



Exploring Ways to Develop Youth Social Capital in Jordan

GenG - New Generation Program

Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Briefs Series

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Introduction

This policy brief addresses the role of social capital in Jordan and its impact on community engagement, political participation, and societal development. In particular, it explores the complex dynamics of youth social capital development and socio-cultural barriers to better understand its impact on young generations and enhance social justice among different societal segments. The brief provides recommendations for government institutions, civil society organizations, and media outlets to promote the creation of social capital opportunities for Jordanian youth in political and civic spheres, thereby fostering a more cohesive and just Jordanian society. The brief is an outcome of

the *Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Lab*, organized by the Arab Renaissance and Democracy Organization (ARDD) in partnership with the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, as part of the New Generation Program. It highlights the seventh session of the lab, “Exploring Ways to Develop Youth Social Capital in Jordan”, and what twenty participants from political science and law students from the University of Jordan discussed in this regard. Following the Lab’s work methodology, the session featured parliamentary and party activist, Dr. Younes Zahran and was moderated by ARDD’s Chief Executive Director, Ms. Samar Muhareb.

Social Capital: The Concept and its Role

Capital is not only an economic aspect, but also a social, cultural, and symbolic construct; more specifically, it is the combination of networks and relationships among individuals that enable societies, organizations, or groups to function effectively, supporting collective action and cooperation for mutual benefit. Generally built on shared values, norms, trust, and other characteristics like cooperation, patience, generosity, social intelligence, and positivity, these relationships can allow people to access resources, information, and opportunities. Still, they can be also affected by gender, class, and other factors. Social capital is not automatically generated but can be cultivated through active participation in social groups, organizations, and networks. Accordingly, it can have a fundamental role in fostering civic and political participation, supporting the meaningful engagement of marginalized groups like women and people with disabilities (PWDs), and enhancing inner trust among communities and political institutions. In essence, it represents the interdependence and trust between members of society. Finally, the development of social capital requires a sustained effort and commitment to building and maintaining those relationships that contribute to the overall well-being, progress, and justice for individuals, the community, and society as a whole.

Social Capital in Jordan: A Contextual Overview

Recognizing the importance of social capital for youth engagement in society, Lab participants discussed its reality in Jordan, highlighting challenges and tools to support networking opportunities in the country. As initially noticed, social capital can be intrinsically affected by gender, class, race, and other stratification. Accordingly, among the challenges identified by Lab participants, are:

- **The existing gender gap** in the Jordanian context. Women and girls face significant challenges in building social capital in Jordan, a reality even harder when it intersects with other issues -for example, disability. This situation is compounded

by societal expectations and traditional roles that limit women's opportunities for networking and participation and reflect broader social constraints, especially in the public sphere. Although representing a significant portion of the Jordanian population, women are indeed substantially excluded from those spaces where social capital can be pursued and built, facing barriers that prevent them from fully engaging in experiences that can benefit both them and their communities.

- **Economic inequalities** and their role in the uneven distribution of social capital. Although different, economic and social capital is closely linked, as financial resources often determine the individual's ability to build and leverage networking and learning opportunities. Today, Jordan's unemployment rate -as of the second quarter of 2024, stands at 21.4%, with women's reaching 31%¹ - makes it especially difficult for youth to actively participate and build solid social capital for their future. This gap is further exacerbated by other factors such as shrinking civic space, economic or humanitarian crises like the COVID-19 Pandemic, or regional conflicts, which can disrupt existing social networks and hinder the formation of new ones.
- **Ethnic and geographical differences** and their role in fostering or hindering social capital, with opportunities concentrated mostly in urban areas. Indeed, if these settings offer more opportunities for socio-economic interaction and education, by contrast, rural areas may lack the infrastructure and resources needed.

Lab participants underscored the importance of addressing all these different forms of inequalities (gender-related, economic, geographical) altogether with targeted interventions and policies to support more equitable, just social capital opportunities for all, especially for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups. In this sense, the relationship between social, economic, and cultural capital was deemed fundamental and strongly interconnected by youth in the lab.

"Social capital is closely linked to economic and cultural capital. Access to education and economic resources often determines an individual's ability to build and leverage his/her networks."

(Lab Participant)

How Social Media Can Create The Conditions to Build Social Capital

Social media and technology platforms can represent a valuable source of information and an asset for building long-term, useful relationships.

“As my social network expanded through social media, my opportunities increased significantly”

(Lab Participant)

Undoubtedly, social media provides access to a vast amount of information and knowledge, which can be leveraged to start cross-cutting discussions, enhancing social capital opportunities. Indeed, by allowing individuals to connect with a diverse range of people from different sectors, social media platforms immensely expand opportunities.

“The nature of relationships between people has changed with social media, as a single post can reach many people. Social capital has evolved with globalization and intermingling of ideas and cultures, no longer tied only to the neighborhood you live in.”

(Lab Participant)

Although useful, Lab participants reflected on how these tools should be used strategically to build genuine social capital and avoid perils coming from uncontrolled spaces of communication. Indeed, while providing a vast amount of information and facilitating connections, they can often be superficial and lack the depth needed for genuine trust, reciprocity, and mutual support, leaving individuals at the mercy of possible hustling, scamming, or threats online. Moreover, building strong social capital also requires continuous engagement beyond immediate gains, a commitment hard to maintain through social media alone and in digital spaces. Accordingly, as the discussion suggested, these tools should always complement, not replace, traditional social capital methods, like face-to-face interactions and the support of institutions and civil society organizations; crucial ele-

ments in a transforming Arab world, these methods can support and strengthen social capital opportunities in combination and beyond the digital sphere. As an example, university institutions were identified by participants as one space *“where not only education happens, but also social capital is created”* through real interaction and youth’s engagement in multi-sectorial experiences. As emerged through the session, by leveraging the strengths of social media while addressing its limitations, people can effectively build and enhance their opportunities for individual and collective benefit.

Social Capital and Political Participation: Ties for Social Justice

Social capital can be strategically employed also in political campaigns, for example, to build alliances and trust between citizens and institutions. Successful candidates often leverage both strong and weak ties in their networks to maximize their outreach and influence. To do so, continuous engagement with the community is fundamental, as maintaining connections even after the election period creates better chances of success in future campaigns and encourages people’s long-term trust. The parliamentary elections of November 2024² represented an interesting case to illustrate the significant role and impact of social capital in political campaigns: candidates with robust social networks have more chances to outperform those who rely solely on economic capital, with well-invested and sustained networks potentially being a decisive factor for success. Moving further, Lab participants backed the importance of cultivating and maintaining ties not only before elections, but especially during and after electoral turning points, mobilizing support and fostering a continuous and prosperous community engagement. By sharing personal electoral experiences, it was pointed out that candidates with strong social networks had a distinct advantage -even with a vast amount of unorganized social capital made of both strong and weak ties. It was stressed further that even the smallest ties, such as day-to-day interactions with the community, can be valuable, as they may provide support in unexpected ways. Starting from examples on the ground, when financial resources were preferred to trust, solidarity, and community, the formers proved insufficient to support and enhance political enterprises, showing the essentiality of strong social, cross-cutting networks.

Recommendations

For Government and Political Institutions:

- **Strengthen Civic Education and Community Engagement:** social capital should be integrated into school curricula, helping young people understand the importance of the concept in achieving collective goals. Civic education programs should emphasize the value of social capital, equipping students with the knowledge and skills to build and maintain strong and effective networks. Additionally, expanding community initiatives will foster different sectors' and social groups engagement, enhancing overall social cohesion in the country.
- **Support Youth Political Engagement Through Social Capital:** political organizations, especially at the grassroots level, should invest in building social capital to enhance their effectiveness and reach. By nurturing networking opportunities, they can mobilize youth and communities, contributing to more robust and participatory political processes. This approach ensures that political movements are more deeply connected to the communities they represent and to their actual needs.
- **Address Economic Barriers:** policymakers must address the economic inequalities that limit access to education and other resources for building social capital. This includes investing in creating opportunities for economic mobility, continuous education, and supporting civil society in overcoming economic and educational divides. By addressing these barriers, social capital opportunities can be more equitably distributed across society and marginalized groups, leading to stronger, more resilient communities.

For Civil Society Organizations and Academia:

- **Promote Gender-Inclusive Social Capital Development:** Efforts should be intensified to reduce the gender gap in social capital opportunities by supporting

women and marginalized groups. This includes developing targeted programs that address the unique barriers these groups face, ensuring their full participation in society's development. By focusing on inclusivity and intersectionality between women's issues, disability, and marginalization, these initiatives can empower youth to actively engage in community and political life.

For Media Outlets and Influencers:

- **Leverage the Use of Social Media:** social media opportunities must be harnessed through the promotion of trust and reciprocity in offline interactions, encouraging responsible use to bridge the gap between online connections and the real world. Digital literacy programs should be expanded to ensure meaningful, trust-based relationships among youth from different areas and socio-economic strata.

For Youth:

- **Invest in Building Inclusive Networks:** Actively participate in diverse community spaces—both online and offline—to build relationships grounded in trust, shared values, and mutual support. These networks are essential for expanding your civic and political influence.
- **Leverage Digital Platforms Strategically:** Use social media to access information, share perspectives, and connect with peers, but ensure your engagement promotes meaningful dialogue and long-term collaboration beyond digital interactions.
- **Champion Equity in Participation:** Recognize and address the structural barriers that affect your peers, especially those related to gender, geography, and economic status. Advocate for inclusive spaces that allow all youth to engage equally in civic life.

The Generation G (New Generation) project was launched within ARDD in 2021 with the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands to energize and encourage youth leadership in promoting gender justice. The project aims to promote dialogue between youth and policymakers to influence policy relating to justice, particularly youth and women's rights.

Policy Labs are part of ARDD's research methodology, providing a dedicated space for discussing and researching public policy issues to enhance youth capacities and equip them with the necessary skills to engage in public policy-making processes. The labs also facilitate exchanging opinions with experts and researchers specialized in relevant topics, based on background papers prepared to address these issues.

Established in 2018, The Renaissance Strategic Center is an independent think tank based in Jordan that operates within the organizational framework of the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD).

References

- 1 See "Jordan unemployment rate" <https://tradingeconomics.com/jordan/unemployment-rate>; The Jordan Times, "Unemployment decreases by 0.9% in Q2, gender gap widens", <https://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/unemployment-decreases-09-q2-gender-gap-widens>
- 2 At the time the Lab was being held, the elections were still to start.