

YOUTH TO YOUTH:
UNLEASHING THE POTENTIAL OF YOUTH
ACTIVISM
AND BUILDING BRIDGES
ACROSS THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN

report

The IEMed Youth Forum aims at stimulating youth research, promoting peer-to-peer debates and exchanges, and building a community of young experts committed to Euro-Mediterranean affairs.

The third edition of the IEMed's Youth Forum was held on 17 June 2019 at Palau Macaya in Barcelona. It gathered over 40 young experts and researchers from 10 countries in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The aim of the forum was to examine online and offline youth activism in the Euro-Mediterranean region, identify common dynamics, and put forward recommendations on how youth-led movements could be further supported.

The Forum was composed of two parallel working groups, to analyze and debate youth online and offline activism, respectively, and a final closing session.



YOUTH OFFLINE ACTIVISM : SIMILARITIES AND DIVERGENCES ACROSS THE EURO-MED REGION

The last years have witnessed an increased offline activism and mobilisations of youth both in Europe and in the MENA region. The session aimed at analysing the patterns and the profile of mobilized youth across the Euro-Med, as well as identify the level of regional cooperation and connections between them. During the session, thirteen junior researchers discussed with their peers selected case studies of offline activism.

The session kicked off with an analysis of current mobilisations in **Morocco and Algeria**, and their comparison to 2010/2011 youth-led movements in Tunisia, and Egypt. In the case of Morocco, the constant marginalization and peripheralisation of the Rif region were one of the major triggers of the protests. Although forms of contentious performances and demonstrations in Rif were different, the protesters shared the same demands, such as civil and political rights, the recognition of Riffian Amazigh cultural particularism, and state investment to transform the region's economic structure.



Algeria's demonstrations are characterised by spontaneity and peaceful character, absence of clear leader, lack of affiliation to any political party, as well as a focus on political claims related to the change of regime. Those were

as well the characteristics of Egypt's and Tunisia's 2010/2011 mobilisations. Nevertheless, several differences can be also identified. Tunisia's civil society is heterogeneous, endowed of political pluralism where no single group dominated the process of negotiation between the political elite. On the eve of the uprisings, Tunisia's civil society's framework was better prepared to contribute to its democratic transition.

Egypt's civil society was constructed around religious ideas, relying on Islamist communal activism and charities through mosques or Islamist NGOs. The challenge of the Egyptian transition was based on the fact that a significant portion of Islamist organisations weren't committed to liberal democracy. Secular NGOs and human rights organisations were very elitist with weak ties with the society, which was evident in their trivial role during the uprisings and its aftermath.



The session then turned to a comparative analysis of **anti-austerity youth-led movements**, with a focus on Greece and Jordan. In both cases, disenfranchised youth advocated for reversing neoliberal economic policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and international investors. The SYRIZA party emerged as the main political force against austerity, increasing its share of the popular vote from 4.6% in October 2009 to 26.9% in June 2012, before eventually winning the elections of January 2015 with

36.3% of the vote. Whereas in Jordan, the King was forced to dismiss Prime Minister Hani Mulki, and the new government, headed by Omar Razzaz launched a “national dialogue” initiative that culminated in December 2018 with parliament adopting a large portion of the protester’s demands.

Gender, environment and urban-related activism were examined. Regarding the former, a participant observed that women’s movements in the MENA region aren’t necessarily pro-women’s rights, and their members aren’t necessarily feminists. In order for women’s movements to be successful, there is a need to promote the transformation in men’s practices towards gender justice. This can be achieved through an increased mobilisation of young men across the Euro-Mediterranean region to change masculine behaviour toward women.

After the Arab Spring, a number of **environmental movements** appeared in the Middle East, such as the anti-coal movement in Egypt, “We are not trash” movement in Morocco and the anti-fracking movement in Algeria. Those movements did not have only environmental implications, but also political and cultural. For instance, in Algeria, the environmental frame has been blended with the frames of marginalisation, new colonialism and social justice. In Morocco, the environmental movement shed light on political corruption. In Egypt, the movement has challenged the current capitalist system of production and emphasized the necessity of green transformation as a way to achieve both national sufficiency of energy and socio-economic justice. In addition to national movements, the Center of SwitchMed Programmes was also mentioned as an example of green-related activism under the shape of trainings, coaching and advisory services. As a result of technical assistance, 150 new green businesses have been created working closely with different types of stakeholders, all of them being actors of change: youth, general public, and policy makers.

Public **urban space** was identified as a medium for creating transformative social, political and cultural experiences. Youth involvement and engagement

in the urban context can act as an enabler to peace-building and social inclusion in fragile communities and can therefore have a direct impact on socio-economic development. To that extent, it is timely to prioritize peace-building efforts in a urban context, through turning to tools such as equity planning and cosmopolitan urbanism and to call upon youth to be key actors in providing creative, sustainable and innovative solutions to advance a sense of civic ownership.



Overall, the participants agreed that some similar patterns of youth-led mobilizations can be observed across the Euro-Med region including their tenuous political affiliation or ideological references, and the focus on practical and concrete goals.

Lastly, the participants discussed the perception of youth by the EU. According to a participant, the EU sees youth as an agent of democratisation and therefore a useful asset to promote its own foreign policy efforts. This perception, however, leads to misinterpretation of needs, priorities and aspirations of young people in Arab Mediterranean countries and minimizes the impact of youth cooperation policies or schemes implemented by EU institutions. To bridge the gap, there is a need to build a new approach to

socio-political dialogue and exchange between EU and Arab Mediterranean youth. In this regard, the Mediterranean Youth for Water (MedYWat) network was cited as an example of successful engagement of youth. The network, whose aim is to create and share knowledge, as well as build capacities to address water scarcity in the MENA region, has followed the “asset-based community development” (ABCD) approach, which means looking at communities through tangible assets and resources (and not through the needs). The fieldwork conducted by the network in the Occupies Territories of Palestine, consisting of monthly visits to refugee communities around the West Bank, broke physical barriers in offline activism.

YOUTH ONLINE ACTIVISM – A DRIVER OF CHANGE?

Social media have offered new platforms to interact, share ideas, engage and advocate for a common cause. Youth have constituted one of the most active community on online platforms. The session aimed to zoom into youth online activism, trying to identify common trends, major issues around which the online mobilisations are taking place, as well as factors enabling youth online activism to and preventing it from reaching its objectives. During the session, ten young researchers presented and debated with their peers their research on youth online activism-related cases studies. Digital technology and social platforms were analyzed both as a game changer and as a threat.

The first issue tackled was online **gender activism**. Although in many cases, such as in Spain, gender activism started on the streets and then moved to online, the internet enabled gender activists reach and mobilize bigger audiences. One of the factors behind this success was the use of popular and untechnical language in online campaigns. Online activism on gender issues, however, has not only been useful in calling for action but also in raising awareness. A clear example is the Egyptian “HarassMap” NGO, online mapping system of sexual harassment, whose objective is to promote zero-tolerance for gender-based violence. The platform is, however, used mostly in urban communities, and a culture of victim-blaming prevents it from reaching its full potential.



Zooming into the case of **Egypt**, it was noted that the lack of coverage by mainstream media of 2011 revolution led many Egyptian youngsters to turn to online media and in some cases to sarcasm as a way to challenge the system – through graffiti, satirical videos and comics. Some participants pointed out, however, that although social media were a tool and a source of information, they were not the trigger of the revolutions: in fact, only a small share of the Egyptian population had Facebook when the Revolution started in 2011.

In the case of **Tunisia** and **Morocco**, online platforms also gave “voice to the unvoiced” and were key to mobilize youth to challenge the state and work towards social change. An example given was an online boycott campaign titled “The People’s Voice” that took place in Morocco to protest against excessive prices, economic monopolies and social problems such as poverty and unemployment. Although the government and private companies ignored the demands, the campaign boosted public debates on those issues and aroused a feeling that young people can be the agents of change.

Turning to **Europe**, youth online activism related to European elections was discussed. Historically, young people’s participation in the elections was low, most of them being “weak abstainers” – meaning that they did not find the motivation to vote. Against this background, the European Parliament’s online

campaign ahead of the elections targeted youth through externalized approach. The campaign “This Time I’m Voting” involved youth “influencers” and celebrities, who discussed EU-related topics in their social media channels to encourage young people to vote. Although it is difficult to establish a direct causality, 2019 European elections were the ones with the highest turnout in two decades.



Environment-related youth online activism was examined through the example of “The Switchers”, an online community that aims to inspire green entrepreneurs in the Mediterranean region – in sectors ranging from sustainable farming and waste management to eco-tourism or sustainable fashion and cosmetics. A participant noted that when it comes to innovation and sustainability, the Northern shore of the Mediterranean has a lot to learn from the Southern shore.

In addition to the positive impact of social media on involving youth and promoting social engagement, the **downsides** of the digital tools were discussed. Many governments have been reported to use social networks to control societies, manipulate contents and spread fake news and videos, so called “deep fake”. Moreover, in some countries in the region activists were arrested for criticizing the regime on online platforms. In order to track the activists, phishing campaigns have been increasingly carried out by some regimes to steal personal information through deception and digital hacking. The campaigns targeted the activists in the diaspora and dissidents in exile.

Media censorship was also analyzed, through the example of **Lebanon**. According to a participant, although Lebanon is considered an advanced country in the region, ruling authorities and many political factions have not respected freedom of expression. More than 90 journalists, artists and activists have been prosecuted since 2016, and in 2018 alone at least 38 cases were brought over online posts. In order to be released from prison, the activists had to sign pledges that they would abstain from social media. On another note, Lebanon's "You Stink" campaign, launched online by civil society groups, succeeded in mobilizing masses, but failed in achieving its goals, partly due to the regime's repressive methods.



Summing up, according to the participants, the youth online activism in Europe and in the Southern Neighborhood differs in terms of issues raised. The topics raised by European young activists are mainly gender equality, climate change, the future of Europe and subjects related to the EU's political agenda such as migration policy and the EU's labor market. Whereas youth online activism in the Southern Mediterranean tends to focus on local issues related to urban development, 2010-2011 online activism focused on promoting political change. Moreover, there are significant differences regarding the dynamics and the success of youth activism. EU leaders and politicians are much more active on social media than the policy makers from the Southern Mediterranean. Hence, the creation of an online dialogue and interaction between the EU representatives and European citizens.

CLOSING PLENARY SESSION

In the closing session of the Youth Forum, the intersection between the online and the off-line world was highlighted.

The participants reflected on whether changes should always be originated at the “bottom” of the society or they could also come from the “top”. While it was stated that in the last European elections there was an innovative top-down approach in order to engage the youth to vote, some researchers pointed out that political activism should rather be promoted by people who are not involved in the process. Some participants highlighted the vital role of inclusiveness. They claimed that it should be acknowledged that in the Arab world there is a huge gap between people in power and people in the bottom of the society, and suggested that precisely the people in the bottom – especially youth – should promote a change.

Considering that one of the main challenges faced by youth in Mediterranean countries is unemployment, according to some young experts one of the first things that the youth activism should focus on was changing the economic structure in their respective countries. Nonetheless, one of the participants, referring to the priority given to improving economy over the political system, stated: “I would personally prefer having freedom than a job”.

The importance of a space to debate and the issue of awareness were deemed critical. In order to bring people to call for changes, there is a need to increase political awareness. Social media can be a useful tool to promote that, although they can also become a dangerous gadget to manipulate people. This is why in order to have productive activism it is vital to combat fake news.

The following recommendations on how youth-led activism online and offline could be further supported were put forward:

1. The youth should be thought of as an asset rather than people who need

help. Thus, the concept of “giving voice” to youth should be replaced by the concept of “giving space” to make their voice heard.

2. Collaboration between public institutions and youth-led movements should be strengthened and streamlined through platforms of exchange and dialogue. Punctual initiatives as policy makers-youth forums serves as a point of departure, but the continuity of cooperation should be secured. The long-term objective of such dialogue is to create safe spaces for exchange and interaction aiming to synchronize EU’s youth cooperation priorities with the needs and priorities of young people in Arab Mediterranean countries. In order for the dialogue to be productive, the following elements should be considered: inclusivity and diversity when choosing participants, reaching (in)formal education to access youth, as well as adopting mid and long-term set of goals. It is crucial to establish an evaluation process with special focus on the impact of such dialogue at local, regional and national levels.
3. Youth engagement can vary between neighbouring countries and within communities. Understanding the perspectives of activist groups and the differences between them is vital to design tailor-made support and assistance. Thus, there is a need to support evidence-based research on new types of youth activism. Young researchers, well connected to local communities, can play a key role in bringing closer various aspects of youth-led movements and be a bridge between the activists and the policy makers.
4. Youth-led movements success stories should be promoted and disseminated in order to mainstream good practices across the region. Online and offline exchanges platforms could be created to foster the exchange of lessons learned. EU Delegations could play a role in that.
5. Environmental activism and aspirations for green transformation in the Southern Mediterranean is increasingly gaining ground. The EU should engage in a genuine partnership with climate-related youth led movements, and allocated more resources to help them increase

awareness at a local level. The final goal is to maximize the use of renewables, and make the Southern Mediterranean societies more resilient to future climate shocks.

6. There is a need to adopt new laws and amend the existing ones in order to keep up with the pace of social media development and secure the safety of online activists. In this vein, the EU member states should vet procedures for digital surveillance software and hardware exports from the EU as well as implement digital training for activists from the Southern Mediterranean region residing in Europe.
7. To support the work of youth activists in navigating in complex socio-political environments, the EU should urge Southern Mediterranean countries to repeal laws that criminalize criticism, to clearly define insults, and to ensure freedom of information against crackdown and censorship.
8. Media and digital literacy, as well as specific courses on fake news should be integrated in school curricula across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Photo credits: Nicolás Carvalho Ochoa