



The Question  
of Palestine

**Beyond Civic Engagement:  
Enabling Social and Political Participation  
of Palestinian Refugee Youth**

## Policy Brief Series\*

### **Beyond Civic Engagement: Enabling Social and Political Participation of Palestinian Refugee Youth**

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## **I. Executive Summary**

From a policy standpoint, mainstreaming Palestinian refugee youth's participation in public governance presents a challenge. While political participation, public governance and civic discourses happen naturally in formal nation-states, the involvement of young Palestinian refugees in any such act defies traditional notions of public governance and state-citizen relation. Furthermore, the different national contexts and policies facing Palestinian refugees, along with their varied living settings (i.e., camp vs. non-camp, and socio-economic status) make it difficult for development actors to provide general programmatic interventions.

Notwithstanding these challenges, continuous efforts must be exerted to enable the participation of Palestinian refugee youth in public governance within their communities, beyond traditional civic engagement approaches. Enabling social and political participation of Palestinian youth in their communities is a shared responsibility held by the international community, host countries and local government authorities. Only by doing so can risks posed by general frustration, socio-political disengagement, and low levels of trust in institutions be avoided.

This brief describes constraints, opportunities and aspirations of Palestinian refugee youth, as explored in "Palestinian refugee youth aspire, as their peers in MENA do, to have the opportunity to develop to the fullest of their own potential", conducted on behalf of ARDD (Al Hussein and Albanese, 2020). In their case, this means: 1- acquiring rights in host or third countries; 2- having the opportunity to access quality education and professional training; 3- access to decent jobs; 4- having the space and rights to mobilize and participate in discussions regarding their present and future as Palestinians, and as part of their host societies.

Bearing this analysis in mind, the brief proposes five recommendations for programmatic interventions: 1- Enhance Palestinian refugee youth's access to justice; 2- Strengthen their opportunity to participate in public governance within their communities; 3- Build on the opportunities provided by youth's "wired citizenship"; 4- Support the rehabilitation of Palestinian cultural heritage and identity vis-à-vis host societies and among Palestinian refugee youth; 5- Promote opportunities for quality education with a view to enhancing opportunities for decent work. The brief also recommends the need to implement tailored youth-oriented data collection along with psychosocial support as needed within each of the programmatic areas.

Last but not least, this brief is written under the assumption that efforts to reduce the economic marginalization of Palestinian refugee youth must underpin programmatic initiatives regarding political participation efforts, as decent livelihoods lie at the basis of youth's future in their communities and the region.

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## II. In their own words: Constraints and Opportunities for Social and Political Participation of Palestinian Refugee Youth

The development agenda on youth in MENA as a whole is drifting away from the political, social and economic imperatives driving youth lives today. From a plethora of research and policy discussion in the early 2000s, determined by the fact that MENA had the highest youth population shares in the world as well as the highest rates of youth unemployment, it can be deduced that, today, there is much more reduced focus on youth, and a tendency to prioritize security concerns over political and economic reforms (Kabbani, 2019).

Demographic analyses show that Palestinian refugee youth constitute more than 30 per cent of their communities' population (Raz, 2019). National fragmentation of research and different age definitions of youth (AHDR, 2016)<sup>1</sup>, among other factors, make it difficult to provide a single number for the total amount of Palestinian refugee youth in MENA. Nonetheless, nationally bound studies highlight the young nature of Palestinian refugee population. For instance, according to UNFPA the total of Palestinian population in the occupied Palestinian territories (refugees included) is facing a rapid population growth and large youthful population, with 69 per cent below the age of 29.<sup>2</sup> In Lebanon, according to UNRWA and UNICEF (2018), nearly half of all Palestinian refugees from Syria and Lebanon are under 24, with 20-25 per cent between 15 and 24 years of age (UNRWA-UNICEF, 2019). In Jordan, a household demographic study conducted in 2013 estimated that 37 per cent of the refugee population was below the age of 15 in 2009, and that there was a higher fertility in the Palestinian refugee camps (Tiltnes, 2013).

In stark contrast to this demographic reality, findings of the background report conducted by ARDD show that Palestinian refugee youth perceive themselves as standing at the margins of the social and political life of their communities (Al Husseini and Albanese, 2020). According to the report, the youth's diminished socio-political role is due to a series of what the study defines as "external and internal constraints" that hinder their social and political participation in their communities:

A. External constraints. These refer to constraints identified as related to host societies and host state authorities and are subject to important national variations, as state policies towards Palestinian refugees differ greatly. They can be summarized as follows:

a- "Unwelcomed foreigners". Palestinian refugee youth, regardless of their place of residence (in camp or non-camp settings), consistently said that they consider themselves politically marginalized, having the feeling that they are treated more or less as unwanted or unwelcomed foreigners in the countries where they reside. They describe the political space available to them as "non-existent", "non-visible" or "of no use". This is especially the case in Lebanon where the Palestinians as a whole are not only deprived of citizenship and correlated rights (right to vote and to work in the public sector and in many jobs of the private sector), but also have to "bear the blame of having destabilized the country".

b- Reduced mobility and being subject to heightened security measures. Camp residents face added burdens, compared to their host communities, like mobility and security limitations. While Palestinian refugees living in camps in the south of Lebanon are subject to physical blockades and need special permits to exit their camps, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt) the camps' reputation of being sanctuaries of "uncontrolled armed

factions” (more especially the Balata camp in the Nablus governorate) has made them obvious targets for both Israeli army and Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces.

c- Diminished social status. Palestinian refugees living in the camps in the oPt remain “second class refugees”. This is particularly more noticeable in the West Bank, for instance, where indigenous Palestinians from Hebron and Nablus “**would never give their daughter to a camp refugee**”, as stated by female camp refugees. The same discrimination is also apparent in commercial transactions, as revealed by a respondent from Al Fawwar camp (near Hebron).

B. Internal constraints. These relate to the social and political structure of the camp community and are no less significant than external, host society/state, constraints. More important, some of them highlight deep-seated values and modes of governance that shape the social and political dynamics within the refugee camp communities. These internal constraints include:

a- General limited capacities of community-based organizations. This mostly refers to poorly funded and understaffed charities providing basic services within the camps.

b- Political patriarchy: “**Not informed, not consulted**”. Political patriarchy refers to the domination of men over women and, in its broader definition, the mistreatment of young males by older males in patriarchal societies (Ayed, 2013). A study on political participation of Palestinian youth in Palestine highlighted how tribalism “is entrenched and internalized in the minds of its members -even the youth. This culture fills the psyche with sayings and stories that praise our elders (and, therefore, patriarchy too)” to the extent that, the author argues, it led to a “‘light version’ of a dictatorship, result-

ing in oppression, human rights violations, internal split and most importantly, a new and less tolerant Palestinian generation.” (Ibid)

Youth interviewed in the study acknowledged that the impact of patriarchy is magnified in the Palestinian camps, where refugees have reproduced and preserved the (clan and tribal) structures that were in place at the time of the original displacement in 1948. Political patriarchy in the context of the camps means that membership in the camp committees tends to exclude women and young men from decision-making positions. The problem across all host countries, as youth put it, “**is not that being a committee member requires particular competence or experience**” (e.g., leadership or management) but that it operates at the expense of the younger members of the community. In the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank, respondents further complained that no committee elections had taken place in the past 16 years. Against this background, the nomination by the political factions of a man younger than 30 to head the Popular Committee of the Mieh-Mieh camp (south of Lebanon) is a notable exception.

For female Palestinian refugee youth, patriarchy, be it social or political, is the source of much injustice. As a female West Banker respondent put it: “**Patriarchy dominates my private life, as much as the occupation dominates the rest.**”

c- Political factionalism. Many young educated Palestinians also resent the lack of merit-based political representation in the camp committees, seeing these committees as embroiled in internecine fighting and with no vision of their future and that of their community. “**They fight just for the sake of fighting: this is what we must avoid doing; our struggle for the realization of our rights must be tailored to our values, clearly established goals and**

to the means we have,” as a Gazan youth put it, echoing statements also made by respondents in the West Bank and Lebanon. Political affiliations, sometimes compounded by tribal and clan affiliations, may also determine, including in Jordan, participation in community-based organizations and eligibility to basic education or relief services. As a young male from the Baqaa camp (north of Amman, Jordan) explained:

“The committees and community organizations in the camp talk but do little: organized volunteering initiatives are rare. They also exclude young people who do not belong to a party or a group, work for their own benefit and the benefit of their followers, and they antagonize the successful people in the camp.”<sup>3</sup>

The fact that most Palestinian refugee youth find themselves on the margins of the socio-political community life does not mean they do not care or do not try to find venues to participate in the socio-political life of their communities. Indeed, echoing previous findings among Palestinian youth in Palestine, Palestinian refugee youth try to maintain a certain level of activism through social media outlets and voluntary work.

e-Activism. The use of social media is widespread among Palestinian refugee youth, including amongst camp residents. Youth participating in the study said that they find social media as efficient tools of social participation despite the censorship and control exerted by the administrators of social media outlets (Facebook, for instance) and the host authorities.

Social media are carefully watched by various authorities: the platform itself (Facebook, for instance) and the host authorities, including Israel in the West Bank. Freedom of expression is authorized insofar as it does not affect these authorities’ interests. While

Facebook algorithms detect any Palestine/Israel related statement as hate speech, Arab states, apart from Lebanon – “where no one checks what Palestinians write and post on Facebook”, as one respondent said- have adopted cybercrime laws that, by criminalizing political posts considered offensive to the country’s integrity, can lead to forms of personal persecution, including arrests. In the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the threat is double edged and may come from Israeli authorities, as well as from the PA or Hamas, respectively.

Nonetheless Palestinian refugee youth acknowledge that social media are critical for political mobilization purposes, and to connect them with the world at large. Individually, social media are mainly used to read news and exchange information with peers, to connect with members of the family across the Near East (for instance between ex-Gazan residents residing in Jordan and their relatives still in the Gaza Strip, or those in Lebanon and their family in the northern part of Israel), or in the diaspora, virtually connecting dispersed Palestinian communities around the world.

Social media are also recognized as key capacity building tools in the hands of some community-based organizations, as stated by a social entrepreneur:

“We try on social media to create a space for youth to share their perspective on all kinds of aspects of life. Trying to do something for the homeland, also trying to shed light on some other (social) issues, for example unemployment, and to brainstorm on ideas about how to generate income” [Male respondent, Balata camp, West Bank].

Youth empowerment activities and “volunteer” experiences in community-based organizations provide important alternative ways of participating in the community affairs,

despite the limitations of these initiatives. Indeed, a study by Sharek Youth Forum highlighted in 2013 how “some 57 per cent of Palestinian youth left political activism and joined the different local bodies in their areas -- and therefore are maintaining a certain level of activism, even if only a part of what they are looking for” (Ayed, 2013).

At individual level, engagement in social activities and capacity-building programs enables youth to develop self-confidence, awareness of their identity, and avoid “boredom, idleness and [the] culture of dependency” that affect so many of their peers. It also enables youth to build lasting friendship ties with other persons involved in social participation programs, which plays an important social function, especially in the precarious, volatile reality that many Palestinian youth experience, from the oPt to Lebanon.

However, the growing presence of humanitarian actors in and around refugee camps has resulted in some discomfort among a number of Palestinian refugee youth who see Palestinians, and particularly the youth growing up in this new environment, “**more dependent on foreign aid than attached to their own [Palestinian] cause**”. While refugees who have benefitted from (or are at present part of) these social programs are generally positive, others express skepticism towards “**NGOs coming to support [Palestinians] in the name of humanitarian action**”. In their view, these programs are “**only curing the symptoms without addressing the main problem**”, or fall short of addressing youth’s expectations, as they feel that core contents of development and/or humanitarian activities in camps are decided “in the capitals”. This profound discontent was expressed in the words of a male respondent in Balata camp, in the West Bank:

“**[For them] we are rather a business cycle, part of the economy.**”

### III. Towards a Transformative Agenda for Palestinian Refugee Youth

The findings of the ARDD report echo the results of data collected in 2019 by the Arab Barometer on Arab Youth. According to an analysis of the data, “relative to older generations, youths tend to be less religious, less interested in politics, and more likely to be engaged in social media”. The analysis also highlights how youths question their ability to voice their frustrations to the government, as “in nearly all countries, less than half say the right to freedom of expression is guaranteed while half or less say they have the right to demonstrate peacefully in all countries” (Arab Barometer, 2019).

Similar findings were reported in 2016 in an OECD report aiming to incorporate youth in public governance in MENA: “Despite a pleasant engagement of MENA youth in civic activities and civil society organizations in some countries, youth representation in public consultations of actual political weight tends to be marginal at best. The limited space of youth to raise their voice and shape political decision is of even greater concern for vulnerable sub-groups such as young women or youth from rural areas and less fortunate socio-economic backgrounds.” (OECD, 2016).

While the OECD report did not specifically address Palestinian refugee youth, the report’s concern for vulnerable groups could apply to this demographic group. Palestinian refugee youth, particularly those in camp settings, present an accentuated vulnerability due to: 1- lack of clear legal status due to their condition as refugees; 2- social stigmatization due to their condition as stateless refugees; 3- a general “less fortunate” socio-economic background.

From a policy standpoint, Palestinian refugee youth present a testing challenge when it comes to making their participation in public

governance mainstream. Context matters and the heterogeneity of the Palestinian refugee youth experience in terms of host country location, camp vs. non-camp refugees, and socio-economic status renders it difficult to provide a single strategic line. Furthermore, public governance in refugee contexts is always a difficult task, but even more so in the absence of a formalized nation-state. While citizenship, public governance and civic discourses occur naturally in formalized nation-states, Palestinian refugee youths' participation in public governance and their status in a state-citizen relation defy traditional notions. In the case of Syrian refugees, for instance, much of the political participation programs provided by humanitarian actors has been done on the basis of their eventual return to their nation-state.<sup>4</sup>

Despite these difficulties, the risks for not integrating youth in public governance, as expressed by the OECD report, remain valid for Palestinian refugee youth. Specifically, the OECD pointed to two main risks: First, the exclusion of youth from the political arena and decision-making processes leaves them on the margins of the public debate, with little scope to shape policy outcomes in their favor, which risks reproducing a vicious cycle of frustration with the performance of government officials, decreasing levels of youth trust in government, and gradual disengagement from politics (which in the case of Palestinian refugee youth is already in place, as the study showed); Second, the absence of youth at the decision-making table makes them deplore a weak integration of their concerns in strategic policy documents and the delivery of public services (OECD 2016).

### **Beyond Traditional Civic Engagement Approaches**

Palestinian refugee youth aspire to have the opportunity to develop to the fullest of their own potential, which youth themselves have described as: 1- acquiring rights in host or

third countries; 2- having opportunities to access quality education and professional training; 3- having access to decent jobs; 4- having the space and right to mobilize and participate in discussions regarding their present and future as Palestinians and as part of their host societies. None of these aspirations, in their view, stand in contradiction with their right of return to historical Palestine (Al Husseini and Albanese, 2020).

These aspirations require integrated programmatic interventions beyond traditional civic engagement approaches, which have become the norm among Palestinian youth and refugee youth since the late 1990s as a result of the P2P (People to People approach) that characterized the post-Oslo period. However, as the ARDD report has highlighted and the 2016 OECD report reminded us, this approach has now become insufficient by itself, as Palestinian refugee youth demand more comprehensive approaches to enhance their civil and political rights.

Looking to address these aspirations from the point of view of enabling Palestinian refugee youth's social and political participation in their communities, the brief proposes five recommendations for programmatic interventions: 1- enhance Palestinian refugee youths' access to justice; 2- strengthen Palestinian refugee youths' opportunity to participate in public governance within their communities; 3- build on the opportunities provided by youth's "wired citizenship"; 4- support the rehabilitation of Palestinian cultural heritage and identity within host societies and among Palestinian refugee youth; 5- promote opportunities to access quality education with a view to enhancing opportunities for decent work. Each of these areas is discussed from a practical point of view, as it builds on past and current programs and interventions that have been implemented in the context of refugees and refugee youth at large. The discussion is not an exhaustive overview or evaluation of programs, but rather a glimpse at programmatic opportuni-

ties and practices and how they could be tailored to the Palestinian refugee youth experience, mostly among camp refugees, but not exclusively.

In order to ensure success in any of these areas, this brief recommends that programs be coupled with two key cross-cutting interventions, namely:

a- Youth-oriented monitoring and evaluation of past and present efforts in order to understand the impact of interventions. In this regard, the OECD has already documented the importance of collecting disaggregated youth data through the form of a SYP (Survey of Young People) for Palestine Refugee Youth. Analysis of the SYP in Egypt (SYPE) in 2006 shows how it provided detailed, comprehensive and reliable information about youth, that is still of use. Indeed, involving youths in this survey process (from planning to implementation) is already a key process that enhances youth's participation. In this regard, ARDD had the opportunity to work on several occasions with youth in filling up questionnaires regarding perceptions of justice, and they proved to be most energetic, and enthusiastic, and had invaluable input in the process.

b- Tailored psycho-social interventions to enhance the resilience and psychological well-being of youth targeted in different programs, in order to ensure equity of access in specific interventions regarding, for example, access to justice, social and political participation; quality education... Rather than PSS stand-alone interventions, this brief encourages donors to think of PSS interventions as a tool to enhance the success of programs as a whole. The heightened vulnerability of certain segments of Palestinian refugee youth population requires programmatic emphasis on the emotional well-being, according to their needs.

Finally, while this policy brief addresses so-

cial and political participation of Palestinian refugee youth, it strongly recommends that programmatic efforts to alleviate the economic marginalization of Palestinian refugee youth underpin programmatic initiatives regarding political participation efforts, as decent livelihoods lie at the basis of youth's future in their communities and the region. Furthermore, the multidimensional nature of challenges facing Palestinian refugee youth in MENA necessitates an integrated approach to reduce their current marginalization. Otherwise, interventions done in silos risk being considered irrelevant by refugee youth or, as the ARDD report also documented, could backfire in the form of negative perceptions by Palestinian refugee youth.

1- Enhanced access to justice among Palestinian refugee youth. The diminished legal status of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and of some Palestinian refugees in Jordan ex Gazan residents -along with myriad legal vulnerabilities afflicting Palestinian refugees in the oPt means that access to legal aid is critical to enhancing the rights of Palestinian refugee youth, with particular attention to refugees in camp settings. Legal protection of youth 15 to 29 encompasses issues related to child protection, children in conflict with the law, labor disputes and, last but not least, issues of gender justice. For Palestinian refugee girls and young women, strengthening gender justice is also an imperative, as patriarchy is a prevalent socio-political reality hampering their rights. Among protection issues, for instance, are early/child marriages, which are documented in camp contexts and which often make young Palestinian mothers in camps need legal support to detach themselves from abusive partners and/or failed marriages.<sup>5</sup> To this end, lessons learned from women's access to justice programs implemented by ARDD over the last decade call for an integrated approach to access to justice in which



young women are psychologically empowered to claim their rights and have financial support to follow through their legal claims. Furthermore, community-based interventions through a women's empowerment lens are equally critical to prevent a vicious circle of young girls' disempowerment.

2- Facilitate opportunities for participation of Palestinian refugee youth in public governance. There are two levels of intervention that should be considered. At institutional level, existing public governance arrangements need to be re-adjusted to meet the demands of the younger generation. There are plenty of experiences regarding public participation in local governance in the context of refugee camps, and Palestinian refugee camps are no exception. The failure of some of these participatory experiences led seasoned scholars, such as Sari Hanafi, to think of innovative proposals in the context of refugee camps in Lebanon, such as fostering community participation in setting up service provision as a priority", adopting the model of Porto Alegre's municipality, and discussing the proposed budget allocation with a forum in each camp. These forums should not be composed by the popular committees, but comprise a more representative audience, for example by inviting political factions and possibly NGOs and grassroots organizations to nominate educated youth and other representatives." (Hanafi, 2014). Clearly, transforming current committees and other public governance arrangements is not an easy task, so this requires further investment and work. Regarding refugee camps in Lebanon, UNRWA, in cooperation with UNDP, had engaged in training programs for the popular committees of Baddawi and Nahr el-Bared camps (Ibid). A "youth lens" could be applied to these experiences and ways to enhance participation of youth as part of camp gover-

nance in Lebanon and oPt should be conceived. Although the situation in Jordan and Syria is different, as the state oversees Palestinian refugee camps through the Department of Palestinian Affairs and GAPAR, one-on-one negotiations with authorities must be considered. In Jordan, the dialogue among donors, implementing partners and authorities could build on the multiple experiences of participatory projects for local governance that have been implemented in the context of the humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis, such as the one concerning decentralization and participatory budgeting in Mafraq, funded through Madad Program and implemented by the Spanish Cooperation Agency (AECID), of which ARDD has been a key implementing partner.

Along with these institutional venues for political participation, individual experiences such as citizen journalism demonstrate great potential for enhancing youth participation in local governance and building youth's skills. One very notable example is 7iber in Jordan, which has grown from a citizen media platform into a registered media organization.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the hands-on approach of this type of initiatives provides a unique opportunity for curious minds and engaged youth to enhance their skills and explore their communities with the possibility for short-term impact at community and individual level. Given that the target age for citizen journalism projects tends to be youth over 16, this could represent a good follow-up opportunity for Palestinian refugee students educated within UNRWA schools system. For the past 5 years, UNRWA schools have developed a system of Student Parliaments in School, as part of which students from UNRWA's five fields of operation "explore topics such as democratic practices, leadership, participation, decision making and communication. Students

developed their work plan to guide the activities of the ASP over the coming year. They also elected a president, a vice-president and a secretary”.<sup>7</sup> Despite the inherent relevance of this initiative, which is run by the UNRWA Education section as part of its Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance education program, once children graduate there is no further mechanism to integrate the newly acquired skills.

3- Build on the opportunities provided by youth’s “wired citizenship”. The use of social media is widespread among Palestinian refugee youth, including amongst camp residents. Youth featured in the report find social media as an efficient tool of social participation despite the censorship and control. Palestinian refugee youths belong to a generation that has been characterized as “Wired citizenship” (Lynn et al., 2020). The term refers to how changes in communication behavior of the high-tech era lead to changes in relationships in social and political systems among the generations born after the late 1980s: “Members of these cohorts function in ways that are more horizontal, participatory, open, collaborative, and mutually influential.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, current analysis of online samples of Arab bloggers and influencers suggests that “MENA’s youths, with their progressive civic outlook and extensive digital social engagement, hold a good promise for better governance in the region” (Ayish, 2018). Building on the potential of these “wired citizens”, the OECD has already suggested interesting interventions that could be adapted to the Palestinian refugee youth context. Among them, the promotion of youth-oriented policies in the field of e-government by using the digitalization of public administration as an opportunity for participation that could benefit from youth’s input in designing user-friendly platforms.

4- Rehabilitate Palestinian cultural heritage and identity within host societies and among Palestinian refugee youth. Palestinians may be subject of occupation, but they have accumulated a rich cultural heritage in the past century, some of which has been incorporated as part of popular culture throughout the Middle East. The positive contributions of Palestinians and Palestinian refugees to their host societies and to Arab culture as a whole must underpin any efforts towards rehabilitation of Palestinian cultural heritage and identity among the new generations in the Middle East. Being a Palestinian refugee should not be considered as bearing social stigma; yet that can only be changed with wide public campaigns sensitizing host societies to and reminding young Palestinians of their positive contributions. Beyond remembering iconic figures, a plethora of interventions can be done at national level highlighting the talent of Palestinian refugee youth. For instance, the work of young Palestinian refugee artists could be featured in cultural festivals in the region; cultural exchanges could be sponsored; art exhibits could be organized, as well as music concerts, and others. For instance, the Khaled Shoman Foundation in Jordan has done much in this regard, but it remains in the margins of popular culture. UNRWA has also sponsored a plethora of cultural activities highlighting refugees’ achievements, but they are usually done in isolation and within the realm of the camps, with very little outreach. As widening the audience for these achievements and contributions remains a challenge, mass media have a key role to play. In the context of the humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis, UNESCO sponsored a radio program for several years featuring Syrian refugees and their plight in Jordan as part of the Radio al Balad program, with the objective of mainstreaming the refugees’ voices on Jordanian airwaves. ARDD has

worked closely for a long time with print media, radio stations and TV channels to bring awareness to difficult issues, such as women's access to justice, refugee rights and others. This requires strong partnerships, steady investments, and a solid knowledge of issues at stake. Palestinian culture has a key role to play in rehabilitating Palestinian identity among Palestinian youths and their host societies.

5- Promote opportunities to access quality education and enhance opportunities for decent work. Quality education is the most powerful tool any young person can have, and the best investment for any society. Throughout the humanitarian response to the Syria refugee crisis, strong educational and professional programs have been developed that have benefited thousands of young Syrian refugees. With diminished access to higher education in Jordan, and even no access to secondary education in Lebanon, Palestinian refugee youths are in dire need of integration into quality educational programs that allow them to develop the right skills for the difficult transition into the job market. Scholarships in higher education institutions abroad for students to complement their education proved to be life-changing opportunities for many now middle-aged Palestinian refugees. Cohorts of engineers and doctors now serving their communities within MENA enjoyed educational op-

portunities abroad. However, since the closure of borders after Sept. 11, 2001, the flow of international students has diminished to a large extent and opportunities have become scarcer. Scholarship schemes such as UNHCR's DAFI program have proved to be successful opportunities for talented refugees worldwide.

Along with scholarship opportunities, skills programs are important to overcoming some of the shortcomings facing educational systems in MENA. The multi-partner Life Skills and Citizenship Education (LSCE) initiative in MENA, for instance, speaks to the need for coordinated action to enhance current education outcomes among youth in MENA.<sup>9</sup> Within the framework of lifelong learning and the overarching goals of "learning to know; learning to be; learning to do; and learning to be together", skills programs facilitating participation, teamwork, resilience, communication are an important first step to having better job opportunities. Furthermore, ILO's advocacy regarding the need to provide young people with technical and soft skills is testimony to the critical role skills programs play in facilitating school-to-work transitions among youth (ILO, 2020).

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## Endnotes

1 See for instance the two age brackets described in the 2016 AHDR for youth: 1-For statistical purposes, the United Nations (UN) defines youth as individuals of ages 15–24; 2-The Middle East Youth Initiative defines youth as people of ages 15–29. This range has been adopted here to reflect the prolonged transitions to adulthood faced by many in the region.

2 See <https://palestine.unfpa.org/en/population-matters-0>

3 According to the authors of the report “This statement echoes the assessment made by a former UNRWA employee in charge of developmental projects in the Talbiyeh camp based on participatory process including working groups (WG) formed by the camp’s women and youth. Ultimately, the WG’s youth and women members were gradually ousted, to be replaced by male camp notables. See Al-Nammari, F., “Participatory urban upgrading and power: Lessons learnt from a pilot project”, *Habitat International*, 39 (2013), 224-231; and Al-Nammari, F., “Talbiyeh camp improvement project and the challenges of community participation”, Research paper, 2010,

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4 See AECID interventions as part of Madad Fund regarding participatory budgeting with Syrian refugees in Decentralization programs in Jordan. [https://www.aecid.es/Centro-Documentacion/Documentos/documentos%20adjuntos/Annual%20Report%202019%20AECID%20in%20Jordan\\_Final.pdf](https://www.aecid.es/Centro-Documentacion/Documentos/documentos%20adjuntos/Annual%20Report%202019%20AECID%20in%20Jordan_Final.pdf)

5 See for instance initiatives to end Child marriage in Gaza <https://www.unrwa.org/news-room/features/girls-not-brides-ending-child-marriage-gaza>

6 See About 7iber at <http://7iber.com/about/>

7 About School Parliament initiative see <https://www.unrwa.org/tags/school-parliament>

8 Ibid




9 For LSCE initiative see <https://www.unicef.org/mena/life-skills-and-citizenship-education>



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