on youth affairs, various ministries and government entities work together to develop policies affecting young people. These function alongside a plethora of royal NGOs, NGOs and international actors. However, the implementation and co-ordination of youth policies is limited by frequent institutional changes, inadequate financial and human resources and inefficient monitoring and evaluation.

In terms of a relationship with governing authorities, or civic engagement, the OECD report highlighted that while the well-educated youth of Jordan communicate an awareness of the importance of political participation,

“only a minority of Jordanian youth has a comprehensive knowledge of the political landscape and how to influence policies and decisions.” This demonstrates an implied apathy arising from a lack of ownership and sense of disillusionment regarding civic engagement.

While youth recognise the importance of political participation, they show little interest in politics. Most consider civic duties and responsibilities key components of active citizenship, but few highlight the importance of political rights. As mentioned, the institutional framework for youth engagement involves many diverse institutions but lacks coherence and falls short of that aim. Certain forms of youth participation are underdeveloped, such as direct involvement in designing and elaborating activities and access to engagement information and tools.

In the summer of 2018, thousands of Jordanians – the large majority of whom were young people – took to the streets to voice their protests against austerity measures by the Jordanian authorities. These measures included a draft law to raise taxes, an end to certain subsidies and a rise in fuel prices. The demonstrations were youth-led and supported by several professional associations. Further, local media highlighted their peaceful nature and the civilised way in which protests were carried out.¹⁴ However, even though the protests resulted in certain changes, these changes were not on the structural level and it can be argued that not much progress has been made. When it becomes evident that the political will of the youth is belittled and sidelined, it is not difficult to understand why young people can be motivated to uproot their lives to a place where their voices are heard.

Conclusion

As discussed, many factors influence the decisions – or desires – of young Jordanians with regard to out-migration. In order to properly assess these factors and identify the ways in which they can or should be addressed, it is important to focus on structural changes that directly influence the well-being of youth.

The opportunity to close the gap between what young people want and what they lack is present, and requires studying and analyzing the problems of disadvantaged youth with the goal to ultimately develop evidence-based policies.¹⁵ At a crucial moment of development for Jordan, effective policies can significantly reduce the risks of youth becoming further disadvantaged. In relation to issues relating to employment opportunities, the facilitation of the transition into the “world of work” through labor market counseling and comprehensive training can contribute to the economic inclusion of youth. Further, active citizenship can be encouraged and supported through cultural and creative activities, violence prevention programs and juvenile justice services. A 2018 policy review by the OECD on youth well-being in Jordan produced the following specific recommendations, which are directly relatable to the issues discussed above:

1. Mainstream youth in all sectoral ministries and create cross-sector coordination mechanisms with a specific recommendation to pass a national youth strategy. This also includes creating an information system on youth, and the effective monitoring and evaluation of youth policies.
2. Align technical and vocational education and training with demands of youth and firms and provide early guidance for educational or workplace transition.
3. Facilitate active citizenship and involve youth in policy making processes by improving communication with young people and developing public consultations to integrate youth perspectives into policies.

Here, we find it important to highlight that ‘development’ and structural change are not synonymous. Hein De Haas argues that while development places heavy emphasis on alleviating poverty, as mentioned, “immigrants mostly do not originate from the poorest communities and countries.”¹⁶ De Haas reiterates that “migrants generally do not flee from misery, but move deliberately in the expectation of finding a better or more stable livelihood, and of improving their social and economic status,” which has been observed to be true for young Jordanians. Here, we can see a connection between self-actualization and migration – rather than the traditionally perceived link between survival and migration – which creates a space to better analyze and respond to the aforementioned interlinked factors relating to the decision-making of Jordanian youth as it pertains to migration.

Since structural change is a long-term endeavor, Dr. Rasha Istaiteyeh provides an important consideration in terms of short-term, proactive developments which focuses on the consideration of ways to encourage the return of those who migrate for academic or professional opportunities. Dr. Rasha Istaiteyeh argues that there are “three approaches in which a successful and efficient policy response is likely to use several mechanisms to bring back researchers and students residing abroad:

1. Individual-based: short-run policy response that attempts to structure the decisions of researchers and students on an individual basis;
2. Environment: medium to long-term approach that aims to encourage return by improving conditions and opportunities;
3. Resource: benefitting from Diaspora networking.

This is also a crucial element to include within discourse on Jordanian youth and migration.

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