Yemen Polling Center
المركز اليمني لقياس الرأي العام

Policy Brief

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Supporting Youth Activism in Yemen: Challenges, Priorities and Needs

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SUMMARY

The term "Independent Youth Movement" (IYM) describes young people in the broader age range between 18 and 38, who share a similar mindset demanding political reform and democracy.

During the 2011 protests it was widely perceived that the youth were the only hope for real political change in the country. In contrast, many believed that established political parties were hijacking the revolution for their own political gains.

Youth activists find that the priorities of the Yemeni government should be the economy and public services (25.5%), as well as security (19.7%).

The majority of activists (33.3%) prefer CSOs as a framework for their activism.

In addition to a general lack of awareness in the communities (10.1%), most youth activists state that they lack financial resources (54.3%). Others stated that they lack information (8.2%) and training (6.4%).

This policy brief is the result of a survey conducted by the European Union funded 'Civil Society Forum Project' implemented by the Yemen Poling Center (YPC) in 2012. The aim of this survey was to evaluate the needs and priorities of politically active youth in Yemen. This brief is addressed to international donor organizations and civil society organizations (CSOs), and makes recommendations on the ways these activists can be best supported.[1]

The youth as a driving force behind political change

Starting in late 2010, the Middle East witnessed popular uprisings and protests that called for both political reforms and the removal of authoritarian regimes. In Yemen, just like other countries, these protests were largely driven by young people who suffered from economic and political exclusion. While the United Nations defines 'youth' (shabab in Arabic) as an age group ranging from 15 to 24 years, in the context of the Yemeni 'youth revolution', the term became more than a label simply referring to a group of similar aged youngsters. The vibrant Yemeni youth movement, or more specifically the Independent Youth Movement (IYM), utilized two key criteria when identifying who these young people were. Anyone who was between the ages of 18 and 38 and shared a similar mindset that demanded political reform and democracy was considered shabab.[2]

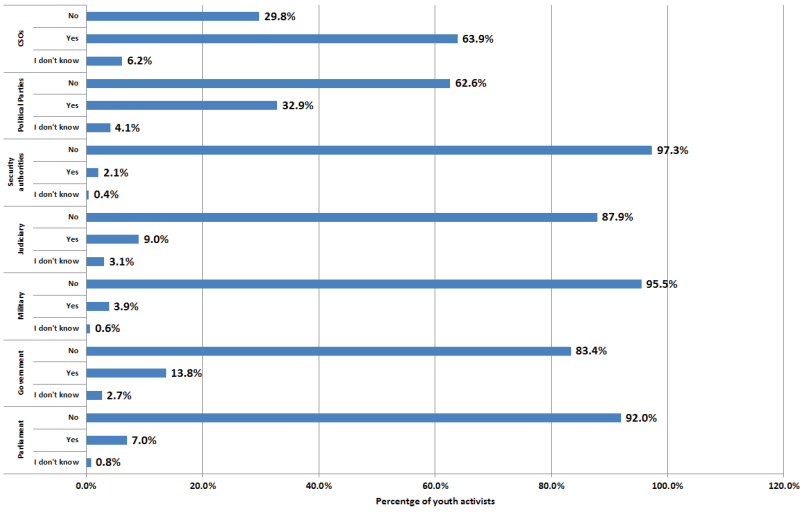
[1] YPC (2013): Capacities and Needs Assessment Survey: Youth. Available online at: http://yemenpolling.org/Projects-en/Needs_and_Capacity_Assessment_Survey_CSO's_and_Youth_Activists_Jul-Aug_2013.zip

[2] Alwazir, Atiaf (2012): "Youth" Inclusion in Yemen: a Necessary Element for Success of Political Transition. Arab Reform Initiative.

During the 2011 protests it was widely perceived by the general population and local as well as international media that the youth were the only hope for real political change in the country. Indeed, 95.3% of the surveyed activists believe that democracy can be realized in Yemen. In contrast, many believed that established political parties were hijacking the revolution for their own political gains.[3] While individual members of the movement were allowed to be affiliated with a political party, the movement itself represented a broader effort to challenge the traditional political powers. The influences of these powers were manifest in the existing political parties, namely the General People's Congress and Islah party.

With the traditional powers dominating the negotiation process, the signing of the GCC Initiative introduced a transitional period with the goal of stabilizing the country. Sadly, the demands of the youth were largely excluded from this agreement. Since then the movement has had difficulties in making their voices heard in the political sphere.[4] Considering the importance the IYM had during the 2011 protests, and their potential for being real agents for political change, supporting the movement and its individual activists is important for the future development of the country. Part of the political stabilization of the country rests on the prospect of the youth becoming effective agents of political change.

Graph 32: In your opinion, do these institutions respect democracy?



[3] See for e.g.: Al-Shamahi, Abubakr (2011, September 23): Yemen's young people are the country's brightest hope. The Guardian. Available online: http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/23/yemen-young-people-youth-movement; and Root, Tik (2011): Yemen's youth: the best hope for democracy. Aljazeera. Available online: http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/08/201181514211383535.html.

[4] Alwazir, Atiaf (2013): Yemen's Independent Youth and their Role in the National Dialogue Conference. Triggering a Change in Political Culture. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik.

Transparency and legitimacy as corner stone of democracy

The political changes that occurred after 2011 did not have a positive impact on the daily lives of youth, particularly in regards to electricity, jobs, basic services, infrastructure and the humanitarian situation. Given that youth activists find that the priorities of the Yemeni government should be the economy and public services (25.5%), as well as security (19.7%), the current lack of success in these areas by the government has resulted in further distrust in the government. They perceive state institutions as entities that largely disrespect the ideals of democracy. Moreover, more than 80% of the activists find that state institutions, particularly the security apparatus, are the main violators of human rights in the country.

International donors and CSOs should not simply focus their efforts on improving government service provisions. Before implementing projects in these areas the perception of these institutions should be taken into account. Instead, they should focus on projects that enhance levels of transparency among state institutions while creating communication channels between them and the youth. Such efforts will enhance their legitimacy among the youth.

Youth focus on raising awareness in communities

As many youth activists have high levels of distrust towards state institutions, the majority of them focus their activism on the community. Seeing themselves as a link between the state and the society at large, 29.6% are active in areas related to advocacy and raising awareness. Interestingly, only 14% are active in the political sphere. 10.1% of them believe that a general lack of political awareness in the society at large is keeping them from succeeding in their goals. This is why they focus their efforts mainly on local communities instead of state institutions. As they raise awareness, youth activists seek to widely enhance political engagement among the society.

Regarding human rights, 89.7% of the interviewed activists stated that they are a priority. Freedom of expression (28.3%), the right to a dignified life (23.2%), and the right to education (18.1%) were among the most important issues in this area. They believe that raising awareness among the community, along with general education, is the best way to support human rights in Yemen.

While 37.5% of the activists state that they strive for the completion the revolutionary agenda (the overthrow of the Saleh regime, the removal of his loyalists from state institutions, and building a modern civil state), they would rather follow a bottom-up approach in their activism. They want to help people become both more aware of their rights and interested in political change. While local communities are often neglected by large scale development projects, the activities of youth activists are worth supporting. They have both the ability to reach out at the grassroots level and the advantage of being able to make an immediate impact on their own communities.

CSOs as the best framework for youth activism

In addition to a general lack of awareness in the communities (10.1%), most youth activists state that they lack financial resources (54.3%). Others stated that they lack information (8.2%) and training (6.4%). During the 2011 protests a major challenge that the IYM faced was a general lack of organization and coordination. We believe that efforts aimed at helping the youth organize themselves should be supported.

To enhance the youth activists' ability to mobilize support, it is important for international donors and CSOs to support grassroots initiatives rather than following a top-down approach. Most activists claim that a general lack of financial resources is the main reason why they are unable to attain their goals. While they should be provided with the necessary levels of expertise that will help them mobilize financial resources for themselves, it is important to likewise provide training on non-financial resources which could further enable youth activists. In addition, activists need to be made aware of non-financial incentives so that they can encourage local communities to engage with politics.

21.6% viewed political parties to be the best framework for their activism. Still, the majority of interviewees (33.3%) preferred CSOs as a framework for their activism. Therefore, assistance should be given both to efforts that enable youth participation in CSOs and political parties, and efforts aimed towards establishing youth CSOs and political parties by activists themselves.

Youth activists seek assistance of CSOs, but see room for improvement

A striking 43.3% of youth activists are not aware of any CSOs working in the field of democracy and 16.8% do not know of any organization working in the field of human rights.[5] More than 60% of them claim to have taken part in activities (i.e. training seminars and conferences) that were organized by CSOs who do specialize in these fields. Subsequently, they see themselves as more knowledgeable in these areas. Roughly 40% stated that they had not benefited from educational opportunities at all. Clearly there is room for improvement. Existing CSOs should specifically focus on helping activists become aware of their organizational purpose and function.

Likewise, youth activists see that there is a lot of room for improvement among CSOs. Only 44.6% rated the ones working in the field of democracy as effective organizations. 55.3% rated the ones working in the field of human rights as 'very or somewhat' effective.

[5] The most known CSOs being the US National Democratic Institute and the National Organization for Defending Rights and Freedom.

Training to multiply outcome and ensure sustainability

Youth activists ranked 'training' fourth among their needs. On topics related to democracy, only 27.5% claimed that they have a 'high' level of knowledge. There is a need for them to improve their knowledge and skills in this area. This would help them become multipliers among members of their communities, especially their peers. The provision of training is a good entry point for outside agencies and local CSOs that desire to strengthen the youth movement as they strive to impact the political status quo.

Given that youth activists lean towards a CSO model of activism, training efforts should focus on helping them learn how to establish, organize, and run a CSO themselves. Training workshops related to organizational development, project cycles, project management, and accounting would be very useful to them. These efforts should focus on building their advocacy skills. This will help them be more effective as they raise awareness in their communities about issues concerning democracy and human rights.

Because the majority of youth activists (over 50%) use the internet as their primary resource, an effective way to support them could be through online tools. For example, webinars are a simple and effective way to provide inexpensive training to a large number of people. Similarly, the internet is a place where youth from all over the globe are able to meet and discuss topics related to democracy and political advocacy. Television is also an effective way to reach youth. 43.9% of the interviewed activists stated that it is the primary place where they hear the news.

Recommendations:

- In order to generate, and enhance youths' confidence in state institutions, direct communication channels should be established.
  - This can be achieved by establishing youth councils and pressure groups that stay in close contact with both state institutions and local communities.
  - Efforts that enable youth activists to act as government watchdogs, especially on its security institutions, should be supported.
  - If international donors and CSOs give both sides incentives, then it is possible that they could act as a link between governmental institutions and youth activists. If an international organization already has a positive relationship with the government, then they would be well positioned to support efforts that create more cooperation between the two. Likewise, international organizations should organize networking events for politically active youth and Yemeni politicians to establish contacts and make links.
- Projects focusing on state institutions should have inbuilt components that enhance their levels of transparency. In addition, the outcomes of these projects should be publicized in effective manners among the youth.

- State institutions should be encouraged to let media organizations review their activities, especially those that utilize the internet and television.
- To better publicize the sucesses and failures of projects aimed at enhancing the transparency of state institutions, international donors and CSOs should seek to create a central hub of information that informs the public on ongoing and concluded projects.

• Given that youth activists want to raise awareness among their own communities, their activism should be seen as a way to gain access to people at a very local level. Activities related to organizing these groups should be supported.

- Existing grassroots initiatives should be identified and supported, especially in rural areas.
- They should be provided with training that helps them identify non-financial resources that could already be available to them.
- These groups should be encouraged to organize themselves by building upon the values and goals that they already share. In order to achieve this, CSOs and donor organizations should gain an intimate knowledge of the common challenges that their local communities experience. The community itself will be more likely to support a project if it is both addressing a real need, and its outcomes are aimed at achieving an immediate and positive effect on the community.

• Efforts to support projects that better enable youth participation in existing CSOs and political parties should be supported. Furthermore, the establishment of new CSOs and political parties by youth activists themselves should be supported as well.

- International donors and CSOs should focus on efforts that help youth participate in existing political parties. Facilitating conferences that bring together both the youth and leadership from within a political party can do this.
- Active youth from various political parties and regions, including worldwide, should be brought together in ways that help them exchange ideas and learn from each other, especially in areas related to how they engage in their respective political parties.
- Both new and older CSOs that were established by participants of the IYM should be supported.

• Existing CSOs should be more effective in how they educate the public about their function, work, and project outcomes.

- This can be done through the media, including the internet, television, and radio stations. It can also be done through CSO networks.

• Training in the following fields should be provided to the youth:

- Organizational development.
- Project management and project cycle.
- Advocacy.

- Policy evaluation.
- Effective use of media.
- Inexpensive and creative ways to activiate and mobilze the community for political and social activism.

• Training can be provided through the internet as it is inexpensive and highly accessible to a larger number of people.

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ABOUT YPC

The Yemen Polling Center (YPC), with its unparalleled experience and expertise, sets the highest professional standards for public opinion, market, and social science research and analysis. At the forefront of social science research, YPC partners with local and international organizations to research and advise on Yemen's most pressing issues.

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