Envisioning Change: Aspirations and Perspectives of Jordanian Youth for a Better Future

GenG - New Generation Program

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Introduction

Jordanian youth, praised by His Majesty King Abdullah as the nation's "greatest asset and hope for the future," are energetic, creative, and socially aware. Their digital fluency enables them to mobilize, voice opinions, and connect with global movements. Yet, they face a major challenge: rapid technological change outpaces slower cultural adaptation, creating a gap that hinders collective impact. This policy brief examines how to bridge the disconnect and harness youth potential for structured, meaningful change.

The brief is an output of the Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Labs, conducted by the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD) as part of the New Generation Program. It highlights the outcome of the session titled **"Envisioning Change: Aspirations and Perspectives of Jordanian Youth for a Better Future,"** and what political science and law students from the University of Jordan discussed in this regard. Following the lab's methodology, the session featured anthropologist and researcher Dr. Kamal Mirza.

Youth Visions of Change in Jordan: Unlocking Potential Through Education

Young people do not live in isolation from the rapid changes happening around the world; in fact, they are often the first to recognize the long-term implications of a major global event. Notably, young people around the world are leading the advocacy efforts to address climate change, given the future-threatening severity of this cataclysm. In Jordan, young people see change as an integral part of their identity; they are eager to challenge and debate conventional rhetoric and devise innovative ways to move forward within the context. However, young people perceive change to be burdened by many socioeconomic and political factors, coupled with the exclusion of youth from formal decision-making spaces; thus, they view change as a source of hope that is out of reach.

> "*If we reformed the political system while dismissing improving individuals' behaviours, we would not see any tangible change; just look at what happened during the Arab Spring.*"
>
> **Lab Participant**

This was apparent in the many instances where young people would express sentiments of hope, immediately followed by a social problem hindering their ability to work for a better future.

This is why young people focused heavily on the significance of working on the individual level (micro level) before moving up into changing structures and systems (Macro level), and this is what the facilitator described as a bottom-up approach to social change.

> "*From my perspective, knowledge, then knowledge, then knowledge, and undoubtedly awareness, as knowledge is power, and the deep focus on everything that is going on around us is the key to an all-inclusive renaissance, and to achieve change towards a better future.*"
>
> **Lab Participant**

As a consequence of this focus, **awareness** was deemed as a critical tool for achieving social change; an awareness that youth in Jordan possess, but do not know how to utilize and conceptualize the pathway for change. This gap highlights the need to examine the drivers youth believe could empower them, including, education, digital tools, globalization, and social capital.

What Are the Drivers of Change: A Youthful Perspective on The Potential of Awareness, Globalization, and Social Capital

Education as a Catalyst for Critical Awareness

Since awareness was crucial to the process of social change, young people emphasized the importance of education as a change and catalyst for social change. To them, the education system needs to be reformed to identify the most effective pathways to change and to equip them with the necessary skills to overcome socioeconomic challenges.

> "*Education is the foundation for political, economic, religious, and social change.*"
>
> **Lab Participant**

Moreover, education can be crucial for organizing the massive amount of knowledge that young people have from being "true digital natives.[1]" The amount of information that people, specifically youth, are being exposed to daily (infoglut), can lead to physical and cognitive paralysis[2] which hinders the process of change.

While the official Ministry of Education mentions "thinking objectively and critically" as one of their objectives for the Jordanian school curricula, however, educational experts believe that it still limits students' thinking and promotes stereotypical thinking, and that it does not cope with the developments in the region and the world[3]. A lack of critical thinking skills makes it harder for young people to analyze the enormous amount of information they are exposed to and utilize them to create meaningful social change towards their desired goals.

Additionally, educational curricula in schools and universities would benefit from greater integration of soft skills development across all levels and fields, particularly through more practical classroom applications

Social Media: Navigating Infoglut and Digital Activism

Beyond formal education, youth turn to digital platforms to organize knowledge and mobilize. Social media has enabled people to unite around common causes

globally. On the one hand, this has helped young people expand their social capital through online networking. On the other hand, social media is an accessible space where young folk can voice their opinions about civic and political matters, not to mention the variety of formats in publishing content (e.g. blogs, videos, podcasts, etc.) has helped them find their favored format for engaging with and sharing political and civic material that pushes social change.

> *"The power and influence of 'youth network awareness' is the strongest driver of change as it can cross social and geographical borders and generate real momentum for change."*
>
> **Lab Participant**

Globalization: Balancing Opportunity and Cultural Identity

Discussions about social media cannot exist without conversations about globalization. Globalization has reshaped Jordanian society by accelerating cultural exchange, economic shifts, and digital activism. The spread of global movements has influenced local conversations on gender equality, labor rights, and social justice, with Jordanian youth engaging in international discussions through social media. However, it also raises questions about cultural identity and economic dependency. The challenge for Jordanian youth is to harness the benefits of globalization while preserving their local values and addressing its unintended consequences.

Social Capital: Wasta, Asabiya, and Tribal Influence

Finally, while social capital is sometimes seen as an effortless way to gain or bypass opportunities, it remains a crucial factor in enabling youth to become drivers of change. This was emphasized in a previous Policy Lab hosted by ARDD, where youth highlighted that *wasta*, often viewed negatively, can be beneficial when used objectively and fairly[4].

This is particularly significant given that young people in Jordan typically lack the financial capital that older generations possess. As a result, social capital may serve as their primary means of advancing and achieving the change they seek.

Tribal traditions play a powerful role in Jordanian society, where **Asabiya** (solidarity based on collective identity, as defined by Ibn Khaldun[5]) is a trusted and reliable

form of social capital and has historically driven momentous change. The extent of which tribalism affects political life in Jordan is significant however contested. Some believe that tribalism is the antithesis of democracy and that it hinders the liberalization of the political process[6]. On the other hand, there is another interesting perspective which states that inside the tribal system there is a democratic process that cannot be overlooked as the internal elections inside the tribe are on par with democratic ideals[7]. Nevertheless, the extent of the effect of tribalism on the participation of young folk needs further investigation, as the internal elections might not always include young voices.

Recommendations: Envisioning a Better Future

The recommendations for this policy brief stem from the social problems that young people cited as hurdles standing in the face of their vision for meaningful social change, for this vision to come true, we need a collaborative approach from different entities in the Jordanian society to be able to achieve the following goals:

1. Reforming Education to Build Critical Awareness and Navigate Infoglut

Issue: The education system limits critical thinking and fails to equip youth with the skills to process vast information (infoglut), hindering their ability to conceptualize and drive change.

Entities to Engage:

- **Ministry of Education:** Revise curricula to mainstream critical thinking, media literacy, and debate skills, aligning with global standards while preserving local values. Partner with youth organizations to co-design workshops on discerning misinformation.

- **Educational Institutions (Universities & Schools):** Establish "Change and Innovation Labs" where students collaborate on community projects with mentorship from academics and NGOs. Integrate global-local case studies into curricula to provide practical frameworks for change.

- **Civil Society Organizations:** Host media literacy campaigns and create youth-produced content (podcasts/videos) that translate global activism models into relatable Jordanian contexts.

2. Harnessing Digital Tools and Globalization for Local Impact

Issue: Youth struggle to harness the benefits of global connectivity and digital activism while preserving local cultural identity and navigating online misinformation.

Entities to Engage:

- **Ministry of Youth & Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs:** Fund digital activism initiatives, such as national platforms for youth-led civic campaigns, and support programs that teach strategic communication for navigating public discourse.

- **Tech Companies & Startups:** Develop Arabic-language tools to combat infoglut (e.g., fact-checking apps tailored to Jordanian social media trends) and sponsor innovation grants for youth-led solutions to local challenges.

- **International Partners (UN Agencies & Donors):** Fund hybrid programs that blend global best practices with local knowledge (e.g., digital activism training using Jordanian case studies) and support cross-border youth networks to share strategies.

3. Leveraging Social Capital for Inclusive Participation

Issue: Traditional structures like tribes hold significant social capital, but youth and women are seemingly excluded from internal decision-making processes, limiting their pathways to influence.

Entities to Engage:

- **Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs:** Institutionalize youth participation by mandating youth quotas in local councils and policy consultations to formalize their role in governance.

- **Civil Society Organizations:** Scale up Policy Labs to rural areas to ensure diverse representation. Host dialogues between elders and youth on reconciling tradition with progressive change and raise awareness among tribal leaders to publicly endorse youth and women in internal tribal elections.

- **Media Companies**: Collaborate on campaigns that highlight positive examples of intergenerational cooperation and youth leadership within traditional frameworks to build broader public legitimacy.

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

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