

Youth and Peaceful Transition to Sustainability in the MENA region

Roundtable discussion at
STOCKHOLM FORUM
on Peace and
Development **2022**

SUMMARY

As part of the 2022 Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted a round table discussion entitled “**Youth and peaceful transition to sustainability in the MENA region**” on May 24. The session brought together climate experts and youth environmental activists and explored the role of youth and youth movements in transitioning in a just and peaceful way.

Recommendations that emerged from the discussion included:

- Ensuring more youth representation at policy, negotiating, and decision-making levels;
- Prioritizing educational and advocacy efforts;
- Adapting language and messaging to local contexts;
- Pursuing decentralized solutions; engaging more effectively with the private sector;
- and Increasing funding opportunities for youth organizations.

REPORT

As part of the 2022 Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development, co-hosted by SIPRI and the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, which focused this year on the theme “From a Human Security Crisis towards an Environment of Peace”, ([2022 Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development | SIPRI](#)), the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa ([Dialogue institute - Sweden Abroad](#)) hosted a round table discussion entitled “**Youth and peaceful transition to sustainability in the MENA region**” on May 24. The session explored the risks in the MENA region associated with transition towards decarbonized and greener economies; the role of youth and youth movements regionally (as well as nationally and globally) in transitioning in a just and peaceful way, given existing challenges and opportunities; and the policy interventions that would enhance youth engagement.

In this round table a diverse set of speakers from across the Middle East and Europe set the scene: Manar Elkebir (Founder of EcoWave, a youth network dedicated to tackling the plastic crisis in her local community in Tunisia), Nadim Farajalla (Programme Director, Climate Change and Environmental Programme, Issam Fares Institute, Lebanon), Sarine Karajerjian (Director, Environmental Politics Programme, Arab Reform Initiative, Lebanon), and Shady Khalil (Founder and Director Greenish, an Egyptian climate education-focused social enterprise [GREENISH | Home \(greenish.org\)](#)). Their interventions were followed by a discussion with some 40 participants. The session was moderated by Johan Berggren, Deputy Director of the Dialogue Institute.

The discussion was set against the backdrop of youth in the MENA region being underrepresented in policy and decision making. During the past decade youth have been on the frontlines of public protests and calls for reforms. Yet, even though half the population is under 25 and in spite of increasing climate change threats, youth are largely excluded from conversations on finding solutions for a sustainable future for the region. And when they are included, they tend to serve an ‘observer’ function, with limited influence and power over the actual policy process.

Sarine Karajerjian, from Arab Reform Initiative, reminded the audience that the MENA **youth unemployment** rates have been the highest in the world for the last 25 years, reaching 23% overall in 2020 and up to 42% for young women, causing wide-spread anger and alienation. She pointed to the frustration and disillusionment this creates amongst youth in the region, incl. in her home country, Lebanon, where “*42% of youth are thinking of emigrating outside the region*” due to unemployment.

“We don’t have food on our tables, but we have weapons”

Karajerjian also highlighted the **crisis of food production** – *“We don’t have food on our tables, but we have weapons”* – which has been exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Being reliant on Europe for food production is not sustainable, with food prices rising everywhere in the world. Karajerjian stressed that, *“We are dependent on European wheat. We have to move away from just being food secure and need to create our own food sovereignty.”*

The 2010 Russian heat wave, which led to the worst drought in 40 years, temperatures above 40 degrees Celsius, and numerous forest fires, underlined the risks of food dependency for MENA. As a result of the heat wave, Russian grain harvests failed and grain exports were suspended by the government. As a major exporter of grain to the globalized food supply chain, this drove up prices everywhere, including the MENA region.

In addition to food insecurity, the MENA region is facing the effects of climate change with **water scarcity, heat waves, rising sea levels and loss of biodiversity**, which threatens to render many cities uninhabitable in the upcoming decades. In 2019 air pollution cost the MENA region roughly 2.2% of GDP (an estimated \$80 million).

The two environmental activists Manar Elkebir and Shady Khalil recounted their personal stories of getting involved in climate and environmental issues at an early age. Elkebir’s engagement stemmed from seeing the plastic pollution in the oceans and on her local beaches, researching the issues, and feeling a need *“to do something”*, which led to the creation of EcoWave, climate strikes, and beach clean-ups. Khalil told the audience how Greenish is gradually involving youth, students, and NGOs across Egypt, how they have developed a manual in Arabic, and how art, theatre, and culture are used to raise awareness.

Both Elkebir and Khalil emphasized that **lack of awareness** of climate change and environmental degradation poses a major challenge to successful youth engagement in the region. According to Elkebir, *“Only 3 out of 10 youth have even a minimum knowledge to talk about climate change.”* Surveys have also revealed that about 2 in 5 Arabs do not agree that climate change is a serious issue, and that only 40 % of young people are ready to adopt sustainable behaviors that can protect and preserve the environment and contribute to mitigating the causes of climate change. Language barriers were mentioned as another key obstacle.

Consequently, education and adapting messaging and language to a local context is crucial. Elkebir and Khalil agreed that the subject and science of climate change needs to be taught at an earlier age in schools, with informed teachers and relevant teaching materials. Khalil pointed to the imperative of working and communicating with local farmers and communities in their own language, to explain the impact of climate change on crops and their livelihoods. Elkebir explained that *“the only way to engage people is to focus on local environmental issues that they can relate to”*. Her network focuses on producing readable, straight to the point posts on social media to engage youth.

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Other issues highlighted by Elkebir and Khalil included the **lack of funding** for youth strategies and programs as well as the limited political space available to young people. It is often assumed that youth engagement should be voluntary, and youth often lack the proper knowledge and experience to apply for major funding from donors. Moreover, protesting is not always a realistic option and entails risks for youth. But there are other ways of creating change. Khalil mentioned that youth groups organize clean ups of their environment around them and to help raising awareness on water pollution and other issues.

“Young entrepreneurs can create smart and innovative ideas to build a sustainable future while ensuring their own economic stability”

Nadim Farajalla, from the Issam Fares Institute at AUB, also emphasized the **importance of education and economic opportunities** in mobilizing youth. Opportunities and knowledge need to be made available so that young people can participate in the global transition towards a greener future. For instance, they must be allowed to open bank accounts more easily, so as to enable them to start businesses and receive funding. *“There is an opportunity here for the private sector to be engaged. Young entrepreneurs can create smart and innovative ideas to build a sustainable future while ensuring their own economic stability,”* said Farajalla. He concluded by calling for youth to be allowed to voice their opinions in meaningful ways and be empowered to join the political scene, to translate their ideas into real political engagement.

In the ensuing discussion, the challenging situation for youth, in particular in the MENA region, including wars and conflicts, high unemployment, exclusion, nepotism, as well as legal, political and social barriers, was highlighted. Several individuals stressed the need to “restore hope” amongst young people by addressing these issues. Also, the older generations’ responsibility to facilitate this process and become “better door openers” was mentioned. The discussion underscored the importance of inclusive processes, with a diversity of voices represented at all tables. *“We need to become more aware of which voices are represented in the room and which voices are missing”*, as one participant put it. Several young participants mentioned the practical barriers they face in being included, including language barriers, challenges in getting visas and economic barriers (e.g. difficulties in covering costs for travel).

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Several speakers raised the need to, in parallel, address local problems with local solutions and to work on structural reforms. They also spoke about the need for both bottom-up and top-down approaches.

A couple of speakers pointed to the role that entrepreneurs – and not least young entrepreneurs – can play in presenting innovative solutions for green transition and contributing to job creation and thereby also potentially contributing to stability. Others emphasized that while the private sector can contribute to creating opportunities, it is not a panacea and reminded the audience that *“the private sector is most of the time more money driven, than impact driven”*.

Towards the end of the session one participant suggested developing thinking on *“how to plan for windows of opportunities”*, i.e. how to develop strategies to prepare for moments of, for example, political will.



The following key recommendations came out of the round table discussion:

- Create conditions for enhanced inclusion of youth at policy, negotiating, and decision-making levels.
- Break silos: seek greater inter-generational and inter-sectoral exchanges.
- Prioritize educational and advocacy efforts and adapt language and messaging to local contexts.
- Pursue decentralized solutions and involve local government/authorities more in policy work and implementation.
- Enhance the engagement with the private sector and improve conditions for young people's economic participation, incl. possibilities in opening bank accounts and starting businesses.
- Increase funding opportunities for youth organizations, incl. through more flexible funding mechanisms (esp. challenging for small organisations to register and to receive funding)
- Improve collection of more robust and relevant data and evidence of climate change.

The Dialogue Institute aims to continue supporting greater youth participation in climate change discussions by:

- Further strengthening the networks of young environmental activists in the region, through meetings, workshops, seminars, webinars etc. to contribute to breaking existing silos.
- Liaising with others, including the EU and UN, regarding opportunities for youth and youth organizations from the region to have a meaningful participation in the upcoming COP meetings.
- Exploring potential avenues of supporting youth that want to engage in the COP process and other processes by providing a platform to connect, network, and in assisting with advice, for instance by convening a preparation session in advance of COP 27 - e.g., intergenerational dialogue with participants from the region who have experiences from past COP-meetings.