A Shared Vision

Activating Arts and Culture to Enhance Community Engagement and Ownership of Civic Spaces

Jabal Amman Area as a Case Study | April 2025

Introduction

This policy brief explores the integration of civic engagement and culture into urban planning in Jordan, using Jabal Amman as a case study to examine how art and cultural initiatives can reshape public spaces and foster inclusive urban development. It highlights the unique potential of youth as agents of change, advocating for participatory urban planning processes that prioritize cultural preservation, equitable access, and sustainable development. By leveraging cultural expression and community involvement, urban planning can transcend its traditional boundaries, addressing systemic issues such as privatization and the commodification of public spaces.

The brief draws on insights from ARDD's project, Hope is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words, supported by the Swiss Embassy, and implemented through the initiative Amman: Past, Present, and Future. As part of the project's methodology, youth participants visually captured Jabal Amman's past, present, and envisioned future through photography (See Annex1).

Five dialogue sessions further enriched this initiative, each focusing on a key theme - urban planning, environment, tourism, social and cultural dimensions, and economic development. Experts in these fields facilitated discussions, offering critical insights into Jabal Amman's distinctive heritage, its challenges, and sustainable development pathways. These sessions provided a structured platform for participants to engage with pressing urban issues, linking their creative expression to informed policy discussions. The project culminated in a photography contest, reinforcing the role of art and culture in reclaiming civic spaces, preserving heritage, and shaping a collective vision for urban resilience and inclusivity. This brief builds on these informed dialogues to offer practical recommendations for safeguarding Jabal Amman's heritage while promoting sustainable development.

Sessions and Expert Speakers

Urban Planning

- Rami Daher an Associate Professor at the School of Architect and Built Environment at the German Jordanian University (GJU) and the general director of TURATH.
- Eng. Deema Abu Diab, UN-Habitat's National Coordinator in Jordan.

Environment

- Eng. Mai Al-Qousi, Senior Water and Environment Engineer at UN-Habitat.
- Amal Madanat, the founder of the "Towards Zero Waste" initiative.

Tourism

- HE Michele Nazzal, a member of the Upper House of Parliament, Chair of the Tourism Committee, and Chairman of the Dead Sea Hotels Company.
- Nuha Mubaideen, a lecturer and coordinator of the tourist guidance program at Ammon Applied University College.

Social and Cultural Dimensions

- Dr. Sinan Sweis, who is the founder and general manager of Jabal Amman Publishers and "Kotobi" platform for interactive reading.
- Khader Qawwas, a social activist in Hai Jabal Amman and the vice president of the JARA association.

Economic Development

- Dr. Sami Al-Hourani, a doctor and entrepreneur, the founder and director of "Leaders of Tomorrow," as well as the "Forsa" and "Souq Fann" platforms.
- Haitham Goussous, Partner and General Manager of the Romero Group.

Why Civic Engagement Through Cultural Initiatives?

Youth civic engagement through cultural initiatives empowers them to address urban challenges, fosters a sense of community ownership, and drives sustainable, inclusive development. By involving youth in shaping their surroundings, these initiatives encourage innovative solutions to social and environmental issues while promoting equitable urban growth.

ARDD has advocated **governance-from-below** as a key framework to enable youth engagement and emphasize grassroots involvement and local decision-making[1], for a long time. This model ensures accountability to communities by amplifying local voices and delegating governance powers to the local level[2]. In city planning, it prioritizes residents' needs and perspectives, ensuring urban projects are shaped collaboratively rather than imposed from above. Integrating cultural initiatives into this model further enhances accessibility, inviting broader public participation in shaping vibrant, inclusive urban spaces.

Why Jabal Amman?

Given its esteemed place in the history of modern Jordan as the starting point for the rejuvenation of its capital, Jabal Amman stands out not only for its historical significance but also for its role in attracting a diverse youth generation engaged in economic and social activities. This vibrant area has long served as a model of camaraderie, coexistence, and unique opportunities, presenting a perfect microcosm of the city's broader urban and cultural dynamics.

The selection of Jabal Amman as a case study highlights its significance in examining the impacts of rapid urbanization, the commodification of public spaces, and the tensions between modernity and heritage. It encapsulates the challenges of balancing economic development with cultural preservation, making it an ideal focus for exploring how urban spaces can shape and reflect societal shifts while activating creative and cultural youth engagement in urban planning.

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1 ARDD, "Supporting Governance from Below - Effective Local Engagement of and within Communities in Northern Municipalities in Jordan and the Role for Local Civil Society," 2019, https://ardd-jo.org/publication/supporting-governance-from-below-effective-local-engagement-of-and-within-communities-in-northern-municipalities-in-jordan-and-the-role-for-local-civil-society/.

2 https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/sites/default/files/leaderii_teaching_kit_booklet-chap4.pdf

Empowering Youth in Jordan: Overcoming Barriers and Shaping Inclusive Urban Futures

Youth civic engagement in Jordan reflects a dynamic yet challenging landscape, marked by low political trust and limited participation. Fewer than half of young Jordanians trust public institutions, and voter turnout among youth is significantly lower than that of older citizens[3]. Representation in state institutions is minimal, with a 42% gap in parliamentary representation[4], and the vast majority of youth express disinterest in politics[5]. While some youth engage in civic activities, such as helping vulnerable populations or promoting environmental sustainability, this involvement is often individual and disconnected from organized movements or formal decision-making processes[6]. These patterns reveal a pressing need for initiatives that foster political trust and create inclusive platforms to empower youth in civic and political life.

Despite the limited participation, young Jordanians are eager to contribute to their communities and the nation's development, highlighting opportunities for transformative change. However, the socio-political environment and economic challenges often hinder youth mobilization and active participation. **Urban planning represents a critical area where youth participation can drive inclusive development.** Globally, youth-focused cultural initiatives have demonstrated success, such as projects involving game simulations with storytelling and local folklore[7]. Additionally, integrating art into urban planning makes the process more accessible, allowing youth to document neighborhood stories and reclaim narratives to foster inclusive development.

Reimagining Public Spaces: Youth-Led Solutions for Inclusive Urban Planning in Amman

Youth participation in urban policymaking is essential for creating inclusive, accessible, and equitable spaces that reflect community needs. Research consistently shows that collaborative urban planning enhances youth well-being and improves the quality of urban development[8]. Youth, as the group most impacted by the decline of public spaces, bring fresh perspectives that are crucial for revitalization efforts. **Their involvement ensures that public spaces are reimagined in ways that prioritize sustainability, inclusivity, and resilience, addressing the diverse needs of all community members[9].**

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3 OECD, Empowering Youth and Building Trust in Jordan, OECD Public Governance Reviews (OECD, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1787/8b14d38f-en.

4 OECD (2021)

5 Mohammad Aburumman and Walid Alkhatib, "Youth in Jordan," FES MENA Youth Study: Result Analysis (Freidrich-Ebert-Stiftung, March 2023), https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/20346.pdf.

6 Aburumman and Alkhatib.

7 Simon Weedy, "Shaping Tomorrow's Cities – the Role of Youth in Urban Design," Child in the City (blog), February 23, 2024, https://www.childinthecity.org/2024/02/23/shaping-tomorrows-cities-the-role-of-youth-in-urban-design/; Teti A. Argo, Shinta Prabonno, and Prima Singgi, "Youth Participation in Urban Environmental Planning through Augmented Reality Learning: The Case of Bandung City, Indonesia," Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 227 (July 2016): 808–14, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.06.149.

8 Zayed F. Zeadat, "Strategies toward Greater Youth Participation in Jordan's Urban Policymaking," Journal of Sustainable Real Estate 15, no. 1 (December 31, 2023): 2204534, https://doi.org/10.1080/19498276.2023.2204534.

9 Weedy, "Shaping Tomorrow's Cities – the Role of Youth in Urban Design."

In Jordan, however, youth engagement in urban planning remains fragile and sporadic, leaving their voices underrepresented in shaping the environments they inhabit. This marginalization undermines sustainable urban development, as policies fail to address the needs of all societal groups. The exclusion of youth leads to missed opportunities for developing cities that reflect the aspirations of future generations.

In Amman, neoliberal urban policies have privatized public spaces[10], marginalizing youth and other groups through exclusionary practices like entry fees and catering to specific demographics. This trend exacerbates the need for youth to play a central role in reclaiming public spaces. Henri Lefebvre's concept of the "right to the city"[11] advocates for cities as shared, inclusive environments that prioritize collective well-being over profit-driven interests. **Youth participation is essential in this context to counter inequality and reshape urban spaces into inclusive, sustainable environments that address the diverse needs of all citizens.**

> *"Urban planning can have a positive impact on Jabal Amman without compromising its cultural heritage through sustainable development that integrates modernity with tradition. This involves designing new projects that respect cultural and historical landmarks, allowing modern buildings to complement the urban landscape while preserving historical roots." A youth participant*

Globally, youth-focused cultural initiatives have demonstrated success in engaging young people in urban development. Projects involving storytelling, game simulations, and local folklore have proven effective in connecting youth with urban planning processes[12]. Additionally, integrating art into urban planning makes the process more accessible and inclusive. These initiatives allow youth to document their community's stories, reclaim narratives, and contribute to the creation of urban spaces that foster inclusivity and development. Engaging youth in these ways ensures that urban planning is not only reflective of their needs but also empowers them to be agents of positive change in their cities.

In line with these considerations, the youth participants in the dialogue sessions expressed their deep attachment to Jabal Amman and their desire to see it as a pioneer in leading youth-centric and climate-friendly city planning projects in Amman and Jordan. They stressed their desire to participate in the urban planning process because they see that the blatant gentrification of Jabal Amman incentivizing the privatization of spaces and the city: youth are concerned that Amman's urban planning trends risk eroding and erasing its authentic identity[13].

> *"In a future vision, Jabal Amman could become a model for smart cities, integrating technology with cultural heritage. These solutions can improve public services, mobility, and tourist access, allowing Jabal Amman to blend modernity with tradition and maintain its unique cultural identity, making it an attractive destination for both residents and visitors." A youth participant*

The civic engagement of youth in the urban planning process can be especially unique due to their deep knowledge of digital tools that can help build a vision of a sustainable future. During the dialogue sessions, the participants highlighted the potential of technology in shaping Jabal Amman's future, advocating for AI in urban solutions and drones for advanced mapping and the need to invest in the capacity building of youth to use these tools.

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10 Rami Farouk Daher, "Amman: Disguised Genealogy and Recent Urban Restructuring and Neoliberal Threats," in The Evolving Arab City (Routledge, 2008).

11 Henri Lefebvre, Writings on Cities, trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/henri-lefebvre-right-to-the-city.

12 Weedy, "Shaping Tomorrow's Cities – the Role of Youth in Urban Design"; Argo, Prabonno, and Singgi, "Youth Participation in Urban Environmental Planning through Augmented Reality Learning."

13 Mais Jafari, "Emerging Public Spaces in the City of Amman, Jordan: An Analysis of Everyday Life Practices" (Germany, Dortmund University, 2014), https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.3827.4805.

Addressing Climate Change and Advancing Environmental Sustainability

Cultural engagement has proven to be a powerful tool for addressing climate challenges, particularly in regions where environmental issues are intertwined with complex socio-political dynamics[14]. This is especially relevant for youth, who face the dual burden of being disproportionately impacted by climate change while often being excluded from critical discussions about its solutions.

In Jordan, rising concerns about water scarcity, rapid urbanization, shrinking green spaces, and growing car emissions have intensified young people's anxiety about their future.

Youth, with their fresh perspectives, are uniquely positioned to contribute to the climate change discourse. However, this conversation often relies on technical language that excludes their voices. To bridge this gap, community engagement through art and cultural initiatives can make climate discussions more accessible and actionable, amplifying youth voices and enabling them to share their concerns with policymakers.

The Jordanian Minister of Environment joined COP29 in 2024 to stress the need to integrate cultural heritage into climate initiatives and place arts and the creative sector at the center of climate action. He also reinforced the value of youth engagement, which was personified by the group of young people who joined COP29 alongside the minister[15].

Culture-based approaches go beyond changing behavior, leveraging diverse cultural values, knowledge, storytelling, design, creativity, and both tangible and intangible heritage to drive impactful solutions for the climate and biodiversity crises. One notable example of using art and culture to streamline the discourse around climate change is the efforts of the Jordanian artist Yassir al- Omari who uses recycled materials to create pieces that represent Jordanian heritage (figure 1).

Figure 2: An example of how participants imagined a sustainable future for Jabal Amman using AI.

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14 For instance, the Mosaic Rooms, in partnership with the Beirut Art Center, launched War-torn Ecologies: Resistant Worlds, which highlights Global South perspectives on the climate crisis. The program explores the impact of aggression on Middle Eastern ecologies while supporting efforts to address Lebanon's environmental challenges. In Cairo, Thiss Studio and CLUSTER collaborated on Localizing Climate Change: Creative Engagement in Community Parks, combining arts-based interventions, sustainable design workshops, and an upcycled Eco-Tower to address the commercialization of green spaces.

15 Jordan Times, "Jordan Leads in Linking Climate Action with Culture, Youth at COP29," Jordan Times, November 16, 2024, https://jordantimes.com/news/local/jordan-leads-linking-climate-action-culture-youth-cop29.

In the spirit of participation, we asked youth in the dialogue sessions to propose initiatives for Jabal Amman that could combat climate change and serve as a pilot project for broader implementation across Jordan. One of the initiatives that were suggested by participants was titled: "Green Jabal Amman" which focused on turning Jabal Amman into the pioneer neighborhood in environmental sustainability. The participants suggested increasing green spaces, building better infrastructure for public transportation, and campaign sessions regarding sustainability. Another initiative **suggested increasing public water drinking fountains that use recycled rainwater. Another interesting suggestion was to reuse glass and plastic bottles for vertical gardening.** The participants utilized AI to envision how these projects could be implemented as seen in Figure (2).

Empowering Youth through Community-Based Tourism: A Path to Sustainable Development and Cultural Preservation in Jordan

Tourism is Jordan's largest private sector employer, contributing 12%-15% to the annual GDP[16]. However, despite its importance, the sector has yet to reach its full potential, largely due to the region's geopolitical context. **Experts advocate for a shift toward more sustainable tourism practices, particularly community-based tourism[17].** This type of tourism focuses on engaging local communities in the development and management of tourism, ensuring that benefits are distributed equitably and sustainably[18].

Youth are well-suited for this model, bringing fresh perspectives, energy, and digital skills. Community-based tourism not only creates jobs for youth but also fosters a sense of belonging, empowering them as active contributors to society[19].

Initiatives help youth develop skills in leadership, arts, and tourism management while generating local employment in guiding, hospitality, and arts production. These projects provide hands-on experience, enhancing self-confidence, entrepreneurial abilities, and job readiness.

Strategic planning in tourism projects ensures job creation and community benefit. **Examples like the Jara Street Market in Jabal Amman promote cultural identity while boosting local resources and economic empowerment.** Community-based tourism emphasizes local ownership and participation, offering substantial economic, cultural, and social advantages. This approach is particularly vital in neighborhoods like Jabal Amman, where rising living costs and urban development threaten to displace long-standing residents and alter the area's character. Prioritizing resident empowerment, culture, and the environment is key to sustainable tourism.

However, tourism, especially in places like Jabal Amman, must balance preserving its authentic heritage with avoiding commercialization that caters to external stereotypes. One of the experts during the dialogue sessions highlighted how maintaining cultural integrity requires caution against orientalist approaches and manufactured tourism. **Community-inclusive strategies that support local entrepreneurs and engage residents in shaping their neighborhood's future are essential.**

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16 Jordan Strategy Forum, "Tourism Sector: Jordan's Economic Vision Roadmap," 2021, https://jsf.org/uploads/2022/12/tourism.pdf.

17 Yazan Mahadin, "Jordan's Path to Tourism Recovery, Resilience," Jordan Times, July 22, 2024, https://jordantimes.com/opinion/yazan-k-mahadin/jordans-path-tourism-recovery-resilience.

18 Most Habiba and Farhana Lina, "Community-Based Tourism (CBT): A Community Development Tool," European Journal of Business and Management, October 2023, https://doi.org/10.7176/EJBM/15-17-01.

19 Mari Partanen, Marika Kettunen, and Jarkko Saarinen, "Community Inclusion in Tourism Development: Young People's Social Innovation Propositions for Advancing Sustainable Tourism," Tourism Recreation Research 0, no. 0 (n.d.): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2023.2226040.

To ensure sustainable growth, it is vital to protect Jabal Amman's essence while fostering economic and touristic initiatives that benefit visitors and locals alike. As one expert noted, "Community-based tourism in Jabal Amman is not merely about attracting visitors; it is a sustainable strategy to support the local economy, preserve cultural identity, and improve residents' quality of life amid urban challenges." Investing in community-based tourism can transform rising costs of living and urban planning challenges into developmental opportunities.

A critical aspect of community engagement is fostering a deeper understanding of one's own country. Many youth express a lack of knowledge about Jordan, hindering their ability to contribute meaningfully. Addressing this knowledge gap is essential for empowering youth to engage effectively in community-based tourism and cultural preservation.

> *"Jabal Amman is undergoing rapid changes, where its cultural heritage is sometimes exploited under the guise of "development" to achieve financial gains. Its old buildings are being replaced with commercial complexes and hotels. While these modern structures have their significance, they sometimes come at the expense of the area's cultural character and historical details. This highlights the urgent need to encourage cultural events and cafes that preserve the heritage identity of the place, as urban development should not erase the beauty of a rich past." ~ a youth participant*

> *"Often when I take foreigners to see Amman, they ask me questions I can't answer because I don't know enough about my country. Sometimes, I feel foreigners know more about Jordan than we do." ~ a youth participant*

Recommendations:

Recommendations for Government and Municipalities

1. Invest in Youth-Centered Public Spaces
- Develop inclusive, safe, and accessible spaces like community arts hubs, youth parks, and recreational centers.
- Equip these spaces with facilities such as performance stages, art walls, and workshop areas for cultural and civic activities.
- Ensure equitable access to such spaces, especially in marginalized neighborhoods.

2. Integrate Art and Culture into Urban Planning
- Establish participatory design processes where youth contribute to urban infrastructure projects.
- Support public art initiatives, including murals and installations, to reflect community identity and values.
- Revitalize under-utilized spaces into hubs for cultural and social events.

3. Expand Access to Arts Education and Platforms for Creativity
- Include arts education in school curricula to enhance creativity and civic awareness.

4. Empower Youth Leadership in Cultural Initiatives
- Offer financial and logistical support for youth-led festivals, digital platforms, and exhibitions.
- Mandate youth participation in cultural and municipal decision-making bodies.
- Facilitate public-private partnerships to sustain youth-led cultural efforts.

5. Raise Awareness Among Youth About Their Rights and Urban Issues
- Launch campaigns to educate youth on their rights, urban challenges, and opportunities for engagement.

Recommendations for Donors

1. Funding and Supporting Projects: Investing in youth-led cultural and climate initiatives. Building on initiatives like Jabal Amman to expand their scope and strengthen the role of youth in urban planning, while enhancing their civil and community engagement.

2. Provide funding and scholarships to support and amplify youth creativity.

Recommendations for Civil Society

1. **Advocate for Inclusive Urban Planning Processes**
   - Organize workshops, forums, and focus groups to include diverse youth perspectives in urban planning and act as a facilitator between the youth and the government.
   - Ensure marginalized groups, such as young women and disabled youth, are represented in discussions.
   - Push for institutionalizing youth representation in municipal planning committees.

2. **Bridge the Gap Between Youth and Urban Planners**
   - Facilitate participatory design sessions to integrate youth ideas into urban strategies.
   - Host dialogues between youth and planners to ensure their contributions are recognized and valued.

3. **Build Capacity for Youth Leadership and Civic Participation**
   - Collaborate with institutions to offer internships and mentorships in urban development.
   - Support youth campaigns to improve community spaces and strengthen their leadership roles.

4. **Utilize Art to Address Urban Challenges**
   - Organize community-based art projects to revitalize neglected areas.
   - Host cultural events and exhibitions to foster community dialogue and collaboration.
   - Leverage storytelling and creative mediums to highlight urban issues and mobilize solutions.

5. **Advocate for Youth-Focused Urban Policies**
   - Push for mandatory youth consultations in urban planning processes.
   - Lobby for budget allocations prioritizing youth-centered initiatives like cultural hubs and arts programs.
   - Collaborate with global partners to adapt successful youth engagement models locally.

Annex

Hope is a Picture that's Worth a Thousand Words

Exhibition Photos
"Jabal Amman: Past, Present, and Future"

Hope is a Picture that is Worth a Thousand Word Photo Exhibition
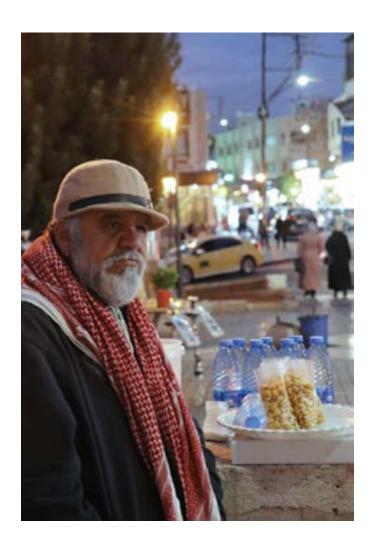
Urban Planning

Environment

Tourism

Social and Cultural Dimensions

Economic Development