

Youth Participation as a Catalyst for Stability

Looking beyond jobs to create hope of a better future for Afghan Youth

This discussion paper examines the challenges and opportunities of urban youth in Afghanistan. It advocates that youth not only need jobs and livelihood opportunities but also recognition and practical mechanisms for urban civic participation in decision-making. The paper situates the challenge of the Afghan youth bulge. Further, it presents an overview of youth priorities, as articulated at a national urban youth workshop in Kabul in February 2016, and three actions that address the main priority areas. Overall, it recommends making youth participation a key feature of the upcoming Urban Solidarity Programme (USP).

Discussion Paper #5, Series Two, March 2016

Being young in Afghanistan

With nearly 80% of the total population under 35 years, Afghanistan is one of the youngest countries in the world.¹ However, young people are excluded from the cities in which they live in multiple ways, including access to jobs, education, basic services, public spaces and recreational areas and participation in governance and decision-making. Lack of representation and opportunities to influence decision-making is reflected in the low priority given to young people's needs in the development and upgrading of city environments. Cities are thus becoming increasingly hostile places for youth. Faced with the current situation, youth in Afghan cities have few avenues to change their situation or to actively shape their own and the country's future. A comprehensive approach, looking beyond the creation of jobs to solve the crisis currently facing young Afghans, is therefore required. Through youth participation, hope for a future of opportunities can be ignited.

Change through action: mobilizing youth

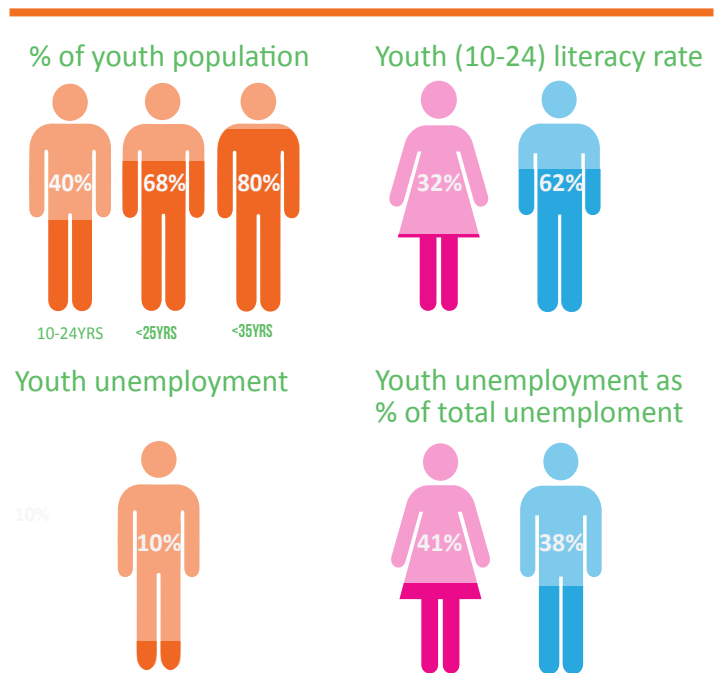
Youth are society's most important and dynamic human resource. Therefore, city governments and communities should treat their young populations as a resource that will help develop their cities rather than as a problem and a burden. Contrary to the dominant perceptions of youth as a group in need of resources, young Afghans should be valued partners in the creation of prosperous cities. This shift in mindset must be accompanied by and feed into a range of interventions that allows young people to take part in and contribute to the society in which they live.

In February 2016 a National Urban Youth Workshop was held, under the leadership of the FoAC lead Partners along with the Deputy Ministry of Youth Affairs. The workshop, gathering over 200 youth participants, is part of a series of consultations undertaken to provide input to the Urban National Priority Programme (U-NPP). The U-NPP, a government-led initiative, will identify strategic policy and program priorities in the urban areas of governance, housing and economy. Through group discussions, the youth participants identified the key challenges they face in their cities, including lack of jobs, opportunities to participate in society and engage with the government (see opposite column).

Following are key intervention strategies for three main priority areas identified by the youth participants in the workshop.

1. Employment: thinking outside traditional jobs creation

Unemployment is one of the most pressing challenges facing Afghan youth. This is reflected both in the outcomes from the workshop as well as in a recent study where over 70% of the



Prioritization map

Key challenges identified during the National Urban Youth workshop, where the relative size reflects how many times each challenge was mentioned.



¹ 'National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2011-2012', Central Statistics Organization, 2014.

participants cited unemployment as the biggest challenge facing young people in Afghanistan.² The social and economic burden caused by unemployment and the working poor is augmented by the fact that many young girls and boys have to generate an income to provide for their families. Lack of livelihood options also leads to a greater risk of being drawn towards insurgency groups or, for many who see no future in Afghanistan, to migrate out of the country, causing a 'brain drain' on the Afghan society.

The unemployment challenge cannot be tackled through conventional job creation only; establishing avenues for young people to develop their skills and improve their livelihoods can equip them with a certain degree of control over their own future and ward off feelings of hopelessness or despair, thus counteracting some of the negative repercussions of joblessness. This is particularly true in cities.

Promoting entrepreneurship is one basic action to improve the livelihoods of youth. Business incubators can be created to encourage and help facilitate start-ups and small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs).³ Lack of access to capital is a key barrier for doing business for youth and the current model for many informal entrepreneurs, where they generate financial support and recruit extra labor through families and social networks, is not sustainable. Therefore public financial support must be made available to start-ups and SMEs in order to promote entrepreneurship. This could be done through microfinance loans, credit other measures, and set up as Islamic banking, financial cooperatives or commercial banks.⁴

Vocational training and youth apprenticeship training can be scaled up to address a labor shortage for technical occupations. In Afghan cities, there are multiple vocational training centers where youth can learn technical skills such as mobile repairing, carpentry, tailoring and plumbing.

Vocational training session for women. Vocational training can play an important role in empowering women and breaking down gender barriers.



2. Youth engagement: youth as the leaders of tomorrow

Participation is recognized as a fundamental human right. It is further a basic principle for fulfillment of other rights. Therefore, ensuring youth participation in decision-making processes must be a top priority. Examples of youth participation include government workshops, seminars, awareness programmes and civic youth campaigns. These channels for engagement require active facilitation by government, organizations and community members.

Creating youth CDCs or youth sub-committees as part of the

Urban Solidarity Programme can be a powerful way to facilitate youth participation. The government of Afghanistan has been working with communities through Community Development Councils (CDCs) for more than a decade, using CDCs as a framework for communities to self-organize, plan and implement vocational training, settlement upgrading and as a tool for conflict resolution within communities. Through the CDCs, communities were given a mechanism to prioritize and seek funding for specific projects, and further to implement the projects. CDCs have been established through urban programmes such as the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), the Kabul Solidarity Programme (KSP) and the Community Led Urban Infrastructure Programme (CLUIP), whose success demonstrates CDCs effectiveness in implementing projects through active community participation.⁵

The CDCs have played a pivotal role in shaping Afghanistan's physical and social urban infrastructure. Building on this, the forthcoming Urban Solidarity Programme (USP) is scaling up the urban CDC model to a national level. As such, USP presents an opportunity to directly engage youth in decision-making processes in urban areas; by integrating a youth mechanism in the programme design and implementation, USP can serve as a powerful tool for youth to impact the development of their communities and to take ownership of their futures. The youth mechanism can take two forms: Youth Development Councils (YDCs) or youth sub-committees within the CDCs.

Structured like CDCs, YDCs would be comprised of youth representatives tasked with planning and implementing programmes that reflect youth needs and priorities. Similar to female CDCs, empowering women through participation, YDCs would allow youth to put forward their own ideas and projects. The advantage of creating independent YDCs is that these councils would be designing, prioritizing and implementing youth projects, thus ensuring that youth needs are specifically addressed. This, however, would require stronger coordination mechanisms to prevent "us versus them" attitude between CDCs and YDCs and avoid competition for limited resources. Further, establishing YDCs will require investment of time and money.

Youth sub-committees, on the other hand, would exist within the established CDCs and would serve as a vehicle to bring youth needs to the attention of the community leaders, and to emphasize youth priorities within proposed projects. But, a youth sub-committee will have to lobby for youth needs and priorities in the development and prioritization of CDC projects, which might not translate into the same focus on youth, as would YDCs.

Young boys playing football on empty streets is a common sight in Afghan cities. One potential youth project could be to create a neighborhood sports field.



² 'A Survey of the Afghan People', The Asia Foundation, 2015.

³ 'Switched On: Youth at the heart of sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific'. UN ESCAP, 2015.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ 'Urban Solidarity' SoAC discussion paper 2, UN-HABITAT 2015.

3. Youth environment: increasing youth's access to the city

Youth in Afghan cities are excluded from urban space in multiple ways. Lacking the appropriate channels to make their concerns a priority, their needs are often overlooked in the development and upgrading of urban areas. This is evident by the lack of recreational areas, playgrounds and sport fields that young people, and especially young women and girls, can use. It is therefore common to see youth playing on the streets and vacant plots in cities. Limited opportunities for youth to impact their physical environment often renders youth more or less invisible in the public eye.

Youth also face severe restrictions on mobility due to a lack of public transportation options in general and gender-sensitive transportation in particular, which is especially challenging for young girls commuting to school and college. The mobility

Street artist Kabir Mokamel and his supporters creating the mural "Heroes of my city", to celebrate everyday people as heroes.



constraints have enormous socio-economic implications as it makes youth and women unable to access many areas of the city.

City beautification measures such as street art/murals is a powerful way to reclaim a city defined by war. Youth in Afghanistan have been born and raised in war, and bombed buildings, grey blast walls, security checkpoints and barricaded streets are their normal. To counteract this, and to create hope and confidence, there are several ongoing street mural projects in Kabul. One motivation is to beautify the city, but equally important is the aspiration to take back the city and humanize the environment. As artists Kabir Mokamel explains: "when you put a picture on a wall, the wall disappears and you are in a new space, that's very important for me".⁶ In his projects, he offers paintbrushes to people passing by the artwork, thus bringing ordinary people together to express a different narrative for the city. Through projects like this, young Afghans have the opportunity to leave a positive mark on their environment, and create hope and optimism for the future.



International Example: "One Stop Shops"

One Stop Youth Centres provide youth with multifunctional, safe spaces in an urban setting to meet and access information and resources critical to youth-led development.⁷ The first One Stop Youth Centre was established in Nairobi in 2003 by UN-Habitat in collaboration with local government, and the programme has since then been extended to five urban centres across Africa.

The One Stop centres are places where young people can acquire skills and knowledge and develop their capacities. The specific services vary between centres, and can cover areas such as arts and sports, employment generation, entrepreneurship, health services and ICT. Key areas of focus for the youth centres are:

- **Governance:** encourage youth participation in urban governance and urban policy development
- **Safe space:** provide a place for youth to access recreational activities, services and information in a safe environment
- **Youth engagement:** help cities develop youth policies and strategies
- **Volunteering:** help build a volunteer culture amongst youth in cities
- **Gender:** support and address the needs of young women and girls

The physical presence of a One Stop Youth Centre would be a welcome addition to Afghan cities where there currently are very few places for young people to meet and interact. As it is often difficult to spread information on available support programmes, the multifunctional design of the centres can also contribute to effectively disseminate information on services and programmes available for youth throughout the city.



As an example, the Health Hotline, launched by UNFPA and Ministry of Public Health in 2012, could be included in the centre. The Afghan youth population is especially susceptible to health related problems, including drug abuse, and explicit interventions are needed to support youth at risk. Responding to this concern, the hotline offers an anonymous way for young people to receive accurate and non-judgmental health information and advice from health professionals. The calls are free of charge, and the services are available every day in both Dari and Pashto. The hotline doctors answer a broad range of questions, from basic lessons on puberty and anatomy to information about new-born care, nutrition and human rights, and refer the callers to the appropriate health and protection services if needed. It is currently possible to visit the health line office, and integrating the service in the one-stop shop centre would make the hotline more accessible and increase its potential to reach young people.

⁶ 'Afghan graffiti artist strives to beautify Kabul', Al Jazeera, 26. August 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/asia/2015/08/afghan-graffiti-artist-strives-beautify-kabul-150826090658859.html>

⁷ 'UN-Habitat One Stop Youth Centre Model', UN-HABITAT 2015.

⁸ 'Voice of Afghan Youth', PARSAs, 2015. <http://afghanistan-parsa.org/voice-of-afghan-youth/>

Youth Participation as a Catalyst for Stability

Bamiyan Voice of Afghan Youth



Case-study: Voice of Afghans

Voice of Afghan youth⁸ is a TV and radio project designed to showcase youth talent, initiatives and perspectives across Afghanistan. The project is developed by and features Afghan Scout Youth, and invites the viewer to see Afghan communities through the lens of young girls and boys. The series offers local youth a channel to share stories and experiences, and to speak about their country and their future. Through its countrywide coverage, this project serves as a source of inspiration for youth to become involved in their local community and an assuredness that they are not in it alone.

Developing a volunteering culture

Although currently not well known in Afghanistan, volunteering can be an effective tool to channel young people's energy and creativity. By working towards a common goal, volunteering can help bring communities and cities closer together through a shared vision, and instill a sense of responsibility and belonging. As seen in the community projects, where members of the neighborhood contribute with sweat labor to implement the projects, or in informal settlements where people help each other build their houses on the hillside, there is already a strong self-help culture in Afghan cities. So the fundamentals for developing a volunteer practice are already there. And as the outcome of the youth workshop suggests, young people want to volunteer but don't know how where to start. Thus, creating avenues for youth to become involved in volunteering could be one simple way to capitalize on the socio-economic resource that youth is, whilst also creating hope through participation.



Ways forward

- Think beyond immediate job creation when trying to address urban youth challenges by engaging young people in city governance processes, and involve them in decision-making. This would require improved linkages between relevant partners, across government as well as with civil society groups;
- Mainstream youth in the upcoming Urban Solidarity Programme (USP). This could take the form of creating Youth CDCs or Gozar Assemblies, or forming sub-committees under the male and female CDCs. Either way, ensure that it is not an 'add on' but a structural part of the programme design with associated funding allocation for youth priorities;
- Take specific actions to promote and foster a youth volunteer culture, in a structured mechanism that recognises and rewards skills development and cultivates leadership;
- Consider establishing "one-stop shop" centres for urban young people to support youth-related services and facilities, including vocational training and business incubators.



The Future of Afghan Cities (FoAC), is a government-led programme of MUDA, IDLG/GDMA, Kabul Municipality and ARAZI that focuses on the development of a Urban National Priority Programme (U-NPP) that will set Afghanistan's urban priorities for the coming decade. To support this, FoAC will also undertake a detailed analysis of five city regions and at least 20 strategic district municipalities to provide key data and recommendations for policy and programme design.

