



**POLICY DIALOGUE REPORT**

# **Libyan Civil Society and Youth Programming: Promoting Economic, Political, and Social Integration**

**Policy Dialogue Report**



**Arab  
Reform  
Initiative**

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# Introduction

In the wake of 10 years of conflict, youth in Libya today face unprecedented challenges. Access to education and the pursuit of higher diplomas has for many been cut short due to instability and pressures to generate income. Livelihood options and decent work opportunities are in short supply as the country's economy has been in free fall. And most face psychological trauma as a result of violent conflict. Given the context of seemingly intractable war and the lack of legitimacy of the peacebuilding process in many eyes, youth in Libya today are not so much planning for their futures but are rather in a holding pattern, concentrated on securing present needs, with little optimism for their prospects in the future.

Added to this, Libyan institutions that are designed to respond to youth needs and create opportunities for their transition into adulthood have largely failed. Yet, civil society actors, which include local and international NGOs but also a variety of other structures, including professional associations, interest-based clubs, independent and citizen media, as well as informal and network-based movements and groups, have emerged to provide programming for and by youth in order to promote Libyan youth economic, political, and social integration. Programming has included a range of objectives and activities, from skills-training and capacity-building for livelihood development to the provision of psychosocial support and protection to rights-based education and advocacy for post-conflict political participation.

This programming is essential in order to prevent youth from being left behind both during but also after conflict. However, civil society actors face a number of obstacles in putting together effective programming that can be responsive to youth needs and promote their inclusion, including the unstable and constantly shifting political context, the difficulty in reaching all youth, the constraints of changing donor priorities and short funding cycles, and the challenge of creating safe spaces and youth ownership for meaningful participation and long-term impact. On 19 October 2021, the Arab Reform Initiative organized a closed workshop with Libyan civil society actors working for and with youth to explore the various needs and aspirations of youth after 10 years of conflict, and the types of programming that can be envisioned to respond to youth's priorities and ensure their integration. Held under Chatham House Rule, this workshop identified the main priorities of Libyan youth after a decade of conflict, and namely the desire to continue education and find meaningful work, the challenges to both political participation and reconciliation, but also how holistic approaches combining leisure, training, and community building can lead to longer-term processes of youth integration.

## Research Findings: Libyan Youth Trajectories after 10 Years of Conflict

Recent research conducted on behalf of the Arab Reform Initiative on the impact of conflict on Libyan youth life trajectories reveals several key trends that have important implications for civil society actors and their youth programming. First, research shows that, since 2011, political awareness among youth has by and large increased, and youth are more interested and involved in political processes. This trend can be observed largely across the board, regardless of region, social class, ethnic, educational and professional background, and gender. Yet the research also shows that this trend towards increasing interest and engagement in politics was altered as of 2014. For youth participating in the research, 2014 marked the year when their lives changed completely: as the schooling system came to a halt, youth priorities started to shift and securing livelihood and income generation became more important than following or participating in the country's political transition.

Alongside this shift in priorities, Libyan youth since 2014 state that they have grown more sceptical of the political system, fearful that any form of political participation would make them complicit in a system of corruption. Indeed, the lack of social justice and accountability measures in Libya are cited as the primary reasons for loss of faith in the political process. Likewise, the issue of instability is cited by Libyan youth as a dominant factor in their personal decision-making processes. Young people state that the lack of certainty in their country prevents them from making any future projections. In addition, the collapse of the previously very generous welfare state has also had an important impact on Libyan youth's opportunities for employment and economic integration. These realities have pushed Libyan youth over the course of the conflict to focus on their immediate needs, and namely securing livelihood and their own education, and pushes political participation into the background.

Yet despite this focus on their own personal economic wellbeing and development, the research also finds that Libyan youth after 10 years of conflict seek important changes to social dynamics, and many seek radical change to traditional and rigid social structures that tend to limit young people and women.

With regards to programming priorities, most youth participating in the research agreed on the importance of creating spaces and forums for societal dialogue in order to move forward as a whole. These dialogues, in turn, can be fostered through assistance and rehabilitation programming as supported by civil society.

## Practitioner Perspectives: Libyan Civil Society Organizations and Youth Programming

The workshop was organized in the form of a whip round where each participating organization took the floor to answer a specific question regarding challenges and opportunities to youth programming in Libya. These practitioner perspectives were solicited in order to collectively identify the variety of challenges that civil society actors face in developing and implementing programming for youth, and what good practices have been deployed to promote youth ownership and long-term impact.

### **What good practices can we identify to engage youth in social entrepreneurship and community development?**

To successfully engage youth in social entrepreneurship and community development, programmes should be knowledge-based and sustainable. Youth need to be empowered so that they can play a better role in political transitions. This integration is possible through strategic partnerships and by building an ecosystem of partners including local actors from both the private and public sectors to provide professional opportunities such as jobs and trainings. Whilst providing these opportunities, technology should be used as a tool to reach to younger generations and allow them to adopt to any professional environment they want.

## **To what extent can infrastructure development, and working indirectly with youth, lead to their political and social engagement?**

The first thing that should be developed is the space of dialogue where youth can exchange with one another. Multi-functional youth centres are good examples of this. In such places, young people engage with their peers, get training, and more importantly have a safe space to express their ideas. Considering how the education system has been since 2014, these centres are almost the only spaces where youth can express themselves.

The lack of infrastructure in the country prevents the social and political development of youth. However, since the conflict within the country does not seem likely to be resolved in the short term, the willingness of stakeholders to participate in political activities are at a halt. In other words, the country is in a vicious cycle where everyone waits for the other to take the first step. This wheel needs to be broken if any programming in the country, including those for the youth, are to be successfully implemented. Yet, to achieve this, not only does programming need to be inclusive and holistic but also timely and sustainable. The current political state and official institutions in the country are unavailable to provide this, which suggests the need of change from bottom up.

## **How can we engage youth in programming that is forward looking, for the future post-conflict context, considering the immediate challenges they face today?**

Education is the key to sustainable development; however, considering the state of Libyan infrastructure post-2014, certain organizations try to provide awareness and educate Libyan youth through unconventional methods. The main goal of these institutions is to draw young people's attention to certain community values such as inclusion, peace,

community, fun, etc. It is about adopting new methods, scenarios, and aspects that are modern so that political engagement is more enjoyable. Since political participation is currently controversial in Libya, young people first need to feel at ease and have fun with one another to define their political and social needs collectively in a safe environment. What are some of the challenges to providing capacity building and skills training for youth? What are some good practices that you have identified for youth capacity building? Today most of the youth programming in Libya revolves around capacity building and skills trainings. This is because, due the lack of educational institutions, it is difficult to find qualified Libyans. Therefore, skill trainings and capacity building are among the best and most important youth programming especially for fresh graduates and senior year high school students. However, providing these trainings also has its challenges. This is simply because there is no culture of volunteering in Libya: with the on-going conflict, where people are facing serious economic constraints, volunteering is not a priority.

Another issue that CSOs that do youth programming in Libya face today is the sustainability of the little trained staff there is. Usually, instead of creating a sustainable training scheme by volunteering, trained Libyan chose one of two options: (1) integrating themselves into international organizations where financial compensations are higher than in the Libyan public and private sectors; or (2) integrating into the public sector where, even though the financial compensations are lower, the need for skills is also low. This shows, once again, that there needs to be a change in political cultures if change is ever to come to Libya. The problem with current international programming schemes in Libya today, whether they be youth oriented or not, is that they try to address these issues temporarily in the form of projects. Currently there are a lot of international organizations and NGOs who try to implement capacity building and skills training programs through different grant schemes and projects. Yet, since most of the time there are either budgetary or time constraints on these programmes, their effects on youth are not sustained, especially not for future generations.

## **How do you assess the needs of youth in terms of social, political, and economic empowerment? How do you decide where to focus and/or what to prioritize?**

To successfully assess the needs of youth, it is imperative to be engaged in a dialogue with them. Youth should be trusted in identifying their own needs. This is mostly done by opinion polls conducted in coordination with international partners. It is now known that, across the country, the needs and demands of youth differ. Thus, to have the most comprehensive programming for youth, it is necessary to include youth from every background in these opinion polls. Yet, regardless of the findings of the opinion polls and the youth programming that is implemented according to these findings, the ever changing political and security context in Libya requires programmers to be fast, adaptive, and resilient.

## **Discussion**

To be able to provide successful programming for youth in conflict countries, it is imperative for civil society organizations to know the difference between the youth they are targeting and the youth they want to target. As seen in Libya, the youth who are currently mobilized and politically aware are largely the same ones that were mobilized and aware in 2011. Most of the time, these activist youth networks stay the same. Although this is a positive factor for the sustainability of youth political inclusion, it also creates issues of stagnation and the tendency for external actors to always be working and dialoguing with the same individuals and groups. Yet, the more inclusive and broader the beneficiary pool is, the more successful and comprehensive youth programming will be. And while it is true that the Libyan youth who were struggling in the early 2010s are still struggling now when it comes to issues like livelihood and political participation, it should also not be forgotten that a decade has now gone by. Youth who have come of age over the course of the conflict constitute the new generation of Libyan youth with different, usually more complex, issues and priorities that those in 2011.

The research conducted on behalf of the Arab Reform Initiative along with the testimonies of the Libyan civil society organizations who attended this workshop all point to two notable priorities of youth in the country today: finishing education that was interrupted by the conflict and pursuing higher degrees; and having better, more fulfilling jobs that match their aspirations and go beyond simply securing income. Based on the experiences on the ground with regards to youth programming, using new technologies offers some of the best ways to respond to these priorities but also to promote longer-term processes of political and social integration. Technology should be used as a leisure vector to attract and include youth in political and social spheres, where parties can be holistically brought to table not only to advance political aspirations but also have create a sense of community and togetherness.

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### About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality,

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