

MAJALAT - Youth Webinar

June 9, 2020

FINAL DOCUMENT

The impact of Covid-19 crisis on youth in the Euromed region and MAJALAT recommendations

Introduction:

On June 9, 2020, REF organized a webinar on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on youth in the Euromed region, as part of the series of webinars taking place from the end of May to the end of September 2020. It brought together 27 participants from Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Italy, France, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Belgium. These webinars also cover 5 other thematic areas of the project: economic development and social dialogue, migration and mobility, security and the fight against violence, climate justice and good governance and rule of law.

The objectives of this webinar were to:

- Collectively reflect on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on youth in the Euromed region
- Promote joint initiatives that address the causes and vulnerabilities that have emerged as a result of the pandemic
- Identify new avenues for recommendations addressed to the European Union and national institutions, based on the ones previously elaborated by youth in the MAJALAT process

The presentations and discussions focused on the following topics: citizenship, employment and vocational training, education, social protection of vulnerable groups, Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH), the fight against violence, especially against women, freedom of movement (students, workers, travelers) and the use of digital as a cross-cutting issue.

Summary of presentations and discussions:

The crisis has affected all the countries in the region and has highlighted two types of complementary responses:

- those at the local level;
- the development of transnational solidarity and networking 2.0 between actors on both shores of the Mediterranean

The notion of solidarity has evolved itself (we now talk about "citizen solidarity").

The participants agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the problems that youth was already facing, especially since countries have developed very uneven responses. Youth managed to prove that they could respond to the needs of the communities (rapid mobilization, especially through social networks). They are recognized as real social actors. In France, the young beneficiaries of welfare centers prepared and brought food parcels to families and mainly to the elderly.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have also adapted to the emergency and started carrying out charitable actions, even when this was not their main purpose. The crisis has also led to the emergence of many informal collectives, especially in Algeria.

The participants mentioned the substitution of citizens and CSOs to State missions (awareness raising operations, disinfection, distribution of meals, making masks and hydroalcoholic gel and prevention in Algeria and Morocco, setting up WebTV and animation of Facebook pages in Tunisia). In Tunisia, for example, the Scouts and the Red Crescent have been highly mobilized in the health sector during the pandemic.

Social networks helped to overcome geographical obstacles, discover new activists, and set up campaigns against misinformation.

Expression of citizenship

The situation has a political impact in the region far beyond what can be expected in other parts of the world. The pandemic has emptied the streets of demonstrators in Algeria and Lebanon, and the army was largely deployed in the name of compliance with containment measures. Autocratic regimes used the pandemic to reinforce social control.

Cyber-surveillance also increased: Israel reinforced it without parliamentary approval. Tunisia also allowed this with a decree, in accordance with Article 70 of its Constitution. In Morocco, a bill wanted to subject the operation of social networks and instant communication platforms to explicit authorization by the authorities. After pressures from civil society the bill was withdrawn.

However, there has been a development of online citizenship (petitions, support concerts for prisoners of conscience in Algeria, for example) and a renewed mobilization of youth.

The fight against violence, especially gender-based violence

The Covid-19 pandemic showed that women were particularly affected during crises. They endemically suffer from social and economic inequalities.

One of the common observations was the increase in domestic violence against women. The latter had to adapt the way in which they reported violence during confinement. A lot of helpline services (legal, psychological and social counseling, relevant information for protection and human security) for women and girls in Euromed countries who suffer from domestic violence, discrimination and abuse have been set up, with the exception of Libya and Syria. The precariousness of women also increased, mainly due to: the increase in divorces, the very limited access to reproductive and sexual care; the lack of family support (Syrian refugees women can sometimes be the only members of the family to have an income).

The pandemic generated psychological violence, which has affected many young people, resulting in emotional distress and anxiety. For some, the confinement took place in a very small space, sometimes in isolation, and may have led to loss of income, housing or dropping out of school. Italy has set up psychological support networks among citizens.

In Palestine, violence linked to the occupation has increased (abusive arrests, physical violence).

Youth employment and the economy

Most States in the MENA region, with young populations and endemic unemployment did not have sufficient financial resources to implement large-scale emergency plans and protect jobs during and after the pandemic. Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and Morocco have been particularly hit (freeze on tourism, a vital source of jobs and foreign exchange earnings). In Morocco, important measures to support people and businesses (especially informal sector workers) were put in place. However, financial

assistance to families has been uneven, as the allocation procedures were only available online and in French. Day laborers were strongly impacted. Numerous layoffs, or wages devaluation were noted. Trade-Unions mobilized, particularly in Morocco, and launched campaigns to alert the authorities. However, they received no response from the government.

Workers in certain areas of work did not have the ability to work remotely. Teleworking also raised the issue of job insecurity, inequalities in technical means, and data protection.

It should be noted that young people have been an important resource in mitigating the economic risks associated with the pandemic. Their capacities for resistance, social and technical innovation and creativity have been put to work. Diasporas have mobilized to raise funds from local solidarity networks.

Finally, a reflection must be carried out on the implementation of a model of solidarity-based welfare State, territorialized public policies (minimum income, solidarity funds, etc.) and on the promotion of entrepreneurship modes stemming from the Social and Solidarity Economy.

Education

Educational institutions in 20 MENA countries remained closed, meaning that more than 110 million children, adolescents, and youth were out of school for a long period of time. Despite the fact that many e-learning solutions have been implemented in the region, notably through ministries of education in partnership with UNESCO, unequal access to digital portals and lack of mastery of certain tools (software, applications) have been obstacles to the continuity of learning.

Along with containment measures, the closure of many sectors of the economy makes it particularly difficult for young people to enter the labor market.

Migration and mobility

In many countries, the pandemic has generated discrimination and stigmatization particularly against people in migration situations. The latter, mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa, have encountered problems related to language barriers, isolation (physical and social), and lack of access to basic health services. Detention and arrests have also been exacerbated under the pretext of the fight against the pandemic (particularly in Morocco - Laayoune and Nador).

In Libya, some families had already had to leave their village/town before the crisis (Internal Displaced People). They therefore faced even more difficulties and a more precarious situation.

Young people were particularly affected by the effects of Covid-19 in terms of displacement. Many people found themselves stranded (students, travelers, workers).

The EU response to the Covid pandemic-19

The EU has focused on 4 priorities: limiting the spread of the virus; ensuring the supply of medical equipment; promoting research into treatments and vaccines; and supporting employment, businesses, and the economy. In addition to the launch of the IPCR (integrated political crisis response mechanism) and the implementation of the TEAM Europe approach, a videoconference of the Council of Youth Ministers on the impact of the crisis on youth and youth organisations was held in May 2020. This Council brings together the ministers responsible for youth policy in each member state. It allows for exchanges of information, practices, which could help in the common search for solutions to minimize the damage caused to the youth sector. Discussions focused on: mobility, the decreasing participation

of young people in the decision-making process, employment opportunities and the need to use digital technology. They reached several conclusions (proposals for adoption):

- Allow greater flexibility in the implementation of the Erasmus+ programmes and the European Solidarity Corps
- Include youth policies and measures in EU recovery initiatives
- Provide assistance to more vulnerable groups, such as young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or those living in rural and remote areas.

However, the discussions did not concern the countries of the Southern neighborhood.

The EU has granted:

1. Financial support: (contribution of €38 million to the April salaries and pensions of some 43,000 Palestinian civil servants in the West Bank; repatriation of EU citizens (including bi-nationals) residing in neighboring countries, including Morocco, through consular assistance (transport costs co-financed by the Commission) ; budget support in the form of grants and the strengthening of the "Essaha Aziza Health" program in Tunisia; allocation of 240 million euros to strengthen the resilience of neighboring countries hosting Syrian refugees to cope with the coronavirus pandemic.

2. Youth capacity building: virtual exchanges (UfM & ALF): development of cooperation projects with youth, consultations with youth organizations (North-South Center of the Council of Europe); a survey on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the rights of young people, with a focus on employment and education launched by the Global Initiative for Decent Work in order to provide policy responses to the challenges facing youth worldwide.

The participants:

- Highlighted that in practice, coordination at the EU level has been difficult. This is mainly linked to the fact that there are still areas in which the States have their own competence: health, security, but that these areas have an impact on the prerogatives of the EU: Schengen area, euro... The pandemic therefore fundamentally questions the relationship between the national and the community.
- Welcomed the numerous financial allocations to the region, but questioned the sustainability and long-term results, especially since some countries seem to have been completely left out.
- Recalled that youth seemed to be both victims of the crisis (economic level, mobility) but also initiators of change. However, it is difficult to assess the extent to which the EU's approach to managing the crisis has taken the youth dimension into account.
- Mentioned that they had little or no knowledge of initiatives supported in the Southern Neighbourhood countries by the EU delegations. EU-funded initiatives are implemented through entities such as UNDP, UNFPA UNICEF, EU4PSL and their offices in Libya with local partners.

Recommendations:

One of the objectives of the webinar was to formulate new tracks of recommendations addressed to the European Union on priority issues for young people and on the basis of those that had already been validated during previous youth workshops and the Brussels Civil Forum of 2019. While some recommendations (in red) were amended during the webinar, the addition of new recommendations related or not to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic were submitted by the participants afterwards, by e-mail, due to lack of time.

Recommendations from previous workshops and the Forum, accepted by participants and reviewed (in red):

General recommendations

➔ Recommendations to DG NEAR, EEAS and National Authorities

- The EU needs to respond to the challenges faced by young people and youth organisations in the Southern Neighbourhood in a clearer and more transparent way:
 - by systematically inserting in bilateral agreements between the EU and the Southern Neighbourhood countries a special chapter on priority issues for young people and youth organisations. This chapter should:
 - clearly identify youth-related budgets in these bilateral agreements, as well as in the overall EU frameworks and in particular the MFF
 - indicate the means of assessing the impact of these bilateral agreements on policies and programmes on young people and make their results easily accessible to the public
 - by creating favourable conditions for the funding of youth organisations in the region by, for example:
 - increasing the number of calls for projects dedicated to youth and/or open to youth organisations in the region and adapting the dedicated budgets (possibility of funding micro and meso projects)
 - Simplifying of the response procedures for these calls
 - opening calls for proposals to unregistered entities [informal collectives, specific social movements, etc.] in the region.

- Support the strengthening of youth civic participation that has a long-term impact and leads to greater involvement of young men and women in policy making in the Southern Neighborhood, including building the advocacy capacity of youth and youth organizations.

➔ Recommendation to UEDs, DG NEAR, EEAS

- Recognize the youth diversity and reach a larger number and a wider range of young men and women, including those involved in informal groups and social movements

Supporting employment and vocational training

➔ Recommendations addressed to DUE, DG NEAR, EEAS

- Support youth entrepreneurship by contributing to creating an enabling environment in terms of available funding and training in particular

- Facilitate access to Southern Mediterranean labour markets for vulnerable groups of young people (people in situation of disabilities, and in migration)

Education

➔ Recommendations to UEDs, DG NEAR, EEAS

- Increase political, financial and administrative support to non-formal education programmes as a way to enhance young people's personal and professional skills and competences as well as their employability

- Involve young people from different backgrounds and CSOs in the design and evaluation of EU employability and education programmes at national and regional level

- Expand programmes facilitating youth mobility in the Southern Neighbourhood and call for education and capacity building to include disadvantaged groups (such as women, rural residents and people with disabilities).

Social protection of vulnerable groups in particular on the issue of Sexual and Reproductive Health

➔ Recommendation to DG NEAR and EEAS

Call on DG NEAR and EEAS to acknowledge the challenge that SRHR represent for younger generations by:

- providing increased financial support to civil society already engaged in this issue and encouraging new organizations to address the issue
- by systematically including SRH in bilateral dialogues with the Southern Neighborhood States

Security: Towards a new approach on youth and fight against all forms of violence

➔ Recommendation to EEAS and DG HOME

- Fully integrate the respect of human rights and democratic values as a fundamental component of all EU external policies and all forms of cooperation with third countries related to security and fight against terrorism

➔ Recommendation to National Authorities

Include youth in decision making related to security and fight against all forms of violence when it comes to revise the EU Neighborhood Policy (consultations, evaluation of existing programs)

➔ Recommendation addressed to DG Near, DEVCO (for financial support), EEAS (for political support)

- To increase political and financial support to youth led initiatives for the promotion of peace and the prevention of violent extremism

Mobility and migration

→ Recommendations to DG NEAR, EUDs and National Authorities

- Increase financial, political and administrative support to South South and North-South mobility partnerships like volunteering, professional training, non-formal education initiatives, cultural exchanges, university twinning projects.

- Widen the budget for Erasmus+ VET Mobility in all the MENA countries, taking into consideration inclusive social and geographical criteria then facilitating visas for selected participants and by:

- o facilitating the obtaining of visas for selected participants (administrative and political support)
- o increasing the number of participants from the Southern Neighborhood who are eligible to participate each year.

Recommendations added as a result of the webinar:

General and financing

→ Recommendations to DG NEAR, UEDs and national authorities

- Support local organizations financially so that they can be more effective in responding to the consequences of the crisis, given the restrictions imposed by some governments (money transfers, currency exchange, etc.).

→ Recommendations to donors (including the EU)

- In coordination with donors, in the case of certain projects, reallocate unused funds to small businesses and organizations that can provide essential health assistance.

- Identify and capitalize on the new practices of collective youth action under Covid-19 in the countries of the region in order to feed and adapt public policies for youth, financing mechanisms and South-South, South-North and North-South mobility.

→ Recommendations addressed to the national authorities

- To promote the development of an alternative economic model resulting from the practices set up during Covid-19 which is sustainable, social and solidarity-based, generates income for young people and favours local development.

- To encourage and support the development of socio-cultural action centers of proximity and/or to reinforce the already existing devices in the countries and this mainly in rural areas.

Sexual and reproductive health

→ Recommendation to DG NEAR, EUDs and national authorities

- Promote new ways to provide information and support to adolescents and young people on sexual and reproductive health and rights, such as supporting the implementation of outreach programs in community youth facilities.

Security

- Promote the culture of solidarity, peace and living together by continuing the international community's efforts to promote tolerance, inclusion, mutual understanding and fraternity.

➔ Recommendations to DG NEAR, DG ECHO and national authorities

- Conduct qualitative research that aims to highlight the effects of crises on women, girls and other marginalized groups to enable the development of appropriate responses.

- In the event of a health crisis, systematically take a gender approach in order to best guarantee women's access to information (available support and resources, etc.).

Mobilité

➔ Recommendation to national authorities

- Favour inter-country mobility to promote exchange between peers.

Education

➔ Recommendations to DG NEAR, UEDs and national authorities

- Faced with the challenge of adapting distance education, support the training of teachers/teachers by multiplying examples of initiatives involving CSOs, foundations or companies, and promote access to adequate equipment (material, connection) for students and teachers.

➔ Recommendation to national authorities

- To centralize, on the same portal, reliable and specific information during health crisis situations in a country, in languages accessible to all inhabitants (nationals and foreigners).

Digital

➔ Recommendation to national authorities

- Support the virtual engagement of youth in:

- o Making resources available in all local languages
- o Fighting misinformation and xenophobia around the pandemic

- Ensure that any use of digital technologies, including applications and artificial intelligence, to monitor the spread of the virus and the behavior of human beings is legal, ethical and strictly temporary.

➔ Recommendation to DG NEAR

- To set up a study of the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the youth of the region using data:

- o Statistics
- o Testimonials in order to understand the immediate and future needs of young people.