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ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE
FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

YOUTH IN THE ARAB WORLD

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Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is an American relief and development organization with operations in over 99 countries. CRS worked in Lebanon from 1975-1992, then reopened its program in July 2006 to provide assistance to Lebanese communities affected by the war, including assistance to Iraqi refugees. Since then CRS has been implementing youth empowerment, consensus building, civil society development and education projects with its Lebanese partners.

Youth Can Become Effective Leaders in Lebanon

Reflecting the dynamism and energy of their society, youth in Lebanon are easily mobilized. About half of Lebanese youth say they volunteer, and a majority of them do so at least monthly. Yet their activity reflects the politicized, evolving, often tense nature of their context. This creates both an opportunity and a challenge.

More often than not in Lebanon's divisive context, this youth activism is through political parties or politically affiliated groups and these experiences necessarily shape youth perception of their society and options. Youth are flooded with messages of intolerance and the need to be fearful of the other – messages which older generations with memory of different times can withstand better. Many girls and young women in particular demonstrate aggression in this context. In times of tension such as the May 2008 events, these messages and means of mobilization, combined with the availability of arms and paramilitary training, can help youth become accelerators of conflict.

In the experience of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in implementing OTI- and DRL-funded projects, however, even in such tense times many youth are eager for opportunities to play a more constructive role in their societies. Active citizenship and dialogue projects quite easily find strong participants – particularly because many youth realize that it is precisely this sort of activism which will help stabilize their country. Implementing youth activism projects around Lebanon, CRS and its partner Nahwa al Muwatiniyya (Na-am) have found participants expressing increased commitment as a result of the May 2008 crisis.

“The thing that gives me hope is the change we’re about to create.”

youth from northern town of Bire, after May 2008 events

Rising above the Challenge

Even in times of relative calm, youth feel constricted by limited political, economic, social, and cultural space. Some youth feel obliged to be politically affiliated even if they would prefer not. As one young man noted about youth engagement projects, “I would like to be involved more, but to keep my teaching job I need the approval of the party influentials.” In a consensus building project with Development for People and Nature Association (DPNA), a youth leader chose to form a nonsectarian NGO after having experienced the positive results possible by bringing together people from different backgrounds to work on common issues.

Most Lebanese youth recognize the limitations of many of their current leaders and eschew corruption and nepotism. In a survey commissioned by CRS in July 2007 targeting 1500 Lebanese youth nationwide, half of those polled describe “ability to work together” as one of the main characteristics of an ideal leader. Acting on those beliefs, formal and informal youth groups continue to spring up in Lebanon with projects such as monitoring hate speech on the media, promoting environmental awareness, or providing services to their communities.

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) was inaugurated in 2006 to harness the policy-related research of AUB's internationally respected faculty and other scholars, in order to contribute positively to Arab policy-making and international relations. IFI is a neutral, dynamic, civil, and open space that brings together people representing all viewpoints in society. It aims to: raise the quality of public policy-related debate and decision-making in the Arab World and abroad; enhance the Arab World's input into international affairs; and, enrich the quality of interaction among scholars, officials and civil society actors in the Middle East and abroad.

Research and Policy Memo #3

Research and Policy Forum on Youth in the Arab World produces research as well as acts as a catalyst and clearing-house among regional and international research and policy on Arab youth. It aims to publish and exchange policy-relevant findings, with a focus on shared experiences and lessons learned; and identify gaps in the global knowledge base on Arab youth-related issues, including education, governance, public health, and civic engagement.

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Locating the Opportunity in Leadership

Their efforts can and do make a difference. CRS and partners find that, even in areas unused to youth leadership, youth can become effective leaders in their community despite their age. In a project implemented with Na-am, an elderly villager told one of the youth who recently led a polling activity on priorities of community members in a village in northern Lebanon that “after the questionnaire, the municipality started taking care of the village a little more. The streets are cleaner and the garbage is getting picked up more often.”

Thus, while youth can be easily manipulated and led towards aggression, when offered the opportunity they can indeed become effective, constructive leaders. To support them best, it is important to fully understand their context, build their skills, and link them with like-minded actors.

Context

- Design projects based on strong understanding of how, when, and where current political parties, as well as non-party power groups, constrict youth choices
- Create space for youth to gather and express opinions openly and constructively, without fear of judgment
- Help youth build positive relations and credibility evenhandedly with all key stakeholders such as municipal leaders and party officials, so that their actions are not perceived as irrelevant or threatening
- Assist youth to have short term “wins” to sustain their motivation even in a context in which their work may not initially be appreciated, but also commit to supporting them for the long term

Skills

- Build critical thinking and conflict transformation abilities to enable youth to navigate their complex environment
- Nurture youth skills for a type of leadership that is accountable, transparent, and capable of working with others
- Develop youth ability to identify and act upon common issues and mutual interests
- Raise awareness of youth’s role in the development of their communities

Links

- Involve parents, teachers, and other older generations who can help youth envision a more tolerant and pluralistic society
- Create opportunities for peer to peer learning and linkages, particularly with youth who are on the forefront of creating nonsectarian political, social or cultural space, as youth are inspired by seeing other youth have impact
- Incorporate youth efforts into existing systems, like municipal structures, national education policy, or strongly networked civil society actors, in order to lessen duplication, scale up impact, and build sustainability