

MAJALAT: The Brussels Civil Society Forum 7 - 9 July 2021, Online Concept Note: *Youth*

1. Context

Youth is a crosscutting issue in MAJALAT's work, that presents a twofold challenge: mainstream youth in EU policies but also identify and promote youth-specific priorities and recommendations to be addressed at the regional and national levels. This explains the fact that youth representatives instead of discussing youth issues, will attend one of the five other thematic break-out sessions during the 2021 Civil Society Forum organized by Majalat in early July. The importance of the theme of youth resorts in its transversal dimensions that touch upon multi-sectorial domains: health, education, employment, economy, politics, digitalization, environment, gender, migration, and security, among others. The theme holds a further significance to both governments and CSOs due to the fact that demographic development is shifting toward an ongoing influx of young people entering the youth bulge for the years to come. While this demographic group represents an invaluable human capital for the progress of any country, to become a multifaceted productive force, young people will require an inclusive society with quality education and capacity building systems, robust healthcare services, democratic political institutions, rewarding economic models, and environment-friendly infrastructures.

2021 has been marked by two major events the outcomes of which will have lasting impacts on youth and civil society actors in the Southern Neighborhood for years to come. On the one hand, there was the development of the COVID-19 vaccines, which restored young people's hopes after over a year of hardship that exacerbated existing challenges youth has historically struggled with. On the other hand, the "New agenda for the Mediterranean", the EU renewed partnership with the SN for the period 2021-2027. This concept note is the result of multiple discussions organized by MAJALAT on Youth.

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A Youth workshop and the South Policy Seminar were held in 2020, facilitated by an independent youth expert active in the civil society sector in the SN. On this basis, MAJALAT launched a regional study with the aim to explore the dynamics of youth and youth organizations in the SN. It seeks to map the current state of operations and ongoing challenges faced by youth and youth CSOs in the region, taking into account the two above-mentioned considerations: the pandemic and the EU renewed partnership. In addition, the research aimed at actualizing MAJALAT's previously developed recommendations by proposing a feasibly clear action plan for designing and implementing a space for youth and youth actors' dialogue with national and European institutions. Finally, in order to extend the scale of MAJALAT and engage national authorities, a roundtable on youth is scheduled in Beirut in June with the aim to disseminate the research outcome, priorities and recommendations to Lebanese youth, youth CSOs, and the EU Delegations representatives in Lebanon. The discussions resulting from this exchange will help feed the regional and thematic Multi-annual Indicative Programmes (MIP) for the period 2021-2027, which was recently launched by the EU. It will consist in the programming of activities based on identified priorities for each country of the SN.

2. Priorities within MAJALAT youth framework and selected recommendations for further development

During MAJALAT process youth mainly discussed 5 issues: 1) the inclusion and participation of youth in the EU Political Frameworks; 2) Mobility; 3) Sexual and Reproductive Health; 4) Employment/Digitalization; 5) Fight against all forms of violence. Accordingly, a series of recommendations were generated around these issues. A selection of priorities was identified for further development, on the following grounds:

- a) The success of the dialogue between the EU and CSOs lies in the fact that all the stakeholders and targets audience are fully included in the decision-making process (here youth), and pursue their role of watchdog on relevant issues;
- b) The need for a better transnational mobilization and structuration within young activists and youth CSOs in the SN; and
- c) These two previous elements need a prerequisite: youth capacity building in terms of advocacy and fundraising.

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Recommendation 1: To create a multi-stakeholders permanent cooperation channel for bilateral EU-Euro-Med youth structured dialogue with a long-term agenda. Youth CSOs mobilized in MAJALAT process could be the core of such a mechanism.

Recommendation 2: To widen the EU Political Frameworks and ease funding mechanisms for youth CSOs which entails:

- Tailoring/simplifying the application procedures according to the amount of the grants. Small grants should entail rather simplified procedures. In case simplification is not a feasible option, the EU should provide CSOs more capacity building trainings on know-how to apply to the EU funds. For implementing those operational actions, various techniques were suggested, including creating user-friendly templates to fill in for reporting; creating an App. for CSOs/collectives members to use for reporting; and creating virtual platforms of exchanges of best practices on how to apply to the EU funds.
- Introducing a mechanism that would make it easier for unregistered/informal entities to get the EU funds through two implementation processes: (a) channeling the EU grants applied by other actors to unregistered/informal entities; or (b) tempering the bureaucratic requirements and paper works required for the grant application eligibility. Indeed, accommodating unregistered entities within the target audience for the EU funds would put the EU principles of “inclusion” and “equal opportunities” into motion, and would offer better access to fund for diverse civil society actors in the fields of youth.

3. Main conclusions/findings from research on youth

The finding of the research, in which 506 youth CSOs from 7 SN countries took the survey and 13 organizations took an in-depth interview, yielded several significant results that could be summarized in 4 underlying rubrics. First, the sectors of education, training and capacity building seems to be the one that preoccupies most of the field of actions of the CSOs participated in the study: 72.2 % (N = 352). This indicator reveals the importance of this sector to the youth of the region. It also aligns with an alarming figure highlighted by the 2020 World Bank report, saying that “youth in the Southern Mediterranean region is the only group worldwide that faces increasing unemployment risks as the level of education increases », (WB 2020).

Although, the region’s median spending on public education is significantly higher than OECD average, the human capital development factor remains a major challenge, with two thirds (around 110 million) of the MENA population being under 35, and youth unemployment over 25% out of which 40% are women (compared to 14% globally, WB, 2020). Therefore, future international cooperation and programmes launched jointly with the EU and the SN CSOs need to allocate more resources and attention to this sector and these organizations.

The second finding is related to the challenges that continue to impede the work of youth CSOs in SN, including : 1) the lack of pedagogical and financial resources; 2) restrictive legal framework which govern the work of associations; 3) difficult access to EU and foreign funding allocated to large and old associations. The third revealing indicator is related to the agility and responsiveness of youth CSOs in the SN. Despite the challenges, these organizations are flexible, resilient and swift to adapt to abrupt conditions as was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictive measures imposed by local authorities. Finally, the fourth finding revealed that these organizations welcome the EU renewed Agenda for the Mediterranean (2021-2027), and maintain high hopes in its objectives, actions and expected outcomes, especially on the future of the youth in the region. Surprisingly, although all of the study’s participants reported being aware of the renewal of the AA, the majority did not know its

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content, objectives or proposed actions. Therefore, there is a need for a wide regional promotion and media-campaigns about the agenda in the region through the EU regional delegation and national offices' representatives.

The findings of the research have been translated into a tangible recommendation and operational action plan, proposing the design and implementation of a youth space for dialogue as a regional mechanism for the youth CSOs and youth representatives with national and European institutions, with periodically specific goals and objectives, clear implementation agenda, and identified stakeholders; and in which young people will participate actively in forging priorities in a way that would have direct impact on youth in the region.

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