The Role of Social Justice Concepts in Empowering Youth & Enhancing their Political Participation

GenG - New Generation Program

Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Briefs Series   **Policy Brief -4**

Introduction

This policy brief looks at the links between political participation and social justice and how the two reinforce each other. It explores the question of social justice and political participation to explore how political participation links in a mutual relationship with the betterment of the living conditions of all members of society. Human and inclusive development prioritizes social justice and, empowers people to participate in decision-making. At the same time, people organizing and mobilizing to achieve social justice build stronger and more effective institutions that can respond to the challenges of their context and ensure a more robust democracy.

The brief is an output of the Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Labs, conducted by the Arab Renaissance and Democracy (ARDD) in partnership with the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, as part of the New Generation Program. It highlights the fourth session on social justice and youth political participation, and what twenty political science and law students from the University of Jordan discussed in this regard. Following the labs´ work methodology, the session hosted human rights expert Dr. Riyad Sobh

The Relationship Between Social Justice and Civic & Political Participation

Social and economic justice is a fundamental pillar for the development and thriving of political and civil liberties. Rights and protections can only be achieved through collective action and participation in civil and political life. **This mutual relationship is at the heart of building accountability between citizens and institutions, thus strengthening trust between the State and the members and sectors of society.** Understanding the relationship between social justice, human rights, and socio-economic well-being in these terms requires an understanding of development not simply as a process of economic growth but as a more inclusive and diverse set of actions and policies aimed at achieving the well-being and basic needs of all members of society. Essentially, this means adopting a holistic perspective of human development. Youth who have participated both in ARDD research and in Policy Labs believe that definitions and implementations of what development is are central to achieving better living conditions for everyone.

Centering social justice in development means understanding and working on the root causes of inequality by addressing them consistently and thoroughly. This involves identifying and dismantling systemic barriers embedded within laws and policies to promote equal opportunities between women and men, and all subgroups of society. Ensuring social protection and socio-economic rights is another fundamental step for advancing social justice. Development policies and programs need to integrate marginalized and vulnerable groups to ensure justice for everyone.

The Policy Lab participants have discussed the need to comprehend social justice as closely linked to economic and human development and as essential for achieving the desired progress at the social and political levels.

Social justice itself, in this perspective, needs to be understood as both a tool and goal that is intertwined with strengthening the social contract – and thus civic and political participation – especially regarding younger generations who are building their society's future.

The ESCWA (Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia) considers social justice to rest on the four pillars of equality, equity, rights, and participation. "Social justice", as defined by the United Nations, can be understood as:

> "Equal rights and access to resources and opportunities for all, men and women, paying particular attention to the removal of barriers that hinder the empowerment of disadvantaged groups to fulfill their potential to participate in decisions that govern their lives."

Social justice is organically connected to the rights of every person to enjoy social, economic, political, and cultural well-being and rights. It is achieved when everyone has the right to access a decent life through equal opportunities in education, health, employment, and public office. When social justice is pursued and achieved, opportunities are within the general principle of non-discrimination based on identity, social class, race, nationality, legal status, physical ability, and sex. Access to resources and opportunities is also deeply intertwined with a society's access to political expression and participation in the civic sphere.

The question of social justice opens the space of what is political within economic relations and calls for understanding how people can mobilize and organize to achieve more fair and inclusive development. In this sense, people's ability and opportunities to participate in political and civic life and decision-making processes are fundamental not only to achieving social justice but also to ensuring – through a fairer and safer environment for all – greater mutual trust between institutions and citizens and greater inclusiveness in political and civic participation.

Economic development policies and measures to support wider political participation are interconnected, as they address simultaneously the root causes of inequality and the needed action toward sustainability.

The Policy Lab has given the participants space to discuss the challenges faced by their specific context and how political participation can positively affect change toward comprehensive social, political, and economic justice in the country. At the same time, they also discussed how political participation and civic engagement can ensure the achievement of a more sustainable form of development that can build social justice in Jordan.

Social Justice Challenges in Jordan From a Youth Perspective

Social, Political, and Legislative Challenges

Despite Jordan's endorsement of conventions and treaties that focus on equality and the prohibition of discrimination in all areas and among different groups, there are still challenges and disparities concerning discrimination between men and women in the workplace and in the implementation of international agreements that ensure gender equality in addressing economic, political, and social challenges. Individuals often do not enjoy equal rights and opportunities in shaping laws and political participation, especially among youth and women and between different geographic areas of the country. Achieving social justice, therefore, is a national challenge that concerns all sectors and members of Jordanian society.

> *"Some of the significant obstacles to achieving social justice include also widespread corruption and nepotism, which can lead to unequal distribution of resources and opportunities and income inequality. This can create a significant gap between different sections of society and lack of freedom in the forms of restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, which ultimately hinder the process of social justice"*
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> ***Lab Participant***

The question of ameliorating legislation proves to be crucial and fundamental in this sense to achieve inclusive social justice. The inter-relation between economic and human growth that emerges from the struggles and challenges faced by Jordan and the region proves that an inclusive and sustainable vision for development is needed. The participants in the Policy Lab have underlined their great interest in understanding more thoroughly models of economic growth, as the latter inform policies adopted on a global scale as well as locally, in a world that is deeply interconnected on the political, economic, and financial levels.

Challenges of Public Services and Social Protection Services

Participants in the Policy Lab underlined, in their discussion, how Arab countries have faced, for a long time, multiple and complex challenges (including high population growth, low social protection coverage, high unemployment, increasing poverty and inequality, various forms of discrimination, conflict and forced displacement) that have heavily impacted on the possibility of equal and just access to resources and opportunities.

In this context, Jordan faces significant challenges in public services related to health safety, water management, and other issues that have a significant impact on social justice among the population. The Syrian crisis and large waves of refugees coming to Jordan, combined with the COVID-19 pandemic in recent years, exacerbated these issues.

Moreover, Jordan is considered one of the world's most water-scarce countries due to its weak infrastructure. According to a 2018 report by the Global Infrastructure Hub, Jordan needs at least $81 billion in infrastructure investments by 2040.

In the healthcare sector, Jordan ranked 66th globally and third in the Arab world in the 2021 Global Health Security Index. However, Jordan's healthcare services face continuous strain, significant hospital and health center overcrowding, and a consistent shortage of healthcare personnel due to population growth and the presence of refugees increasing health services challenges.

Additionally, in recent years poverty rates rose in the kingdom. According to the Sustainable Development Goals Atlas for 2023 released by the World Bank, Jordan's poverty rate is estimated at approximately 35% of the total population. In the 2023 Global Poverty Index ranking of the world's poorest countries, Jordan was placed 78th out of 97 countries and ranked tenth among 14 Arab countries included in the classification.

These challenges are expected to increase in the coming years. National institutions, such as the General Social Security Corporation (a comprehensive public social insurance system) contribute to achieving social security and economic development in the kingdom while focusing on social adequacy considerations.

As underlined in previous labs, the participants reflected on how a more comprehensive social protection system can guarantee a more inclusive social justice and human development.

Political Participation for Social Justice: Youth Perspectives on the Way Forward

The challenges faced by Jordan are common in the Arab region and within a world where problems and solutions develop both on a global and a local level. Facing these issues and finding solutions for them cannot happen in a void, but needs to address structural root causes and work on a wide level of interconnections between such reasons. Ensuring the participation of everyone in political and social processes of change is crucial, in this sense, to pressure decision-makers to keep collective essential priorities at the top of their agendas.

> *"Civic and political engagement and participation are a necessary condition for achieving social justice in Jordan. How are we going to move to a socially fairer country if some individuals and communities cannot fully access and participate in civil and political fora? All voices must be heard from across social classes and geographic spaces."*
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> **Lab Participant**

Political participation is linked in different ways to knowledge production, human capital, social protection, freedom of speech, and human rights. In all such connections, the relationship is mutual. Political participation is the route to increasing spaces for reclaiming rights and well-being, while, at the same time, strong social protection, human capital, rights, and freedoms allow for a healthy, diverse, and inclusive democratic life. Participation in the political and social spheres comes both as a cause and as an effect of a virtuous cycle between participation, engagement, rights, opportunities, and well-being.

Achieving change cannot happen without a wider engagement of the population in the decision-making processes and public discussion of problems and solutions. This is why political participation remains a key issue at the center of social justice as well as human and economic development. Raising political and economic awareness becomes, therefore, a fundamental step towards increasing and safeguarding political and civic participation towards social justice, inclusivity, and equality between men and women in Jordanian society.

Recommendations

Discussing social justice has allowed the participants in the Lab to reflect collectively on some of the key-words and topics that have emerged from the first phase of the Gen-G research: values, social and economic development in society, and inclusivity. The research found that these three elements were the main drivers of youth perceptions and ideas on political participation and that youth mostly intended political participation as a means for the achievement of social justice. In this regard, the participants in the Lab mostly focused their understanding of political participation around the values of equality and justice, and social cohesion. **Developing deeper and more critical knowledge and awareness about models, policies, and legislation was seen by the youth as a fundamental step in building and implementing actions toward the achievement of more inclusive laws and better access to opportunities and resources** for all members and sectors of society and they proposed the following recommendations.

To Government and Legislatures:

– Work on institutionalizing the reciprocal relationship between social justice and effective civic and political participation. In addition, stakeholders must be reminded that ensuring access to job opportunities, inclusive health insurance, public transportation, public spaces, and essential services is crucial for driving mobilization and organization. These needs are key factors in advancing a youth political change agenda.

– Address the social and economic challenges facing Jordan and transform them into opportunities that contribute to the promotion and consolidation of the principles of social justice and political and civic participation, and work on removing obstacles hindering a strong social contract in Jordan.

– Seek to establish principles of social and economic justice and apply them across all state institutions to reduce negative feelings towards participation and avoid waves of extremist thinking and intolerance that could affect the youth.

– Work on ensuring equality for all, including youth and women, by activating effective and equitable strategies and adhering to the principle of equal citizenship for everyone.

To Civil Society Organizations and Academia:

– Build a common understanding and perception among civil society institutions regarding concepts related to social justice by:

  • Creating scientific and methodological research that links the impact of social justice to economic growth and social development, and its relationship with civil and political participation.

  • Identify the reasons and challenges that hinder participation in access to social justice, especially for youth and women. Advise institutions on how to face and solve such challenges.

To Media and Influencers:

– Digitally promote political participation as a tool and aim for social justice, by disseminating impactful content that supports equality and justice for all.

To Youth:

– Build, promote, and share a new culture of political participation that links individual and collective needs and aspires to achieve social justice for all in the Jordanian context and the world.

– Be active in proposing initiatives that showcase the voices of youth demanding wider and better social justice. Support such cases and voices by adopting such programs and initiatives not only in public engagement and participation but also in daily, private, lives and relationships.