



Report from the MENA hub session during the 2020 CSO Forum:

The CSO forum is an annual meeting between the Swedish government and civil society, this year under the theme youth participation, informal movements and networks, and shrinking civic space. The Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted the MENA hub session, focusing on young people's participation, including political participation. This is the written report from the MENA hub session, including challenges, opportunities, and key recommendations.

Challenges:

- **Lack of hope:** The hope that young people felt during the Arab uprisings has for many changed to despair, in light of high unemployment, lack of reforms, limited access to public political roles and continued exclusion from policy shaping.
- **The way politics is run is neither attractive nor accessible to young people:** Public political processes continue to be dominated by parties that reflect a patriarchal societal environment, often led by middle-aged or elderly men. Lack of platforms for meetings and interactions between youth and politicians, and legal, political and societal obstacles prevent youth to engage. Furthermore, sectarian, exclusive and conservative systems are difficult to change/join, and not attractive to young people. This leads to lack of trust in politicians and political processes. In the meanwhile, young people participate in protests and remain engaged in civil society, despite risks and intimidation, and a shrinking civic space.
- **High entries to formal decision-making:** the minimal age to vote and run for office are, in many countries in the MENA region, too high, as is the financial cost for running a campaign.
- **Lack of access to resources and opportunities:** Many participants pointed to clear links between economic and political participation. The lack of political participation and engagement of youth has to be understood in light of their social situation. It is therefore essential to address economic and educational exclusion, high unemployment rates and the lack of equal access to quality education.
- **Instability and conflicts:** Given the political situation in many of the countries in the region, several participants raised concerns over fear of occupation and/or insecurity. They pointed to lack of movement, lack of safe spaces, lack of protection and lack of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.
- **Lack of political "tool box":** "*You can't demand what you don't know*". Participants pointed to a lack of knowledge, training and tools to understand political processes, including negotiations. They pointed to a need to create understanding of the basic concepts and for capacity building to give young people better tools to participate. Many donors and

international organisations publish their materials only in English and were urged to produce more materials also in Arabic.

Opportunities and recommendations:

Participants stressed the need to work simultaneously at different levels, at an institutional and legal level, and on issues that concern people's everyday lives (livelihoods, access to jobs, education, and building confidence in the grassroots), to create hope, link political and economic inclusion, lower barriers to decision-making, and ensure equal access and opportunities.

They recommended to:

- **Ensure a holistic perspective with focus on expanding access - politically, socially, economically.**
- **Link between political and economic inclusion:** Be mindful of the links between political participation to economic governance, and ensure access to dignified jobs and livelihoods, access to education and housing, etc.
- **Bottom-up and top-down:** Support grass roots mobilisation, while pushing for inclusive and democratic governance processes.
- **Look to intersections:** Work in the intersection of **culture** (making the community aware that they have a **right to participate**. It's not about allowing something, it's about upholding rights), **practices** (ensuring that inclusion is an essential, and should be practiced), and **policies** (donors, international organisations should put more pressure on MENA countries to uphold inclusive participation).
- **Political advocacy:** Encourage the international community/governments/donors to put more pressure on governments to adopt laws and policies that would allow more participation of youth in politics and society. More concretely there was a wish that Sweden and other countries advocate for platforms for civil society to express their political opinions and for conducive environments for youth and civil society to act and express themselves.
- **Look beyond survival:** Donors must focus on issues beyond food, aid and relief. There was an expectation that donors focused more on political participation of youth, capacity building and digital inclusion.
- **Mainstreaming:** Mainstream youth involvement in development cooperation, in the same way that gender is streamlined.
- **Start young:** Invest in child participation, child rights advocacy in their programming, as well as to support and encourage events in which children are enabled to speak to decision makers in countries such as Sweden and in international forums.
- **Influential actors:** Explore possibilities to engage with different influential actors, incl. religious leaders and faith actors, to promote engagement of young voices.
- **Investments:** Invest in youth as agents of change - and do it sincerely. The message was: *"Be patient and look beyond risk parameters in development cooperation and give grassroots youth organisations a chance"*.

- **Empower, engage and mobilize youth:** Contribute to creating platforms for youth to express themselves. Swedish development cooperation funding should be channelled to these spaces.
- **Capacity building and leadership trainings:** Support should be given to organisations working at grassroots levels and to concrete initiatives aiming at meaningfully educating “new political generations” and building their confidence. Leadership and negotiation trainings were mentioned as prioritised areas and there was a call for providing more materials in Arabic. Another idea was to look at mentorship/empowerment opportunities within and between CSOs.
- **Exchanges:** Encourage and facilitate sharing of experiences between organisations, stakeholders and regions.
- **Entrepreneurship:** Support young entrepreneurs and promote entrepreneurship, together with civil society. Entrepreneurship provides an opportunity for young people to create jobs for themselves and their peers.