

Report

Regional workshop and multistakeholder dialogue on intergenerational dialogue

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Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa



Executive Summary

Between the 7th and 9th of June 2023, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa (*The Dialogue Institute*) conducted an interactive workshop focusing on intergenerational dialogue. The workshop hosted 19 young peacebuilders from the [MENA for Youth, Peace and Security Coalition](#).

Through exploratory and reflective sets of conversations and interactive exercisers the workshop aimed at exploring and co-creating knowledge on what intergenerational dialogue is, what it entails and what associated promising practices are. This included discussions on what the generational differences and gaps are in the MENA-region, what consequences they have on opportunities for young and old alike to participate across societies and how the gaps interlink with conflict dynamics. The role of dialogue between generations as a method to bridge these gaps and mitigate potential conflicts aggravated or caused by generational inequity was discussed in depth as well. The workshop included institutional capacity-strengthening sessions, led by the coalition, during which issues related to the organisational structure and strategic and operational plans of the network were addressed.

The workshop also aimed at promoting dialogue as such between on one hand young women and men and on the other hand policy- and decision-makers. For that reason, a multistakeholder meeting and intergenerational dialogue dinner was organized as part of the workshop. During this event the young participants got an opportunity to dialogue with representatives from the United Nations, European Union, Jordanian and Swedish ministries and government agencies and civil society. Some 50 guests participated, incl. the H.E. the Minister of Youth of Jordan, H.E. the Director General of Global Affairs at the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ambassador of Sweden to Jordan. The meeting enabled important conversations between people of different backgrounds and walks of life and also generated hands-on experiences and promising practices on how to carry out an intergenerational dialogue.

Based on the collective insights gained and lessons learnt during the workshop and dialogue, the participants identified a set of recommendations on what they, from their perspective, think is important to consider when planning, facilitating, and partaking in an intergenerational dialogue. These include, among others:

- Prepare both sides for the dialogue by e.g., let the participants **reflect around their own age-based biases** and by agreeing on a **code of conduct** for how to ensure a safe space for both young and old.
- **Seek common grounds** by focusing on what the similarities between the generations are rather than the differences.
- **Practice active listening.**
- **Create safe a space for all and promote inclusivity.**

Background

A cornerstone for reaching durable peace, security and development is to ensure that people of different genders, backgrounds, identities and ages have the same rights, tools, and opportunities, to participate in and influence governance and peacebuilding processes. Despite this there are many gaps between the younger and older generations in terms of e.g., societal inclusion, participation, and decision-making power at all levels of societies.

Dialogue between generations could be an important tool for lessening these gaps and for achieving greater intergenerational equity. In recent years, a growing number of international and regional actors, especially working on the Youth, Peace, and Security agenda, have started to bring young peacebuilders and duty-bearers together in so called “intergenerational dialogues”. While many of these efforts have provided young women and men with an opportunity to voice their concerns, priorities and recommendations, there is a growing criticism from youth movements that despite these meetings many young people do not feel listened to, nor do they feel that their input will be acted upon. In some cases, both youth and older have witnessed that these events have rather sparked irritation between the groups as both “sides of the table” have felt accused, unheard, and/or even disrespected. Hence, the practical know-how and capacity of actors at all levels of society to create an enabling environment for such dialogue practice needs to be further developed and strengthened.

Against this backdrop, and upon recommendations from previous activities, the Dialogue Institute has since the beginning of 2023 engaged in a “knowledge-creating” process, together with different actors, for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of what makes dialogue across generations meaningful for both the older and younger generations. The goal of the process is to develop a simple ‘guidance note’ that can support actors in planning, facilitating, and partaking in intergenerational dialogues. The three-day workshop and the multistakeholder meeting and dialogue dinner was implemented as part of this process.

*“All generations are part of the problem.
They therefore also must be part of the solution”.*

Summary of key discussion points and takeaways

During the workshop and the multistakeholder dialogue meeting the main questions addressed and discussed were:

1. What are the generational differences and gaps in the MENA-region and how do they interlink with conflict dynamics and aspects of inclusive participation?
2. What makes a dialogue intergenerational and how can it serve as a tool for bridging gaps and mitigating conflicts that are based on generational inequity?
3. What are promising practices for enabling dialogue between generations that becomes meaningful for young and old alike?

Below follows a summary of the key points, takeaways and lessons learnt per question:

1. Understanding generational gaps

What defines a generation is not only age but joint lived experiences.

During the first day of the workshop, the participants explored the main factors that they believed had influenced their own generation as young adults in the MENA-region, as well as factors which they perceived had formed the identity of older generations. Even if the similarity of age was referenced to as a basis for generational identity, other defining factors were emphasized as more formative. In this new technology, digitalization and the social media landscape were highlighted, as was the Arab Spring and its aftermath. Political and economic instability caused by wars, revolutions, coups etc. were perceived by the young workshop participants to have shaped the older generation.



Differences in generational identities may lead to age-based stereotypes that complicates communication and gaps that hinders inclusion

The participants recognized that the different experiences of growing up between the younger and older generations have led to variations in values, behaviours, thoughts, beliefs, language, and cultural expressions. When being tasked to describe the differences between “young” and “old”, the younger generation was described in terms of open-mindedness, solution-oriented, innovative, flexible and drivers of diversity and inclusion. In contrast, the older generation was describes as adhering to social norms and traditions as well as being cautious, fearful, protective, and conservative.

When being asked - in the next step of the exercise - to reflect around what the results would have been if carried out by older people, the outcome significantly changed. The older generation was then described with more positive epithets such as wise, experienced, and rational, whereas the younger generation was described in much more negative terms, including irrational, conflict seeking and impatient. Based on this outcome, the presence and effects of age-based stereotypes, biases, and prejudices that young and old hold about each other were subsequently discussed. It was concluded that stereotypes do not only complicate communication between generations but can also lead to gaps in society in terms of inclusions, equity, and access to decision-making power.

“We should remember that we one day we will be old. How will we then look upon and interact with the young generation?”

The generational gaps in the MENA-region are widespread and closely interlinked with power-structures based on age.

In the discussion concerning generational gaps and inequity in the MENA-region it was concluded that gaps are present across societies and sectors and that they are closely interlinked with power-structures based on age. From a youth perspective, the group specifically highlighted the age-based gaps related to political participation. This as the negative effects of traditional stereotypes about youth, such as being politically disengaged, violent and/or unexperienced, is perceived to be most visible within this sector and that consequently the *“decision-making power and political sphere is colonised and reserved by the older people”*.

Even if most examples given on generational inequity and gaps were examples in which the younger generation is disfavoured, it was also recognized that there are certain sectors in which older people are being marginalised and where stereotypes about them have an amplifying effect on their exclusion. One example of this is the STEM-sector (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) in which the older generation is lagging behind in terms of education and employment and are ascribed epithets such as outdated, unteachable, technologically illiterate, and slow.



Some generational gaps are more conflict prone than others and addressing them may be dangerous for young people

A key point and concern raised by the participants connected to the discussion on generational gaps was that certain sectors and/or issues are more sensitive and conflict prone than others from a generational perspective. One example mentioned was policy making around climate security and environmental degradation. This since there is - due to the nature of the challenge - an intrinsic generational inequality and combativeness. Whereas certain groups of engaged youth may feel betrayed, angry, hopeless, and robbed of their future due to the past behaviours of the older generations and the lack of stronger policy commitments by today's decision-makers, the older generation may feel accused and disrespected and that their backgrounds are not understood – leading to a defensiveness that complicates dialogue.

Other areas that were raised as more conflict prone were the political and security sectors. Connected to this, a sincere discussion started in the group around the risks involved with trying to, as a young person in the MENA-region, stand up for one's rights. A couple of the participants shared their personal experiences from been subject to humiliation and violence by e.g., security forces and other bore witness of how peers had been detained, arrested, and even killed for either engaging in issues related to human rights or when speaking-up against or protesting unlawful practises in society. The group underlined that given how complex these gaps are and how sensitive it may be to question decision-makers any kind of dialogue attempt aimed at mitigating these inequalities requires careful navigation and a “do-no-harm” approach.

“What room is there for sincere dialogue when our lives are being threatened by those we should dialogue with?”

2. Understanding intergenerational dialogue

During the second day of the workshop, the participants focused on exploring the meaning of intergenerational dialogue. The exploratory conversations were framed by a presentation by the Dialogue Institute and enriched by the participants positive and negative experiences from partaking in previous dialogue events, including the multistakeholder meeting and dialogue that the Institute arranged as part of the workshop.



Dissimilar understandings of what an intergenerational dialogue is create different expectations of approaches to and attitudes in a dialogue - which can undermine or even defeat the purpose of the dialogue

The conversations started with several participants stating that it is rather difficult to pinpoint what makes a dialogue intergenerational and how it differs from other types of dialogue. It was highlighted that stakeholders seem to hold rather different viewpoints on what constitutes an intergenerational dialogue, what the purpose of it is and accordingly what is expected in terms of their interaction. Building on this, several participants in the group raised their experience of being called to “intergenerational dialogues”, only to realize upon arrival to such events that what it really was about was more of youth consultations. Many of them raised how they would have taken time of work, travel and make other sacrifices to be able to go to these events, only to be disappointed when they were in the meetings and found out that the purpose never was to engage in a mutual dialogue.

“In order to know what intergenerational dialogue is, we also need to understand what it is not”.

Participants acknowledged that the tendency of calling youth consultations for intergenerational dialogues is a problem, as it risks diluting the meaning of dialogue as such and to create a wrong set of expectations. The participants gave further examples of “dialogue situations” arranged by both the international community and national actors in which this lack of conceptual consensus and clarity on the “rules of the game” has led to frustration and irritation between parties – causing the conversation to halter or even diverge into something else.

As part of this, a few participants also shared experiences from being shouted at or subjected to master suppression techniques, such as ridiculing and infantilization, by older people when trying to address or raising their concerns of not feeling that they are partaking in the dialogues on equal terms. Thus, the group underlined the need of a joint understanding of what intergenerational dialogue actually is and entails so to manage expectations and find common grounds in how to actually carry it out – otherwise it can rather become a harmful practise deepening generational gaps.

In comparison to these kinds of veiled consultation events, the participants highlighted several aspects that they had appreciated with the dialogue event arranged by the Dialogue Institute. To begin with, the overall structure of the event with a formal opening and networking session, followed by a more informal roundtable dinner setting for the actual dialogue was emphasized. This set-up was perceived to have facilitated a more conducive environment and candid conversations between the parties with less “positioning”. In particular, the sharing of a meal together was something that many of the stakeholder representatives had mentioned during the dialogue as something very conducive. In addition, the well thought through seating arrangements with diverse representation in terms of age and “seniority”, gender, backgrounds, professional roles etc. at each table, as well as having a moderator facilitating and (when needed) guiding and safeguarding the conversation and the interplay from stereotypical lines of arguments or biased behaviours was also highlighted as very positive.



The purpose of intergenerational dialogue is not limited to increased youth participation

Concerning the purpose of intergenerational dialogue, a candid debate aroused around for “what it is” and for “whom it serves”. Some participants argued that the sole purpose of intergenerational dialogue is to increase youth (political) participation, whereas others argued that the purpose of it can be multiple and not even youth focused.

As part of this discussion participants pointed to a tendency to apply intergenerational dialogue only within the framework of the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agenda. While the participants stressed the instrumental and intrinsic value of dialogues across generations in the operationalizing the YPS-agenda, they also underlined that it would be a lost opportunity to limit the practise to only YPS related issues. They argued that bridging of generational gaps is necessary and important for the achievement also of other agendas, such as Agenda 2030 and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, as well as for the social cohesion in societies at large.

Ultimately, the group agreed that, while it from a youth perspective and their organisational priorities, may be most relevant to engage in intergenerational dialogues that aim at increasing youth (political) participation and influence, this does not mean that that is or should be the only reason for carrying out and engaging in intergenerational dialogues. In fact, depending on the issue or context at hand, there may be instances where the purpose of it should be achieving greater inclusion of elderly people or simply to just listen to each other’s different life experiences.

Conclusion: intergenerational dialogue is a method and a tool in its own right

To this end the group concluded that intergenerational dialogue should be understood as a method and a tool that facilitates conversations between generations for the purposes of fostering increased understanding, challenge stereotypes, building trust and reconcile potential grievances. They underlined the importance of regarding it as a flexible tool that can be applied across various contexts, sectors, and issues to address and potentially find solutions to diverse challenges that both young and old experience.

“Generational equity requires that the stereotypical narrative about young and old alike is changed and that power structures based on age are being addressed. This can be achieved through dialogue across generations – but only if such a dialogue does not turn into two separate monologues.”



3. Promising practices and recommendations

During the last day and based on the collective insights gained and lessons learnt during the two first workshop days, participants identified a set of recommendations on what they, from their perspective, think is important to consider when planning, facilitating, and partaking in an intergenerational dialogue:

1. **Prepare both 'sides':** This includes, in particular, support participants in 1) analysing the topic for the dialogue from a generational perspective, i.e. to help the participant understand what and why there are differences, grievances and disagreements; 2) agreeing on the what an intergenerational dialogue is and what it is not to create a common understanding of expectations; and 3) reflecting around age based stereotypes and prejudice and how the holding of them affect ones possibility of engaging in an intergenerational dialogue in a meaningful way and; 4) agreeing on a code of conduct with a focus on how to behave in order to ensure a safe space for both young and old.
2. **Seek common grounds to strengthen the sense of belonging:** It can be helpful to start off an intergenerational dialogue by letting the parties reflecting around what the generational similarities are rather than what the differences are. Letting the participants e.g., share a memory from their childhood and to reflect around their futures (what are their hopes and fears) so to recall that all have been young and that one also will age can foster empathy across generational lines.

“What we have in common is that all old have been young and that all young will grow older. Let’s build on that.”

3. **Practice active listening:** This means both to “*not to interfere or keep quiet when the younger or older person is talking*”, but also to absorb what is being said and shared, as well as the practice of reflecting back, e.g., through positive body language, that one has listened and, through e.g., posing questions, that one is willing to continue to listen.
4. **Be mindful of one’s own age-based biases.** This includes reflecting around one’s own potential biases about younger respectively older people and to e.g., pose questions rather than just assuming things about others. It is recommended to have a designated person in the dialogue that pays specific attention to the interplay between the parties so “safeguard” and environment free from age-based prejudices.
5. **Create safe a space for all:** The basis for creating a safe space lies in the preparations of the intergeneration dialogue (see recommendation 1). It is important to understand the potential reservations and fears of the parties and to agree on a set of guidelines that frame expected group behaviours and to have someone assigned to ensure that participants abide to these guidelines.

From a youth perspective it is particularly important to acknowledge that it may be both risky and dangerous for youth to express certain views, especially when dialoguing with powerholders. Due to this there may be instances where it is preferable to harness the power of technology to provide platforms avenues and for individuals of different generations to anonymously engage in intergenerational dialogues.

6. **Promote inclusivity:** Participants underscored the importance of including a wide range of age groups in the dialogue to facilitate diverse perspectives, wise decision-making, and the exchange of opinions and ideas across generations and groups of people. This involves recognizing the diversity within generations and ensuring that voices from all backgrounds are heard and valued. It also includes acknowledging that it is not only a question about “young” and “old” as there are more generations than two and not all identify themselves as either “young” or “old”.

"It is crucial to integrate the novel viewpoints and distinctive life experiences of different generations into the dialogue, fostering a rich exchange of ideas and perspectives."



Many thanks to all participants for contributing by sharing insights, experiences, and recommendations!