

CONFERENCE REPORT

YOUTH CITIZENSHIP IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES:

Promoting Citizenship, Enacting Citizenship

Leila Kabalan



**AUBPOLICY
INSTITUTE**

Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs

Published by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs,
American University of Beirut.

This report can be obtained from the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and
International Affairs office at the American University of Beirut or can be downloaded
from the following website: www.aub.edu.lb/ifi

The views expressed in this document are solely those of the author, and do not reflect
the views of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs or the
American University of Beirut.

Beirut, October 2016 © All Rights Reserved

CONFERENCE REPORT

***YOUTH
CITIZENSHIP
IN DIVIDED
SOCIETIES:
PROMOTING CITIZENSHIP,
ENACTING CITIZENSHIP***

Leila Kaban

CONTENTS

04

INTRODUCTION

05

**PERSPECTIVE
OF YOUNG
PEOPLE
ON YOUTH
CITIZENSHIP**

06

**PERSPECTIVE
OF YOUTH
ORGANIZATIONS
ON YOUTH
CITIZENSHIP**

08

**ROLES OF NGOS
IN POLITICAL
CHANGE**

09

**MAPPING BEIRUT
THROUGH
DIGITAL STORY-
TELLING**

10

**SECURING A
FUTURE /
SUSTAINING
YOUTH ACTIVISM**

INTRODUCTION

Lynn Staeheli, Professor in the Department of Geography at Durham University and Principal Investigator of Youth Citizenship in Divided Societies project, introduced the project which investigates young people's belonging in societies that have a history of conflict and division. The project covers Bosnia-Herzegovina, South Africa, and Lebanon as well as international organizations promoting youth citizenship worldwide. Staeheli explained that the premise behind the study is to understand how young people who have experienced violent conflict build a future alongside fellow colleagues, neighbors, and co-nationals in the context and with the legacy of deep division. The focus on youth stems from the fact that they are a segment of society that is continuously told and taught how they can prepare for a common future, how they can live together. However, they also confront the contradictions between what they learn and what they hear in their communities, especially those scarred with a violent past. This disjuncture is a point of interest well worth exploring. Similarly, international organizations, foundations, and civil society in divided societies are fixated on promoting the citizen as a curative effect - or more cynically, a bandage effect, which believes covering the wound will eventually heal it. As such, citizenship is no longer a reflection of legal status but a remedy for peace-building and conflict resolution.

Konstantin Kastrissianakis, Post-doctoral Research Associate in the Department of Geography at Durham University and Lebanon field researcher on the YouCitizen project, presented the main findings that reflect the Lebanese youth's views and experience of citizenship coupled with national and civil society efforts to promote citizenship. The report (English || Arabic) summarizes the perspective of organizations as described in interviews with youth-led organizations or organizations working on youth-related issues as well as the views of young people themselves on the notion of youth citizenship, collected through a year of participatory research.

PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG PEOPLE ON YOUTH CITIZENSHIP

The definition of citizenship among young people is dynamic and draws on different but overlapping concepts. For a number of youth, equal rights and responsibilities comes as a necessary prerequisite, as several among the interviewed youth highlighted the lack of a civil status law that minimizes the interference of religion and sects in their relationship with the state. For others, however, citizenship is more about actively seeking change and experiencing citizenship in practice through direct engagement. This concept often transcends national boundaries into a global one with ideas of pursuing a common good. Others saw it as a form of belonging and identity that surpasses sectarian and divisive politics. By the same token, national identity becomes a form of both inclusion (national pride) and exclusion (legal status of Palestine and Syrian refugees).

This definition is directly related to future prospects and a common sense of uncertainty nationally and personally. Kastrissianakis saw that the research shows that regardless of the multiplicity of definitions, the current legal and political system in Lebanon restricts the extent to which citizenship can be practiced and experienced. Kastrissianakis then highlighted the main barriers to citizenship as identified by youth: lack of opportunities for the future, sectarian and political divisions, insecurity, uncertainty and instability, corruption, segregation and limited public spaces, and young people's attitudes. In general, active young citizens perceive their engagement positively yet with a concern about its limited societal impact and the difficulty in overcoming defeatism and cynicism. However, another faction showed considerable skepticism about the civil society organizations' ability to induce real change.



PERSPECTIVE OF YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS ON YOUTH CITIZENSHIP

The promotion of citizenship in youth organizations mirrors the finding articulated by young citizens themselves. Citizenship is promoted as a set of national rights and responsibilities, as civic engagement or as an identity that surpasses sectarian differences and facilitates coexistence. Similarly, political polarization, the lack of future prospects, a corrupt and dysfunctional state are also seen as the biggest barriers. Interestingly, history and memory are commonly used to promote youth citizenship. The report highlights different methods that youth practitioners resort to in order to mobilize the past as a resource for the future, either through memorialization or an attempt to rewrite a common, yet selective history.

Citizenship is promoted as a set of national rights and responsibilities, as civic engagement or as an identity that surpasses sectarian differences and facilitates coexistence

Ahmad Amer, former member of the Sustainable Democracy Center (SDC) and current fashion design student at Creative Space Beirut, shared his experience at SDC as it pertains to youth participation. With fellow activists at the Center, they developed a mechanism that allows young members of the organization to participate in the decision-making process as they felt that although that segment of the society is one of the most active, they still lacked the mechanisms or legal channels to participate in the decision-making process. The model they developed is called the Participative Associative Model (PAM). It stands on four pillars of participation: consultative, representative, executive, and observational. However, Amer concluded that although gaining access to decision-making is vital, the biggest challenge remains committed and sustainable activism.

Hiba Antoun, Project Officer at Development for People and Nature Association (DPNA), also shared her experience as a youth activist. Hiba mentioned her first exposure to DPNA through volunteering in the opening of a public park in her village, Jezzine. Introducing visitors to her region taught her the importance of

impact-making and engagement as a citizen. She sees that a sense of belief in rights, duties, and the rule of law can be ensured if youth were involved in the decision-making process. However she sees that youth are denied their political rights through age limits that bars their participation in political change (voting age at 21, right to run for office at 25). From her experience, there is a need for interactive citizenship education as it is currently outdated and heavily based on memorization. Antoun highlighted the geographical angle of her experience with youth organizations, citing the lack of opportunities for rural youth to be involved NGOs and clubs.

Hashem Adnan, member of Zokak Theatre Company and founding member of Al-Sh'ab Yureed (The People Demand), believes that the first step in identifying or dissecting the concept of citizenship should be done through understanding our surroundings. Citizenship cannot be understood without consciously understanding that Lebanon endured a violent 15-year civil war that ended in an amnesty law that granted public policy-making authority to previously warring factions. Importing and implementing a prepackaged concept of citizenship is doomed to fail. Thus, we need to re-identify what citizenship means for this country at this point in time when national borders' authority are continuously being questioned. Adnan emphasized that through his practice, he sees that a vital role to understand citizenship today is through creating new, local, and community-based spaces that shape a new social contract – the basis for any form of citizenship. Those spaces act as enablers for citizens to reclaim their citizenship. Adnan cites the example of the play [Perform Autopsy](#) that tries to narrate the history of Lebanon from a current yet alternative point of view. Through 60 performances nationwide, Adnan observed that all audiences expressed some form of victimhood coupled with an idealism of their community. Statements like “we are not sectarian or racist” are so common in communities that are homogenous and strive for maintaining the homogeneity. Thus, Adnan sees that we still need to work on the basic understanding and practice of what “living together” or “coexistence” truly mean. This is pivotal in establishing new forms of participatory political practices as traditional, central political parties have proved inadequate to lead the process of change. Yet Adnan is aware that this is a continuous process that takes different shapes since the civil war through movements like Isqat Al-Nizam, Take Back

Parliament, YouStink movement, and the current Beirut Madinati coalition for municipality elections. We need to assess what those movements produced rather than evaluate their success and failures as stand-alone experiences. He sees that the social movements in Lebanon are still in the process of redefining itself through non-hierarchical, direct democracy.

Mona Harb, Associate Professor of Urban Studies and Politics at the American University of Beirut and member of the [POWER2YOUTH](#) research consortium, highlighted the importance of gender when it comes to youth activism. Through her work, she notices that women tend to form the bigger fraction of organizers, campaigners, and activists. Another pivotal façade for Harb is age as the stamina for change tends to decrease at the higher end of the youth bracket.

Understanding this feature increases our ability to capture that moment for political change. On this issue, Kastrissianakis added that the research shows that the youth view themselves as a post-war generation that does not carry the weight that the parents who lived through war bear. However, this generational stamina fades after graduation where questions of social change become more secondary to those of employment and income. Harb also emphasized the need to explore variables such as income, sexuality and geography. Harb praised the report for shifting the discourse and research on youth from the lens of unemployment and/or radicalization to citizenship-focused practices of youth that include an underrated variety and diversity of initiatives and activities that are mostly in self-organized, alternative forms of participation.



ROLES OF NGOS IN POLITICAL CHANGE

An interesting debate on the role of NGOs in influencing change followed the discussion. Harb saw that NGOs are bound to become professionalized and thus heavily dependent on funding that they end up mostly servicing donors' agendas, for better or worse. Audience members highlighted that NGOs do have an impact in promoting rights, influencing policy-making, and compensating for absence of the state. While Harb agrees with the NGOs ability to raise awareness, she sees that they have minimal capabilities in influencing policy and even a lesser one when it comes to political change.

Adnan agreed that NGOs are not the right vehicle for political change yet acknowledged their role as incubators where political activists develop political consciousness needed for successful social movements. For Adnan, they also played a transitional role in trying to redefine new methods of political action. The criticism of the NGO sector becomes warranted when the sector proposes itself as an alternative to the current system. Moreover, the criticism has emerged from within that sector as there is a growing belief in the need for a shift from associations to sociopolitical movement since NGOs are limited in the way they can mobilize. Harb agreed and said there are fragments of success, but the challenge still lies in the move from the individual mobilization to the collective one. The successes of the NGO sector are limited to those that were capable of identifying a legal entry point to issue-based demands. Examples of those include Nahnoo's work on Ramlet Bayda public shore, Horsh Beirut, the Civil Coalition for the Protection of Dalieh, and Stop the Fouad Boutros Highway coalition. Yet by the same token, the political elite use legal channels (such as the previously cited voting age limits or unrepresentative electoral law) to block any forms of attempted political change.

MAPPING BEIRUT THROUGH DIGITAL STORY-TELLING

In this session, Kastrissianakis introduced YouCitizen's digital story-telling project, [Story Maps](#). It is an interactive tool used by youth participants to narrate stories about their environment, highlighting the link between place, belonging, and citizenship. Combined with digital mapping, the tool explores how the lives and hopes of young people develop in particular places in relation to historical narratives, memories, and visions of the future. Those stories re-narrate the idea of citizenship from different perspectives and offer possibilities for the redefinition of belonging and engaging with space, the city, and others. Stories are available on a wide [array of places](#) such as the Shatila refugee camp, Furn el-Chebak neighborhood, Horsh Beirut, and many more.

Van #4 and a story of home

The first digital story was about Van #4, an informal bus used as a main means of transportation for a big portion of the city dwellers. The video narrates stories of everyday passengers and their political and social experiences as the current bus route is on the infamous Green Line that used to divide Beirut into East and West. Mariam El-Amine, curator of that story, talks about discovering hidden gems that changed her perception of Beirut. The exercise helped her identify three axes of time: it was a pause in time that allowed her to explore the past through the present situation and project a future based on that. For her, the importance of the project is allowing people to have a sentimental value attached to a place that in itself produces a sense of belonging and ownership; a learning experience to understand and practice active citizenship.

A story of home

In the story presented by Lamis al-Aaraj's, her mother narrates her everyday life in Tariq-al-Jdeideh neighborhood in Beirut. The story sheds light on social relationships as a first step in communal building and forming an identity of belonging to the country. It allowed her to explore oral histories of the city through a lens of past experiences and memories.

SECURING A FUTURE / SUSTAINING YOUTH ACTIVISM

In the third session of the symposium, entitled Securing a future /sustaining youth activism, the participants, including Kastrissianakis and Staeheli, joined the members of the audience to discuss, in a working group, key themes of youth citizenship in Lebanon. There were two competing perceptions emerging. One promoted the grassroots-level, proactive approach wherein individuals take it upon themselves to drive change rather than succumb to defeatism, and the second went beyond championing individual agency and choices to see the bigger picture where institutions and collective action, rather than individuals, have the greater impact on change. The final consensus was that a balance of both approaches is best, where individuals need to act on their agency and educate themselves on ways to drive change, even if the bigger system is failing them and working against them. Lebanese youth participants at the higher end of the 16-30 age range agreed that although change is slow and gradual, they recognize remarkable progress when they compare youth political activism and participation during the 90's to what they are witnessing now. This progress is an indicator that there is hope, especially given the context of the political system still being ruled by warlords. The [civil] war, although officially over in the 90's, has continued on different fronts; rather than fighting with weapons, the warlords are now fighting over waste management, water, and utilities.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Social Justice and Development Policy in the Arab World Program

In collaboration with the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice at Princeton University, the Social Justice and Development Policy in the Arab World Program tries to further understand through research the many different meanings of the phrase “Social Justice” and its social and economic policy implications. The program looks at social justice in the realm of urbanism, labor unions, social policies, and protest movements. Each component has a dedicated project that aims at establishing a partnership, through research, between scholars, policy-makers, and activists in Lebanon (and beyond).

ABOUT AUB POLICY INSTITUTE

The AUB Policy Institute (Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs) is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. Inaugurated in 2006, the Institute aims to harness, develop, and initiate policy-relevant research in the Arab region.

We are committed to expanding and deepening policy-relevant knowledge production in and about the Arab region; and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society and policy-makers.

Main goals

- ▶ *Enhancing and broadening public policy-related debate and knowledge production in the Arab world and beyond*
- ▶ *Better understanding the Arab world within shifting international and global contexts*
- ▶ *Providing a space to enrich the quality of interaction among scholars, officials and civil society actors in and about the Arab world*
- ▶ *Disseminating knowledge that is accessible to policy-makers, media, research communities and the general public*

📍 AUB Policy Institute (Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs)
American University of Beirut
Issam Fares Institute Building (Green Oval)

✉ P.O.Box 11-0236 Riad El-Solh | Beirut, Lebanon

☎ 961-1-350000 ext. 4150

☎ +961-1-737627

@ ifi@aub.edu.lb

🌐 www.aub.edu.lb/ifi

f aub.ifi

🐦 @ifi_aub



Issam Fares Institute for Public
Policy and International Affairs

معهد عصام فارس لسياسات
العامة والشؤون الدولية