

Passive or Restrained?

Youth civic engagement and
political participation in Jordan



النهضة العربية للديمقراطية والتنمية
Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development



مركز النهضة الاستراتيجي
Renaissance Strategic Center

جيل جديد
Generation G
A New Generation

Context

This action research has been conducted within the framework of the New Generation- GenG project, an initiative aimed at fostering gender-just and violence-free societies through youth empowerment and advocacy. In Jordan, one of the seven participating countries, the project is implemented in partnership with Rutgers, by the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD), and is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. **Generation G seeks to energize a renewed social movement over five years by promoting youth leadership and gender justice.** It will also enhance the dialogue between youth and policymakers to influence policies on youth and women's rights.

In the long term, the project aims to achieve the following strategic objectives:

- Public support -a growing number of young men and women are mobilized to promote gender justice.
- Policy changes -policymakers increasingly adopt, adapt, implement, and are accountable for gender-transformative and youth-inclusive policies and laws.
- Civil Society Organization (CSO) strengthening -civil society for gender justice is increasingly resilient, effective, gender transformative, and youth-inclusive.

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Executive Summary

The New Generation -GenG project was launched in Jordan, with the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, to energize a social movement by encouraging youth leadership and promoting gender justice. Gen-G aims to contribute to building youth awareness on issues of social and gender justice and to help youth and women in Jordan become better able to achieve their goals, needs, and aspirations through effective civic engagement, political participation, and by leading positive change. This research is the first in a series of research works that will be conducted within the framework of New Generation project. It focuses on the meaning of political participation for youth, building on the findings of the Generation G baseline report. The objective of this study is to identify the obstacles and opportunities for enhanced youth civic participation in Jordan and the forms of civic engagement most conducive to the interests. It breaks down and demystifies the concept of political participation by working on defining with youth to define various concepts that relate to political participation and the possible role of youth in making change happen.

The research focuses on the needs and perspectives of the Jordanian youth as the principal target of the project, and explores what underlies their needs, expectations, and perspectives. It was conducted between July and November 2022 in Jordan amongst members of five youth networks across the country. The research methodology built on networks and groups engaged with ARDD in various projects and activities, and the process of data collection was itself part of the raising awareness pathway. The methodology for the research used mixed tools, including a survey, eight focus group discussions and 26 semi-structured interviews. The analysis and findings of the report build on the results of the 2021 baseline report and a brief literature review on the topic of MENA youth political participation and civic engagement. Moreover, policy labs and awareness-raising sessions were organized to engage youth in a more meaningful and participatory manner during the research process.

Key Findings

- Generally, Jordanian youth understand and value the importance of political participation to achieve meaningful changes that could positively impact their lives and that of their communities.
- They tend to make a clear distinction between political participation and civic engagement and are, in the majority, reluctant to engage in manifest forms of political participation.
- Many youths stated being involved in non-political or latent forms of political action due to their lack of trust in the current political and institutional mechanisms and limited opportunities for youth participation.
- The tribal system is perceived as a key element in both the ability and hindrance of young people to participate in political life and make their voices heard.
- **There is a shared perception of the rights and duties linked to active citizenship. Youth understand that political and social change can only come through participation and engagement. the (lack of) enjoyment of Jordanian citizenship, and a recognition of the unequal status and benefits attached to certain categories of the population.**
- Respondents expressed their skepticism regarding the capacity of civil society organizations to effectively support them in accessing the political sphere and participating meaningfully in public life.
- A consensus prevails regarding the idea that Jordanian youth can play an essential and innovative role in the economic development of their country.
- Youths tend to make a clear distinction between social and economic development, as they have doubts about the willingness of the successive governments to induce social development.
- Most youths are inclined to think that they do not have the individual capacity to generate social movements to advocate for social change and political participation.
- Some youth nurture a holistic vision of socio-economic development that starts with the individual him(her)self, spreads to their community and benefits the whole society.

Introduction

This research explores youth political participation, building on the Generation G baseline report. Assuming that young people may not fully understand the nuances of political participation, it aims to clarify these concepts, identify barriers and opportunities for enhancing youth civic engagement in Jordan, and determine the forms of engagement that best align with youth interests. Incorporating youth's perspectives, this research seeks to clarify different political participation concepts and explore the potential role of youth in driving societal change.

Research Rationale and Baseline Data

Girls and women in Jordan face several forms of violence and discrimination that hinder their well-being and limit their development. SGBV can occur quite often, fueled by entrenched patriarchal norms, a culture of shame, and institutional and political factors. According to Jordan's Population and Family Health Survey (DHS) for 2017-2018, 29.5% of women aged 15-49 who have been married reported physical, sexual, or emotional abuse by their spouse or partner, with 41% of those abused suffering injuries¹. Moreover, women and girls also face limited educational, political, and economic opportunities compared to men and boys, and bear the primary responsibility for the home and childcare. As of 2019, Jordan had one of the lowest rates of economic participation for women globally, with a female labor force participation rate of 14% compared to 61% for males². Despite these challenges, youth in Jordan demonstrate a strong determination to overcome barriers and drive societal progress toward equity and inclusivity. Their active engagement in various civic activities highlights their potential to raise awareness and advocate for gender-sensitive norms, policies, laws, and opportunities.

Baseline Study Insights

A baseline study conducted in 2021 informed the Generation G program design by examining youth participation in politics and their support for gender justice. The study addressed three critical knowledge gaps:

1. Perceptions of gender equality outside the capital and urban centers;
2. SGBV opinions and needs as the topic is often taboo and not discussed in Jordan;
3. Population opinions on women's political participation.

The baseline study revealed several key findings:

1. Limited Awareness particularly among male youth and those in southern governorates, regarding gender equality.
2. Civil society actors do not feel comfortable implementing advocacy activities and the space to participate in decision-making is limited.
3. Female youth feel disengaged from national politics but are eager to lead change.
4. More awareness is needed about youth potential to drive changes, with a focus on male youth understanding the importance of women in politics.
5. Youth use social media to stay informed but feel their interests are under covered in both social and traditional media.

Importance of the Research

The baseline study highlighted the need to investigate **the links between political participation, civic engagement, and youth perceptions of their role in Jordan's socio-economic development**. Therefore, the research questions are directly informed by these baseline results, aiming to address knowledge gaps and challenges identified in the study, and ultimately contribute to fostering meaningful youth engagement and empowerment.

¹ <https://jordan.unfpa.org/en/node/22552>

² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.MA.NE.ZS?locations=JO>

Methodology

Pathway for Change

The methodology was built with ARDD's youth networks. The research targeted young men and women aged 18-29, beneficiaries of the Generation G project, part of ARDD's youth network across all Jordanian governorates. This diversity ensured a comprehensive understanding of different contexts and social backgrounds. **The methodology emphasizes active participation, empowering youth not just as respondents but as contributors to the research and project.** Participants received specialized training on youth political participation, civic engagement, and gender justice.

The mixed-method approach included both quantitative and qualitative tools, comprising 73 survey respondents (42 female, 31 male); eight focus groups discussion with 61 participants (31 female, 30 male); 26 semi-structured interviewees (15 female, 11 male). The youth participants were primarily Jordanian (59), with others being Syrian (8), Palestinian (2), and from other nationalities (1), representing various regions of Jordan. Moreover, the analysis was also informed by (a) the **needs assessment** conducted in 2021 using a youth survey, focus group discussions, a stakeholder mapping, power analysis, desk review, key informant interviews, and a survey targeting CSOs, (b) **literature review** on the topic of MENA youth political participation and civic engagement and on youth in general. Additional methodological tools were **internal trainings** provided by ARDD research experts to researchers, youth, and staff involved in data collection. **Four policy labs** held in 2022 focusing on political science education, human and social capital, freedom of speech, and social justice's impact on political and economic growth. These labs ran concurrently with data collection, allowing for discussion and validation of some research data. **This methodology ensured meaningful and inclusive youth participation.**

Challenges and Limitations

While the research gathered valuable insights, it faced certain limitations. The data collected did not disclose the social backgrounds of the youth, limiting the ability to analyze attitudes towards political participation at the intersections of class, education level, and gender. Furthermore, the results indicated the need for more research on the relationship between youth tribal affiliation and their views on political participation and gender justice. Tribal influences on youth identity and values were evident and warrant further exploration with demographic data to strengthen the Generation G action research.

The three research questions guiding this study are:

1. How and why are the concepts of political participation and civic engagement linked?
2. Would youth associate political participation with active citizenship?
3. How can the perception of youth of their role in socio-economic development contribute to enhanced political participation at the community and national levels?

1. The Scope of Political Participation and Civic Engagement

Research question 1: How and why are the concepts of political participation and civic engagement linked?

Youth political participation refers to the active engagement of young people in the political processes of their society. Distinguishing the below forms of political participation, including non-participation, can help to understand the wider spectrum of political behaviour amongst youth in Jordan³. The authors of the article "Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology" understand manifest political participation as formal and direct forms of public political engagement that include voting, political party membership, protest activities and public campaigning to raise awareness on an issue, typically within the framework of representative democracy. **Manifest political participation** is actions directed towards influencing governmental decisions and

³ Ekman, Joakim, and Erik Amnå. 2012. "Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology." *Human Affairs* 22 (3): 283–300. doi:10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1.

political outcomes. In contrast, **latent political participation** is explained as less direct and includes more informal activities, civic engagement and social involvement beyond formal organizations and often voluntary activities⁴. Latent political participation refers to activities by ordinary citizens, as individuals or collective, that are intended to influence circumstances in society that are relevant to others outside their own family and circle of close friends.

Civic engagement refers to actions taken by an individual or group to promote the well-being of their community. Civic engagement is thus one type of political participation that involves indirectly participating in the political process through activities that take place within the civil domain such as, for example, ordinary citizens who get organized to solve local problems or to improve conditions for certain groups in society. Civic engagement implies actions such as discussing politics with friends and family or online, volunteering in social work or charity work or faith-based community work. Through voluntary work to improve conditions in the local community, donating money, discussing politics, following political issues, recycling for environmental reasons and so on, individuals and groups can have a significant impact on their society and contribute to future manifest political participation that can lead to shaping the direction of their country.

Alternatively, active and passive forms of non-participation exist on the other side of the spectrum of analyzing political behaviour. The opposite of political participation refers to people who do not care about politics in general. A distinction is made between people that perceive politics as uninteresting and unimportant, a passive form of disengagement, and people who feel resentful or disillusioned by politics, a form referred to as active disengagement.

Young people in the MENA region reluctantly associate civic engagement with political participation, partly due to the limiting circumstances and tight control by authorities for political activities in the region. The majority of youth respondents in the study “Coping with Uncertainty: Youth in the Middle East and North Africa” indicated that the foremost themes that motivate civic engagement relate to helping the poor and vulnerable and protecting the environment, followed by other themes distant from politics⁵. Civic engagement motivated by social and political changes and promoting equal rights of men and women comes at the bottom of the list. **As Generation G addresses youth political participation in Jordan with a gender transformative approach, recognizing the broad range of political participation as well as disengagement is important to understand the role of youth in civic action and capitalize on this engagement.**

Assumption 1:

If the various forms of political participation are acknowledged, including active non-participation, there will be a more accurate and nuanced understanding of youth civic engagement in Jordan.

2. Youth Political Participation and Active Citizenship

Research question 2: would youth associate political participation with active citizenship?

To better understand the dynamics of youth political participation in Jordan, it is crucial to explore the concept of active citizenship and its implications. **Active citizenship** is defined by the European Youth Forum as a status in a political, legal, and social community based on a set of rules that define membership in the political community⁶. These rules refer both to legal rights and political rights. Legal rights include freedom of speech, thought and religious belief. Political rights include the right to participate and exercise power. Active citizenship serves as a foundational element in motivating youth to participate in political processes. When young people perceive themselves as active citizens **with rights and responsibilities** within their society, they are more inclined to

4 Ekman, Joakim, and Erik Amnå. 2012. “Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology.” *Human Affairs* 22 (3): 283–300. doi:10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1.

5 Coping with uncertainty: Youth in the Middle East and North Africa / Edited for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung by Jörg Gertel and Ralf Hexel. - London : Saqi Books, 2018 <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/18100.pdf>

6 Life-wide Learning for Active Citizenship - Position Paper (2002) European Youth Forum. <https://tools.youthforum.org/policy-library/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2002-lifewide-learning-active-citizenship.pdf> (Accessed: 05 August 2023).

engage in political activities aimed at influencing decision-making processes and shaping public policies. This sense of civic duty and agency is essential for fostering a culture of political participation among youth. Moreover, the accessibility and effectiveness of institutional channels play a crucial role in facilitating youth political engagement. Safe, accessible, and inclusive institutional mechanisms enable young individuals to voice their concerns, participate in decision-making processes, and contribute to the governance of their communities. However, youth political participation can be influenced by various factors, including socio-economic disparities, institutional barriers, and levels of political trust. In contexts where youth face systemic barriers to participation, their ability to engage meaningfully in political processes may be constrained.

Data from the latest Arab Barometer Jordan shed light on the evolving perceptions of youth regarding their role in governance and public affairs. According to the report, there has been a notable decline in confidence in the government, with trust levels 41 points lower than during the Arab Uprisings in the early 2010s.

This decline is attributed to various factors, one of the primary reasons for the decline in confidence is the persistent economic challenges facing Jordanian youth. High unemployment rates, particularly among the younger population, coupled with the stagnant wages and limited job opportunities, have created a sense of economic insecurity and disillusionment. Moreover, despite ongoing government efforts to combat corruption, the issue remains pervasive, frustrating youth's perception regarding their effective contribution. They recognize that continued and decisive action against corrupt practices is crucial to fully restoring public confidence and ensuring fair governance, and they can be an active part of this change which will help dismantle barriers to social mobility and foster a more just society.

The correlation between active citizenship and confidence in governmental institutions is evident, particularly in how institutional trust shapes youth engagement. As youth seek meaningful participation and influence, their trust in public institutions significantly impacts their willingness to engage in national politics and civic activities. Trust in public institutions is a crucial catalyst for such engagement. When young people perceive these institutions as transparent, accountable, and responsive to their needs, they are more likely to participate actively in politics and civic affairs. Additionally, accessible institutional channels, such as inclusive voting procedures, civic education programs, and youth councils, are essential for facilitating youth involvement in political activities.

Assumption 2:

If youth gain trust in public institutions and institutional channels become accessible to them, they will be more motivated to actively engage in national politics and more confident in their ability to effect positive change in their society and community.

3. Youth as Actors of Change: Investing in Human Capital to Achieve Social Justice.

Research question 3: How can the perception of youth of their role in socio-economic development contribute to enhanced political participation at the community and national levels?

Young people in countries across the Middle East and North Africa played a prominent role in the protests that shook the region in the early 2010s. Despite being better educated than their parent's generation, they face a myriad of challenges, including limited opportunities for social mobility due to insufficient job creation to match population growth. The limited opportunities for the development of skills, capacities, knowledge and access to health, education, and innovation for youth in Jordan are elements that hinder their potential to engage and act meaningfully and impactfully in society. According to the World Bank's 2020 HCI, between 2010 and 2020, the value of the HCI in Jordan decreased from 0.56 to 0.55. A study by Mercy Corps has found that socio-economic status and opportunities are a major indicator for predicting levels of civic engagement amongst youth in the

MENA region⁷. Young women, youth with less education, unemployed and from rural areas were shown least likely to be civically engaged. These categories of youths remain largely underrepresented in the political arena, which in turn contributes to their disengagement. The relationship between engagement, participation and human capital, in this sense, can be read as mutual. The latest Jordan Report published by the Arab Barometer indicated that youths with a college education or higher (16 percent) are more likely to volunteer for a cause they care about than those who have a secondary degree or less (9 percent)⁸. The Mercy Corps study suggests that contribution to socio-economic development in the MENA region requires civic engagement programs to include youth from rural areas and young women. At the same time, outreach and program strategies should be considerate of and adapt to the socio-economic status of youth in targeted areas. An understanding of the mutual impact of investment in human capital and political participation is crucial, as it is only when youth feel catered for and supported in their goals and needs that they can trust institutions and aim to be active and effective within them. In this sense, investing in human capital means strengthening the social contract and generalized trust within a society, making it more capable of pursuing, collectively, social justice for all.

An interesting study published in 2020 looked at youth in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Lebanon in relation to mobilization. Its findings suggest a further level that needs to be kept in mind when analyzing youth political participation and their civic engagement: i.e., the different forms and spaces through which youth engage in their daily lives with society at large. The study proposes a more nuanced approach to youth political participation in the region from the early 2010s onwards⁹. It points to a change in attitude that went from public political engagements -often unpaid- to more personal goals, focusing on education, finding work, and working to sustain amidst a failing economy and additional factors shaping everyday priorities. Coupled with the limited prospects of influencing politics in their country, individual and collective resignation from public political participation redirects youth to focus on areas directly relevant to their everyday lives and future. Accordingly, youth will not -even if they would like to- prioritize voluntary forms of engagement in politics unless it supports their aspirations for the future.

Assumption 3:

If youth, including the most marginalized ones, connect the impact of their political participation to sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development, they will be more willing to transform grievances into action for change in public life and politics in Jordan.

Research Results

Research question 1: Towards a broader understanding of political participation

The research assessed the understanding of political participation amongst youth by formulating several questions that attempted to assess their knowledge of this concept from several angles.

In the survey, respondents were asked whether they participated in a rally for a cause, a campaign, a political party meeting or a meeting with a local political candidate. Respondents were then asked to rank various forms of political participation in order of relevance and to identify other forms of political participation that they considered missing from the list.

⁷ Mercy Corps. 2012. *Civic Engagement of Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: An Analysis of Key Drivers and Outcomes*. https://europe.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/mena_youth_civic_engagement_study_-_final.pdf, p. 11-15.

⁸ Arab Barometer. Jordan Country Report 2021-2022. https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Jordan_Report-EN.pdf, p. 31-32.

⁹ Henri Onodera, Bruno Lefort, Karim Maiche & Sofia Laine (2020) Dynamics of engagement among youth in Arab Mediterranean countries, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 25:2, 280-303, DOI: [10.1080/13629387.2018.1547197](https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2018.1547197).

In the semi-structured interviews, informants were asked what their understanding is of political participation, what they considered as their role in politics and why and whether they themselves got involved in activities related to politics. They were also asked to answer and elaborate on whether they thought the youth, women and persons with disabilities should be participating in politics.

The focus group discussions examined factors influencing political participation, such as discussing politics with friends, family, or community members. In the discussions, the different forms of participation were also explored, as well as the knowledge of organizations or structures focused on political activities, and whether participants considered political participation necessary.

- *Civic engagement and political participation*

Generally, participants described civic engagement as contributing to and a catalyst for positive change in the community, or country at large, through activities such as volunteering, scouting, and participating in workshops and roundtables on societal issues. In the surveys, 21 respondents acknowledged participating in one form of civic engagement, such as recycling, creating unions and joining a civil society organization. Civic engagement was also considered an opportunity for networking and beneficial for personal growth, in addition to filling the gap between the government and NGOs. Furthermore, participants viewed civic engagement as easily linked to activities in everyday life. To a large extent, their understanding corresponded with the existing literature researched in the previous chapter. **The link between civic engagement and political participation was viewed as evident to advance societal changes.** However, in some focus groups, participants perceived civic engagement and political participation as two separate concepts instead of seeing political participation as one form of civic engagement. They tended to define civic engagement activities as non-political. One group underlined that the role and relationships between social institutions and organizations should be focused on jointly creating social change instead of competing against each other.

Political participation was seen as limited in scope and effectiveness due to issues such as corruption and the tribal system. While voting, campaigning, and demonstrating were mainly associated with the concept of political participation, many felt that the political system maintained robust and well-defined boundaries that limited possibilities for youth to influence, and that political money played too significant a role in the access to decision-making spheres within the political arena. Despite these limitations, some participants still saw value in political participation as a medium to make their voices heard and contribute to change. Generally, **participants considered non-political or more latent forms of political participation as an avenue easier and more accessible to contribute to the development of Jordan without ignoring the importance and need for more manifest and direct forms of political participation in creating change.**

- *Relevance of politics in daily life*

When asked questions about their interest in political participation and the boundaries for youth to engage, participants in the focus group discussions largely answered that politics were rarely discussed with their family or friends. Others clarified that only topics of shared interest were discussed, and some limited their political discussions to like-minded people with a clear understanding of politics. In one group, the sentiment was, “Why talk politics when I have no rights.” The general feeling that it was better to avoid talking about politics seemed to resonate with most participants. Interestingly, participants reported feeling more comfortable discussing politics with their family than with friends.

In terms of connections to those involved in politics, a similar feeling of avoidance seemed to dominate. Participants shared either not knowing people in politics or, if they did, avoided political discussions with them. Some groups also made a clear distinction between persons involved in politics and those involved in civil society; mixing both groups in social gatherings was generally considered uncommon. Moreover, one group stated that they prefer discussing politics with influential people from the civil society, as they consider them to have a greater and more efficient role in social change. Only one respondent discussed politics with friends involved in political work. Overall, it appeared that **youth felt a significant distance between themselves and politicians, and some attributed this to the idea that, from an early age, the political field is inaccessible to them.**

A few participants openly expressed the fear of getting too involved in politics, stating that certain forms of political participation could be viewed as against the law. Some would rather be involved in raising awareness about political participation, not so much participating themselves. One participant was more interested in the philosophy of political participation and the policies pertaining to meaningful change. As such, it is unsurprising that a 2019 study on civic engagement in the MENA region by Arab Barometer showed that only 5-10 percent of Jordanian youth reported having taken part in politics beyond voting, such as engagement through peaceful demonstrations, signing petitions and political meetings¹⁰. Of the countries analysed, Jordanian youth are the least likely to have engaged in these participation means.

• *Role of civil society organizations in supporting youth civic engagement*

The answers in the focus groups regarding knowledge of institutions and organizations that stimulate political participation were diverse. Out of eight focus groups, the majority of participants in three of them lacked knowledge of such institutions or organizations. In other focus groups, participants mentioned various Jordanian civil society organizations, INGOs, UN agencies, and some royal foundations dedicated to youth, especially after the royal directive stimulating youth participation. According to one participant, however, youth are not interested in participating and developing skills.

Some participants felt that the impact of these initiatives was limited because of the seemingly larger accountability towards the donor than towards the constituency group, i.e., the youth and the efforts to achieve social change and gender justice. Moreover, **funded initiatives tend to be viewed as following a ‘Western’ agenda or culture.**

As for the royal directive, as part of Jordan’s policymakers’ vision for political and economic reforms, a Royal Committee was formed in 2021, consisting of ninety-two members from diverse political spectrums¹¹. The Committee’s primary mission was to propose alterations to the political life in Jordan. After diligent work, they presented a 10-year roadmap for political reforms, including changes to the laws governing political parties and elections¹². Among these envisioned reforms was a focus on fostering greater engagement of women and youth as integral components of Jordan’s political landscape. The Parliament subsequently ratified these proposed amendments in 2022, and they were brought into effect through a royal decree.

• *Perceptions on youth and political participation*

On the question of whether they would consider political participation, the majority of the interviewed youth expressed no particular desire or interest.

“ I engage in any domain except politics or political involvement. ”

One of the respondents

10 Arab Barometer. 2019. *Civic Engagement in the Middle East and North Africa*. https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/AB_Civic_Engagement_public-opinion-2019-1.pdf, p. 13-14.

11 *King entrusts Rifai with chairing Royal Committee to modernise political system* (no date) *Jordan News Agency (Petra)*. Available at: https://petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=35303&lang=en&name=en_news (Accessed: 06 August 2023).

12 For the whole report please refer to <https://www.moppa.gov.jo/Ar/> (Accessed: 06 August 2023).

The reasons given were that many lack confidence in their impact and are confronted with barriers and legal limits to participation. A general unwillingness to join a political party or run for local elections seemed to dominate the interviews; others considered running if the political system were reformed. One of the interviewees contemplated the prospect of joining a political party “provided that its values and objectives resonate with my own intellectual beliefs”. The answers are reflective of several reports, including the Center for Strategic Studies 2019 report, highlighting that a very low percentage of Jordanians trust political parties¹³. In 2020, the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) published a report showing the participation of women in political parties is around 28 percent. In the JNCW report, only a minority expressed interest in observing elections, participating in peaceful demonstrations, commemorating international days, partaking in volunteer programs, and acquiring knowledge of political and civil society.

In the semi-structured interviews, many responded positively when asked whether youth should participate in politics. They mentioned that it is important to have youth nationwide represented and in decision-making circles. One of the interviewees stated that “the youth are the cornerstone of society, and political engagement is their rightful claim. Hence, it is imperative to ensure that their voices resonate through political roles”. However, four interviewees chose not to answer this question. Nine participants echoed the importance of the role of men in political participation. One interviewee recalled a directive issued by the King that should encourage youth political participation.

“We would distance ourselves from traditional political parties out of fear of being potentially perceived as acting against the government or the law.”

Several interviewees

Four interviewees expressed the importance of protecting youth when participating and the need to restore trust in the political establishment. Overall, participants agreed that for youth to participate, a certain trust should be felt concerning youth’s safety and security when engaging. It was unclear whether the fear of, at best unpleasant, at worst dangerous, consequences was based on unfounded or legitimate threats. For example, some fear losing access to university in case of political participation. In the policy labs, when some of the results of the research were discussed, youth expressed the same perceived fear that political activism would jeopardize youth’s future, grants for studies, and graduation. Despite the challenges and risks expressed, interviewees believed that everyone has the right to participate in politics without discrimination and that a mechanism should exist to ensure youth voices are heard.

Research question 2: Youth political participation: between human rights and social norms

The topic of citizenship – or *المواطنة* – was tackled during the focus group discussions through questions on the definition and importance of this concept. Once the meaning and opinions on the significance of the term were clarified, participants were asked what they considered their rights and obligations as citizens. Finally, the facilitator steered the direction towards the scope of these rights and obligations for women and persons with disabilities.

13 <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/20346.pdf>

- **Defining citizenship and identity**

The answers given in the eight focus group discussions reflected a differing understanding of citizenship, and many approached the discussion on defining the term from a philosophical angle.

Jordan's geographical location also bears significance in terms of accessing rights, highlighting the unequal distribution of developed infrastructure for higher education, hospitals, and other essential services across various governorates.

Some participants questioned whether citizenship is determined by a sense of belonging or by possession of a passport, and what that means for loyalty towards a country. Others linked citizenship directly to nationality and perceived that not having a nationality limits rights and possibilities for political participation significantly.

Participants highlighted the significance of legal status in relation to political participation, particularly noting the challenges faced by individuals who lack formal documentation or encounter obstacles in completing registration processes. These challenges extend beyond political engagement to affect access to employment and other basic rights. It's evident that issues surrounding citizenship status have profound implications for individuals' sense of belonging and access to rights and opportunities. One participant shared how their life circumstances changed after certain legal processes were completed.

“When I married a Jordanian, I acquired citizenship, and it became easier to apply for government jobs and to participate in elections. How can I be a good citizen when the country in which I live and perform all my duties does not give me the most basic rights? For me, citizenship is tied to an inner sense of belonging to a place, not tied to nationality”

- **How to engage with human rights contextually to strengthen political participation**

The principal rights to be provided by the government mentioned during the focus group discussions include access to education, healthcare, food security, and freedom of expression. Basic rights were explained as including access to food and job opportunities. In practice, however, the discussions highlighted that these rights are not consistently guaranteed without using nepotism ('wasta'). Further, participants commented that while rights for women and persons with disabilities are enshrined in the law, they are not consistently implemented or respected due to some of the traditional aspects of the prevailing culture, depending on the community. Several participants highlighted the imbalances in rights for women and persons with disabilities. Awareness raising amongst youth was mentioned as a primary tool to counter biases regarding the role of women in politics and the necessity of gender equality, considered as women's right to full and equal participation in political, civil, economic, social, and cultural life in Jordan. In parallel, participants underlined the importance of addressing concepts like women's rights with the appropriate terminology reflecting the Jordanian context to avoid resorting to the 'Western' agenda of gender.

Participants identified the tribal structures as playing an important role in securing rights for their community members within the context of their traditions. The prominence of tribal structures has repercussions for notions of social reciprocity, the status of individual families, and relationships between the sexes. They highlighted the direct correlation between a tribe's strength or prominence and the level of rights and benefits enjoyed by its members. Significantly, the presence of certain tribe members in high-ranking positions within the government and other state organizations suggests a potential link between their positions of power and the distribution of rights and benefits to their respective tribes. These tribe members, by virtue of their influential positions, exert additional influence over the allocation of privileges, which in turn impacts the socio-political landscape within Jordanian communities. This intricate interplay between tribal affiliations and the distribution of

privileges and rights, and the traditional gender roles underscores the complex dynamics at play, shaping the societal framework of Jordan. Recognizing and understanding these influential dynamics can offer valuable insights for policymakers in promoting social cohesion and inclusive development within the unique context of tribal communities in Jordan.

Some participants who Moreover, the participants' observations shed light on a prevailing issue within the nation's governance system - the evident gap between the existence of laws and their practical implementation in the day-to-day lives of citizens.

In regards to obligations, participants mentioned respecting the laws of the country, good work ethics, and professionalism. One of the respondents stated that "the legal framework governs the relationships between citizens and individuals, safeguarding all rights, particularly when individuals are cognizant of their duties and entitlements. This awareness empowers them to lead a sound civil life". **Women were separately mentioned as having obligations to care for the children and the household, although some youths are calling for equal rights and for raising awareness about the concept of gender equality. Here again, participants were cautious about addressing gender equality in a culture-sensitive manner appropriate in the Jordanian context.**

Research question 3: The role of youth in making change: a stronger social contract for wider social justice

As aforementioned, the baseline report indicated reluctance amongst youth, particularly young women, to engage in national politics, although expressing interest in leading change. The assumption prior to the data collection was that youth are torn between aspirations to change primarily their economic status and social norms and structures that provide them with a certain level of stability at the family and community levels. The youth, especially young women, seem to grapple with a delicate balance between their aspirations for economic, societal, and political changes and being mindful of established social norms and structures that offer a sense of stability at both the family and community levels. This assumption arises from the recognition that many young individuals, particularly young women, face a dual challenge: seeking to become more active in driving transformations while being affected and influenced by traditions that limit their ability to achieve their aspirations. On one hand, they strive for improved economic circumstances and social standing, seeking opportunities for growth and upward mobility. On the other hand, they are mindful of the cohesive values and traditions within their families and communities, which contribute to their sense of belonging and support systems. As a result, the path towards realizing their aspirations may be hindered by the tensions between modern aspirations and traditional constraints, adding complexity to their journey of socio-economic development.

The questions in the survey, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were hence designed to assess to what extent youth, including marginalised youth, perceive themselves as possible change makers in their country in terms of socio-economic development. In the surveys, respondents were asked their opinion on whether youth political participation can improve the socio-economic conditions in Jordan. Respondents were also asked whether they considered themselves capable of improving socio-economic conditions and human development. **Of the respondents, 72 out of 73 answered in the affirmative when asked whether youth political participation can improve socio-economic development in Jordan.** The link that emerged, again, from the semi-structured interviews was between the support that youth need to be better equipped to pursue their individual and collective goals and their ability and willingness to participate in collective processes of political, social and economic change.

• Vision of socio-economic development in Jordan

When it comes to socio-economic development in Jordan, some participants appear to prioritize supporting investment, reducing taxes, and identifying hidden markets that can generate profits. Interviewed youth largely separated the terms economic and social development, with the latter associated with raising awareness, education, and promoting values and principles. Some interviewees have proposed developing new professional courses at the universities to link higher education and youth competencies to the existing labour market. Further to that,

interviewees pointed to accurate representation in the political arena to voice their needs and concerns on the status of socio-economic development in Jordan. Interviewees also highlighted the challenges faced due to corruption and tribal connection when it comes to access to the labour market. Some referred to problems with earning a dignified salary based on competence instead of an associated clan and ending discrimination based on an individual's status in the country. Additionally, ideas on poverty reduction and income generation were mentioned. Many hinted at the challenges of securing a job after graduating across the governorates, especially when most jobs are concentrated in and around Amman.

The observations made during these interviews allude to varying levels of understanding and vision for socio-economic development, with some lacking a clear idea of what a developed region or Jordan would mean. However, there is widespread recognition amongst those interviewed that youth have a role to play in the development of their country and that change can start at the individual level. The role of youth is perceived as crucial to accelerate development, and the general belief is that **investment is needed in the ideas of youth through opportunities to participate more actively in politics**. Interviewees added that development is based on capacity building and technological developments. Several interviewees stated that change begins with the youth through facilitating projects in the field of economic development. In many interviews, youth mentioned that change occurs when the individual changes first, then his or her surroundings and ultimately society through personal development and curricula in educational institutions rooted in values like justice, love, and respect.

• *Role of youth in the socio-economic development in Jordan and the region*

When asked about their role in advocating for change at the regional, national and community levels, answers ranged from raising awareness on nature preservation to investing in self-learning opportunities, to joining civil society initiatives, to representing Jordan internationally. Social media was regularly mentioned as the main tool for communicating knowledge and experiences. A participant pointed out the significance of her role in driving positive change, stating that “my contribution is through influencing the external circle, including friends, relatives, and neighbours, by means of attending training workshops across various fields”. A few interviewees identified the importance of developing themselves first, unlocking their talent and passion for inspiring others and spreading values contributing to socio-economic development. While many interviewees perceived themselves as having agency in actively seeking ways to create change and seeing a role for youth in their country's development, some feel they lack the power or resources to make a difference. Only a few see themselves as capable of working with others to generate movements of change.

• *Advocating for an inclusive socio-economic development*

Interestingly, while there is significant interest in socio-economic development, there are limited responses around political participation. Interviewees that hinted at political participation expressed caution in taking agency and getting involved in advocating for change through politics. Based on the answers given during the interviews, no clear link was established to understand how the government would allocate a budget to improve social protection and other benefits suggested by the interviewees while simultaneously reducing taxes. This suggests that there may be a need for more discussion and awareness-raising to establish a link between political participation and policies influencing socio-economic development and the link between a more just society and promoting gender justice and inclusivity.

Insights from Youth

The findings from the four policy briefs underscore the critical importance of addressing knowledge gaps, social justice, social capital, human capital, and freedom of speech to enhance political participation among Jordanian youth. These concepts shaped all aspects of the research and were validated through active engagement with the youth, who concurred on the necessity of investing to be able to fully participate in the country's political life. The policy briefs highlight that political participation cannot be effectively promoted without first ensuring that youth have access to comprehensive civic education, equitable social structures, strong community networks, and the freedom to express their views openly. Indeed, they reveal a significant need for improved civic education that bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical political engagement. The youth recognized that understanding political processes, rights, and responsibilities is foundational to meaningful participation. Moreover, addressing social justice is paramount, as equitable access to resources and opportunities empowers youth to engage actively in civic life. Overcoming systemic barriers and ensuring fair treatment across all social strata are essential for fostering an inclusive political environment. Also, strengthening social capital through community networks and trust-building initiatives is crucial. The dialogue indicated that robust interpersonal and community relationships facilitate collective action and empower youth to mobilize for political and social change. Finally, ensuring freedom of expression is a cornerstone for democratic participation. The youth emphasized that the ability to express opinions and engage in open dialogue without fear of reprisal is vital for their active involvement in political processes. They recommend safeguarding these rights to create a more participatory and responsive political landscape.

The youth's agreement on these investments reflects their commitment to overcoming existing challenges and contributing to the nation's democratic development. Addressing these foundational elements is essential for Jordan to cultivate a politically active and engaged youth population, ultimately leading to a more just and equitable society.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The research seems to indicate that, generally, Jordanian youth understand and value the importance of political participation to achieve meaningful changes that could positively impact their lives and that of their communities. However, most of them are reluctant to engage in political activities due to fear of security threats and other retaliatory measures, their lack of trust in the current political and institutional mechanisms, the perceived ineffectiveness of political systems, and the legal and societal barriers that restrict youth participation. As a result, they prefer to be involved in non-political or latent forms of political participation. Moreover, they tend to view with skepticism the capacity of civil society organizations to effectively support them in accessing the political sphere and participating meaningfully in public life.

Jordanian youth have different opinions regarding the meaning of active citizenship, defining it as a sense of belonging or a feeling of loyalty, among others. However, there seems to be a consensus about the rights and obligations associated with this concept. According to them, active citizens should be aware of and able to exercise their fundamental rights and be active in pursuing inclusive education, healthcare, food security, livelihood and freedom of expression. Some factors such as "wasta" (client relationships), weak law implementation, lack of decentralization of services, and societal norms or traditions may limit or impede the enjoyment of these rights. In some instances, on the other hand, traditional social relations do participate, sometimes, in supporting access to services. Tribal affiliation, for example, is perceived, to some extent, favorably as a guarantee of greater enjoyment of these rights in some parts of Jordanian society. At the same time, the status of women and persons with disabilities and their entitlements to these rights is considered unequal compared to that of men. All of these tensions, many youth convened, need to be addressed, however, through an approach that is respectful of local sensitivities and culture.

An overall consensus prevails regarding the idea that Jordanian youth can play an important and innovative role in the economic development of their country. For this change to happen, they consider that the acquisition of knowledge and capacities aligned with the needs of the market and greater political representation to express their needs would be supportive factors. Nevertheless, they tend to make a clear distinction between social and economic development as they have doubts about the willingness of their government to induce social development. This could explain their reluctance to engage into politics to advocate for a fair and effective socio-economic development. They are also inclined to think that they do not have the individual capacity to generate social movements for this purpose. Interestingly, some participating youth nurture a holistic vision of socio-economic development that starts with the individual him(her)self, spreads to their community and benefits the whole society.

The recommendations follow the order of the assumptions initially formulated.

Assumption 1:

If the various forms of civic participation are acknowledged, including active non-participation, there will be a more accurate and nuanced understanding of youth civic participation in Jordan.

1. Further research should be conducted to identify ways and opportunities for Jordanian youth to influence and engage in the political sphere that are not limited to conventional conceptions of political participation in Western democracies.
2. Educational institutions should integrate civic education and critical thinking into the curriculum in a view to cultivate a culture of civic engagement from an early age. This approach would help instill an understanding of rights, responsibilities, and the importance of active participation.
3. Civil society organizations should build on youth's interests, needs and diverse forms of civic engagement to encourage them to be active and productive citizens.
4. Donors should give primary consideration to youths from the peripheries, youth's own priorities and the potential for impact in the choice of projects aiming to enhance civic engagement and political participation.

Assumption 2:

If youth gain trust in public institutions, and institutional channels become accessible to them, they will be more motivated to actively engage in national politics and more confident in their ability to effect positive change in their society and community.

1. Further research should be conducted to better understand the impact of the tribal system in Jordan on the political sphere and youth's perceptions of and role within this system.
2. The Jordanian government shall adopt swift and effective measures to ensure the implementation of the laws and policies that aim to enhance youth participation in the political and public spheres.
3. Mechanisms shall be established that ensure transparency in decision-making processes, resources allocation and the implementation of policies, enhancing youth's confidence in public institutions.
4. Greater power and resources should be devolved to Governorate councils, enabling youth to influence local policies that directly impact their communities. This decentralization could foster a sense of ownership and motivate youth to engage at the local level.
5. International and local NGOs and civil society organizations should advocate towards Jordanian authorities for the realization of youth's right of expression, association and political participation.
6. Inclusive platforms should be established that facilitate open dialogues between youth and decision-makers and foster mutual understanding and cooperation. These platforms should embrace diverse perspectives and ensure that the voices of marginalized groups, including women and minority communities, are heard and considered.

Assumption 3:

If youth, including the most marginalized ones, connect the impact of their political participation to sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development, they will be more willing to transform grievances into action for change in public life and politics in Jordan.

1. Mechanisms should be established that allow Jordanian youth to participate at the local and national levels in the development of socio-economic policies and plans.
2. Youth, particularly those from the periphery and NEETs (not in employment, education, or training), should be given access to training schemes and grant opportunities to develop skills and launch initiatives that support their communities' growth and well-being.
3. Civil society organizations should raise awareness of youth on the importance of both social and economic developments and their close connection with gender justice and social inclusion.

