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Final Reports of the 2015 EUNA Cohort
"Youth Development and Intercultural Dialogue"

2015 EUNA Cohort - Final Report Youth Development and Intercultural Collaboration

Where are Women in MENA Region? - Status of Women -
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Introduction

The MENA region accounts for approximately 6% of the world's population and is mostly well-known for its oil reserves (60% of the world's oil reserves) which make MENA as an important source of global economic stability. Despite this economic progress, the region still faces many challenges one of them being a lack of women's empowerment to take participation in public life.

It is very common for people outside of MENA region to have certain generalizations and stigma regarding the manners in which women are treated and represented throughout this region. The media plays a crucial role in our understanding of 'other' people and world regions which contributes towards the creation of specific stigma and prejudice. One such stigma certainly is a low level of education among women due to political, religious, and cultural practices in MENA countries.

This short report focuses on the position of women in Morocco, Egypt, and Qatar, countries we visited during our UNAOC Fellowship in October 2015. To be exact, the report focuses on women in education, religion, business, and finally in politics within their societies and MENA region itself. It is important to mention that MENA region cannot be generalized and observed as a whole. One may notice obvious diversity in social, political, religious, and cultural aspects within these three particular societies. Namely, even though all three countries have a vast majority of Muslim citizens, the manner in which each country displays and promotes Islam differs. Similarly, the role and engagement of women in various aspects within all three above mentioned societies also significantly varies. In the final section, this report offers recommendations on what can be done to improve the current situation.

Women in Education

Education is extremely important in women's empowerment and ensuring women's and the household's well being. In addition, literacy is an imperative for enabling women's participation in societal decision making processes. In 2013, it was estimated that 31 million girls of primary school age and 32 million girls of lower secondary school age were out of school.

In the recent decades, women are having better access to education globally. However, some so called 'developing' countries are still struggling to ensure that both men and women have equal access to education.

Therefore, it is unfair to say that all the countries in MENA region treat the issue of women's education in the same way. On the contrary, women's access to education within the region

has improved significantly over the last decades.[1] During our visit to three countries in MENA region, it was impressive to learn that in the Gulf region, Qatar for instance, more women graduate from Universities than men. Surprisingly, during our visits to institutions and organizations in Qatar there were more men present than women, especially in leadership positions. Likewise, in Morocco and Egypt there are more females than males enrolled in higher education. Yet, just like in the rest of the world there were very few women who hold executive power.

Furthermore, the female labor force participation rate is 26%[2] within the region, which does not reflect the high level of female education. Hence, even tough in some countries there are more educated women than men, due to cultural customs women are still not equally represented in the labor market.

Finally, one cannot but ask herself: "What are women doing after education and why don't we hear about them?". It is obvious that these women exist, but that due to misogynist societies in which men control the public sphere these women have very little access in the domain that is typically not considered as 'women's business.'

Women in Religion

Muslim women are frequently portrayed as the victims of an oppressive, patriarchal religion. Thus, there exists a popular belief in the Western world that Islam is inherently against for women.

Although the three countries in MENA region are predominantly Muslim, we were able to discern the differences via their Histories, culture and more especially via their "Madhab". A madhab is a school of thought which is defined by its Islamic jurisprudence ("fiqh" in arabic). The Islamic jurisprudence is the human understanding of the religious precepts of Islam (first of all the Quran). The interpretation is done by Islamic jurists (Ulema).

Nowadays, there are four main Madhabs that are: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'I and Hanbali. During our stay in Morocco, we had a meeting at the Rabita Mohammadia of Ulemas. This institution will train French and Malian imams as Morocco is seen as practicing a tolerant Islam (Morocco follows the Maliki school of jurisprudence). We learned during our meeting that this training will concern not only men but also women. They are not called imams but "Muhaddithat." This means that those women will have access to a high level religious training. As this training did not start yet, we cannot define for now their influence. It is still important to notice the existence of such women and hopefully to see the future position that they will hold in the civil society. However, the leadership position of these women in their societies is still uncertain.

In Qatar, despite the fact that most of the women went to the university there's no leadership for them in the Religious Affairs. In Qatar, the Madhab is Wahhabism, which consists in practicing Islam in a literal interpretation of the Koran. Therefore, one concludes that Islam is a very diverse religion, which differs from country to country. As it is interpreted by different Muslim scholars, jurists, governments and politicians, Islam has a diverse effect on women empowerment across MENA region.

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[1] http://go.worldbank.org/LW8QT4PKC0
[2] http://go.worldbank.org/LW8QT4PKC0

Women do have access to religious education. However, their participation ends with a successful completion of a religious program. They do not hold any significant religious position, and as such their impact stays at the level of receiving a certificate or a diploma for their religious studies.

Women in Business

While the presence of women in the workforce has improved and as women's entrepreneurship has been recognized as being an important untapped source of economic growth, they still represent a minority in the workforce and among entrepreneurs.

We discovered that MENA women are highly qualified and, unfortunately, they do not really have a leadership position in their respective societies. We did not hear a lot about women entrepreneurs' nor of policies, institutions, and programs supporting women's enterprise. According to the World Bank, even if many women attend University, this trend has not been translated yet into improvements in economic and political inclusion. Thus, the participation of women in the labor force in MENA region is one of the lowest in the world.

Only about 26 percent of women participate in the labor force though the figures are rapidly improving. If it is already hard to get a job as a woman how would it be easier to run its own business? The unequal access to those opportunities is a missed opportunity for economic growth and development for MENA region. The labor market outcomes and unequal wages for women as opposed to men in MENA region could be attributed to prevailing cultural attitudes and weak policies.

Women in Politics

Women's equal access to formal decision-making bodies and political discourse is crucial for adequately reflecting their policy priorities.

Despite the fact that there is a large number of highly educated women across MENA region the level of women's involvement within political and civil affairs in the region is still one of the world's lowest. Thus, the great potential for women's leadership in various political segments remains unexploited. As we were also able to witness women are rare to be found in decision-making positions and politics in general as it is culturally perceived as 'men's space.'

Therefore, it is not surprising that in 2014 Qatar had no women in Parliament[3], and a quota for women's Parliamentary representation does not exist[4]. According to the data provided by the World Bank, in 2011 and 2012 Egypt had 2% of its parliamentary seats held by women. However, the Egyptian Constitution from 2014 addresses the need for an increased percentage of women in the Parliament and demands a quota of 12%. Even though this is a positive step forward, it is still not an appropriate representation of women in their society. Likewise, in Morocco, the number of women in the Moroccan Parliament is only 60 out of 395 seats that are slightly more than 15% of total seats in the Parliament.

The fact that some governments is recognizing the need for quotas to ensure women's representation in decision-making processes is encouraging. However, in order to foster

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[3] http://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/which-country-has-highest-proportion-women-parliament
[4] http://spring-forward.unwomen.org/en/countries/qatar

conditions for sustainable progress these governments needs to increase the representations of all its citizens within decision-making bodies.

Lastly, it is important to note that just because we do not see many women in decision-making positions that does not mean they are politically inactive. On the contrary, women are very involved in politics and civil struggles, but their involvement is more participatory, supportive, and organizational than the executive.

Conclusion/Recommendation(s)

Many challenges and obstacles lie ahead for women in MENA region. In Morocco, Egypt and Qatar, it will be the task of the governments to make good on the promises for women in the future laws or constitutions. Women will, therefore, need to take part in large numbers in the upcoming opportunities and build the advocacy capacity of the women community according to issue treated. By improving women entrepreneurs' access to credit and financial services their access to the labor force would be reinforced. A local and interregional network that will bring together the civil society, the government, and private sector representatives, would help to overcome the several obstacles faced by women by supporting the development of targeted policies and business support.

Moreover, it is very important to note that the lack of female representation within a society is not strictly related to MENA region. Unfortunately, this phenomena is shared globally, with an exception of very few 'highly developed democratic societies' countries. To start with, the governments need to ensure equal representation of men and women in the decision-making bodies. Introducing quotas (in Qatar) and increasing the percentage of women's seats in the Parliament (in Egypt and Morocco) would be a significant step forward to hearing more women voices in the public sphere.

Additionally, presence and work of different organizations (civil society organizations, nongovernmental organizations, independent international bodies such as United Nations) that dedicate their work to advocacy that forces governments and private industry to change and adopt new and more inclusive laws that enforce more equal female participation in all segments is encouraging. In order for the work of these agencies to be affective, there is a great need to raise awareness about the benefits of women's participation towards economic growth and development. The aim of raising this awareness is to encourage societal support towards the implementation of these very changes. A possible solution would be to utilize strategically the high number of Internet and various social media users to raise awareness and enable women to enjoy equal participation within their societies.

JOSH CASS - ERMANNO PEROTTI

FOSTERING COOPERATION BETWEEN EUNA AND MENA YOUTH

CONTEXT, REFECTIONS AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

UNAOC Fellowship Program 2015

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In order to develop effective strategies to foster EUNA-MENA cooperation between young people it is important to have a strong contextual landscape. It is also important that any initiative be grounded in a strong theory of change, with a robust and targeted set of methodologies.

In the experience of this reports authors, outcome oriented initiatives which utilize a range of formal and non-formal learning methodologies with an emphasis on dialogue in safe spaces, is an effective means to build cooperative and mutual collaboration. In turn, this can lead to stronger, more positive and productive relations between individuals from those regions.

INTRODUCTION

Demographic changes, challenges to traditional sources of authority and leadership, widening inequality of opportunity and changes to the way in which people access and engage with the media are shaping the landscape on which young people across Europe and North America (EUNA) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) live, work and interact with others. These contextual factors provide the backdrop against which any considerations as to how cooperation between youth from these regions might be achieved.

As both the authors of this report are based within the European Union (EU) and because their experience of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) Fellowship took them to the MENA region, the authors took the decision to limit the scope of this report to regions for which they have experience. For the purposes of this report, the authors have limited the geographical remit of their recommendations to the EuroMed region.

In subsequent sections this report will explore the context in more detail, set out the terms of a potential theory of change, suggest some broad methodological approaches, and finally, based on the experience of the authors, make some suggestions as to projects and programmes which could foster cooperation between young people in the EuroMed region.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

While travelling through the MENA region as delegates on the UNAOC Fellowship, the authors reflected on the trends that they see within the EU which are profoundly shaping the lives of other young people. The authors felt that they could be summarized by the following broad trends:

Challenges to traditional forms of leadership – the authors noted that there is growing disillusionment, particularly amongst young people, with traditional forms of leadership. This is seen in fewer young people getting involved with mainstream politics, and instead increasingly becoming more involved in grassroots and alternative political movements. There is an increasing disillusionment in the legitimacy of traditional leadership structures, including in elected bodies (local, regional and trans-national) as well as with faith-based leadership structures.

Demographic changes – pressures placed on society by increasing levels of migration into the EU-region are also affecting young people. Though young people tend to be more progressive and liberal the pressure of migration in particular challenges societies and individuals in the EU in terms of how they respond to those pressures.

Inequality of opportunity – the ongoing economic situation has a disproportionate affect on young people. Rates of youth unemployment remain high (see figure below: youth unemployment refers to the share of the labor force ages 15-24 without work but available for and seeking employment) , access to affordable housing is limited, and higher education is increasingly inaccessible. These are factors which parents of young people living in the EU today did not face, certainly at the levels seen today, when they were their children's age.

Unemployment, Youth Total (% of total labor force ages 15-24)
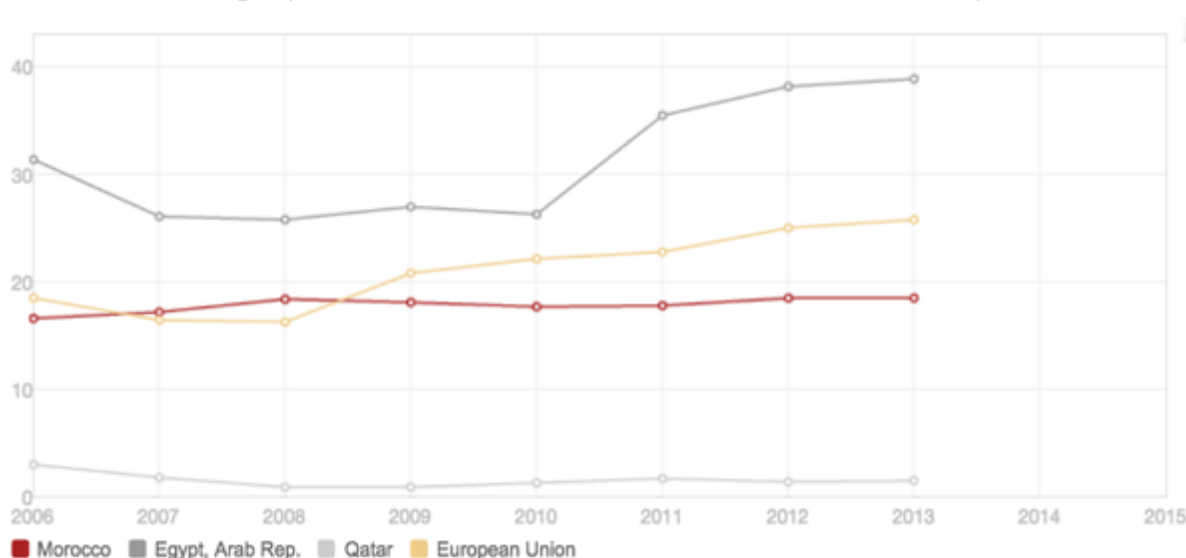
Source: World Bank, modeled ILO estimate

Changes in media – traditional forms of media such as newspapers are in decline, whereas the volume of information available online increases. Furthermore, through personal electronic devices, young people can access social media which in turns provide them with information on situations around the world. This in turn has an affect on how they perceive the world and their own identities (gender, faith, ethnicity, nationality).

The authors consider it important to highlight these trends because in each case there are multiple ways in which individuals can respond to these trends. For instance, these trends can be a point for engagement, or isolation depending on opportunities provided and the inclination of the individual.

Having travelled through the MENA region the authors of this report would suggest that the contextual pressures described above, are, with some modifications, similar to those confronting young people in the MENA region. For instance:

Challenges to traditional forms of leadership – in Egypt the authors saw how the fallout from recent events which began in the Arab Spring have led to a deep disillusionment with all forms of official authority.

Demographic changes – throughout the region, the authors were constantly reminded of how demographics are skewed towards youth, some estimates place 40% of the population of the MENA region under 25 years of age. The consequence of this is far reaching for the shape of those societies in the next decade or so.

Inequality of opportunity – in many ways, the challenges which young people in the EU face are magnified many times over in relation to inequality of opportunity. The shocking levels of youth unemployment and chronic lack of opportunity which was visible during the UNAOC Fellowship visit to the MENA region illustrate the challenges faced.

Changes in media – the revolutions of the Arab Spring were in many way revolutions driven by changes in the media landscape. The penetration of all forms of social media, and the vibrancy of this ecosystem is both an opportunity and a potential challenge to initiatives that seek to enable and empower young people.

In light of the two regions sharing these contextual trends, in the opinion of the authors of this report it is possible to consider developing shared strategies for fostering cooperation between young people at a EuroMed level.

WHY EUROMED

The authors of this report are not the first to note that there are shared cultural and historical connections and points of reference which link societies which live around the Mediterranean

basin. Historically, the narrative has referred to the relationship between Europe and MENA region as 'Clash of Civilizations'. But in light of the uprisings in the Arab world these schemes have been put into question, creating instead a growing desire for knowledge and mutual understanding, which suggests that the regions are not really the victim of a clash of civilizations, but rather of a clash of ignorance based on historical stereotypes.

However, in the experience of the authors there are few initiatives which work to develop a sense of solidarity and connection between individual living in this region. There remains space, certainly within the youth sector, to develop new initiatives which can effectively enable a sense of connection and cooperation between young people.

VISION

It is the vision of this report's authors that young people living in the EuroMed region should be enabled to have opportunities to develop a sense of cooperation and solidarity with one another, and that by doing this will lead to more peaceful, productive and positive relations in the region.

THEORY OF CHANGE

By creating spaces within which young people living in the EuroMed region are enabled and supported to take part in processes of exchange, those young people involved can develop a sense of solidarity with each other on issues that affect them and in doing so increase cooperation with each other. This in turn will lead to the development, by young people, of a shared narrative and vision for the EuroMed region, based on mutual understanding and solidarity, enabling more productive and positive future relations.

METHODS

In the experience of the authors of this report, proposed methodologies include:
- the creation of safe spaces within which interactions can occur; these can be either physical spaces or virtual spaces
- dialogue focused processes which enable fostering of mutual understanding
- developing non-formal educational resources that focus on skills development
- an outcome oriented process that encourages a collaborative learning environment, within which young people work together towards shared objectives.

SUGGESTED PROGRAMS

The following section details projects that, in the experience of the authors, might serve to increase cooperation between young people in the EuroMed region.

UNAOC Alumni Network counts on the support of a number of government and private sector donors. It needs to focus on expanding this list of partners and emphasize the financial support from public and private sector. The Alumni network should identify a team within the network to focus on external partnerships and collaboration. Areas of critical need:
- delivery and coordination of the fellowship's classes
- coordinate the initial phases of outreach amidst the Alums
- an annual budget to support the network's operating costs and outreach activities
- provide opportunities for Alumni to collaborate with the Group of Friends ministerial meetings and the United Nations General Assembly to have the possibility to foster the cooperation between MENA and EUNA regions.

Training trainers for the EuroMed region, to develop a Trainers' Platform and Circle, as a space to connect, contribute and get inspired. It is of crucial importance to develop professional and well trained capacity since these facilitators have to facilitate meeting and encounter between young people from very different backgrounds (gender, faith, ethnicity, nationality). They will also require a range of methodologies suitable for working with very diverse groups. It is therefore of paramount importance - in order to ensure quality - to have trainers well prepared to face the specific challenges related to training activities within EuroMed.

Residential Dialogue Retreats are an effective way of building strong and positive relations between young people from different backgrounds. These retreats need to structured around a key question, or set of questions. They also need to use a variety of formal and non-formal methodologies so as to ensure that the broadest range of learning styles are accommodated. It is also recommended that the retreats are outcome orientated, and that participants are supported to collaboratively produce a creative resource, document or manifesto that highlights the experience which they as young participants have had. Those facilitating these encounters should work to distribute that resource as widely. This will ensure that the experiences of young people are heard by a wide range of stakeholders and partners.

CONCLUSION

Young people living in the EuroMed region are confronted by a range of issues, whether they live within the EU or the MENA regions, that are common across both regions. Enabling young people from across the region to reflect on those challenges collectively can build a

sense of solidarity which could lead to more cooperation between young people from those regions.

In order to ensure this, there needs to be a greater emphasis on the development and retention of expert facilitators, comfortable at working with diverse groups of young people. Furthermore, it is important that these initiatives connect young people to people working in positions of power whether at a local, national, regional or trans-national level. In this way, young people will feel that their voices and ideas are valued and have a place at all levels of society.

ABOUT THE AUTORS

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Arts & Culture: A Youth Engagement Solution
Morocco, Egypt, Qatar, and Bosnia & Herzegovina (EUNA 2015)
By Nora Rahimian and Roda Siad

Introduction

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, youth aged 15-29 make up 30 percent of the population. They are also the fastest growing segment of the population, which makes them major stakeholders in the region. This demographic however, faces serious issues including unemployment, lack of access to resources, limited opportunities to engage with government, and lack of voice in mainstream media. In fact, more than half (51 percent) of youth in this region are unemployed. While there is high enrollment among youth in post secondary education in this region, they continue to be excluded from the economic, political and social fields in their countries. Traditional youth development responses focus on a small sector of the youth population, and often in mainstream, government-sanctified ways that are more rhetoric than practice. Arts and culture, therefore, present an opportunity to engage a cross-sector of youth in a diverse range of activities that can provide economic returns, political voice, psychosocial interaction, and creative outlet.

Background

All four countries identified youth development as an important issue, but none had clear definitions of what that meant nor did they have strategic plans for how youth would be engaged. Consistently, there was a dissonance between the rhetoric officials expounded and the practices they were implementing (made most notable by the overall lack of young people in meetings.)

Meetings with Ministries of Youth and Sports suggested that youth programming was focused largely on sports and loosely defined youth centers. In Egypt, the youth center we visited- a large, Microsoft branded space with an outdoor play area and indoor computer lab- was largely empty, raising questions about the accessibility of such spaces. While there is value in these spaces, the emphasis on sports suggests that the Ministries are disconnected from, or have chosen to simply, the needs and concerns of youth.[5]

Regional organizations like the League of Arab States did not seem to emphasize youth development, even within the context of other challenges facing the region. It was clear that the League has little influence over the actions of each member state and lacks coordinated effort among countries. Responses to intersectional issues like unemployment and lack of political power amongst youth were theoretical, showing that the League has few practical solutions to youth engagement.

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[5] The Ministry of Youth and Sports in Egypt did mention they were beginning a series of community-based town hall style meetings with youth people in order to better understand and engage them.

Where traditional agencies seemed to see youth development as rhetoric, grassroots organizations such as Hiba Foundation in Morocco actively and authentically engage young people. In Rabat, youth-led spaces like Renaissance and public spaces like the park where we saw teens breakdancing, offer young people places for voice and self-expression. Creative community spaces, via festivals like L'Boulevard in Morocco and underground hip hop artists in Cairo, for example, begins to fulfill youth engagement responsibilities that the government is not fulfilling.

Within traditional mainstream structures, youth in the MENA region lack economic, social and political agency. There is a disconnection on the part of government officials in understanding the needs and challenges faced by youth in the region, and the importance of culture on any level is overlooked. As Hicham El Hebbaj of Hiba Foundation said, "Arts can create an environment of tolerance and promote intercultural dialogue ." The lack of government support for any kinds of arts- & culturally-based program, combined with the disconnect between traditional institutions of power and young people means that there are lots of untapped opportunities. Youth are an asset and strength in the MENA region, and while the government does not embrace the demographic, the few community-based organizations do.

Problem

Large, dynamic youth populations in the MENA region without real, viable engagement strategies can present a series of country-specific and regional challenges. Arts and culture have largely remained an unexplored solution when it comes to cultivating responses to this. *How then can arts and culture play a role in addressing the social, political and economic disenfranchisement of youth?*

Objectives

The objectives of the report are to provide clear ways in which arts can be integrated into youth programming and how arts can be used as a strategy for youth engagement.

In order to understand the issues facing MENA youth, there are several external factors that need to be acknowledged. Young people are part of a youth bulge in countries where there is high poverty, high unemployment, censorship, and lack of political access. Recent movements to challenge hegemonic power structures have been met with varying degrees of effectiveness which most young people feel is still not enough.

In Morocco, youth involvement in civil society has not been a focus for the government. As the country has focused its efforts on building infrastructure and other institutional priorities, young people have been an afterthought. But young people have carved space for themselves, creating cultural spaces and building south-south connections that foster

intercultural collaborations. These collaborations across borders speak to the role of independent media and technology in connecting Morocco to other parts of Arica. The results have been some of the longest running, internationally recognized music festivals, which attract over 200,000 people.

In Egypt, according to university professor Zeyad Elkalani, the values and political views of youth post-2011 differ greatly from those of the older generation. The Egyptian parliamentary elections held on October 17 saw a turn out of 10% of the population. The low turnout (especially among youth) reflects current attitudes towards the government. It demonstrates the disengagement of youth in civic participation and highlights their exclusion from the political sphere. Post-2011 Egypt saw increased security measures and government censorship of journalists and human rights activists. Our meeting with the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) revealed the government crack down and investigation of independent media and human rights organizations. The Egyptian government's restriction around freedom of expression and freedom of assembly has great impact on arts development in this region. The investigations have created a culture of fear among young people who are engaged in the arts.

In the countries we visited, young people are untapped resources. While institutional support of arts and culture is not necessary for young people to create a new economic industry, build cross-border collaborations, and find voice through new media and creativity, things like funding, space, and resources would help nurture the work of youth.

Key Points

In each country, the root cause of youth disengagement stems from lack of systemic power and inclusion in the crucial areas of economics and politics. Additionally, the value of social and cultural outlets for healing, intercultural dialogue, and social exchange have been largely overlooked by mainstream institutions of power. The challenge is not that youth do not want to be included in these spaces, but that hegemonic power does not allow access aside from rhetorical and token inclusion. Arts and cultural therefore provide youth a space of their own that is unreliant on these powers.

Economics
As it stands, most youth in Egypt, Morocco, and Bosnia lack economic power. Jobs are scarce, even for those that have higher education, and poverty rates are high, especially in areas outside of major cities.

-Creative industries can provide much-needed jobs for young people in both skilled (marketing, social media, management, design, production) and unskilled (construction, security, street promotion, set up and break down) areas.

-Creative industries can become self-sustaining because they have built-in income-generating

mechanisms. Unlike donor-models, inclusion of investors in the creative industries recognizes the agency of young people and challenges donor-driven dependency culture.[6]

-Creative industries encourage entrepreneurship and innovation. Young people are able to work with the resources available to them to create and build innovative solutions to complex challenges.

Politics

Despite strong pushes for political change, power still remains in traditional spaces that represent governments over people (in the words of an Arab League representative, "The UN was created by the people, for the people. The Arab League was created by governments…"). Young people who want more than token representation can use arts and culture, particularly through media, to harness political power.

-Arts and culture provide creative ways to talk about sociopolitical issues that can cut across political divisions. By utilizing storytelling and entertainment, arts can address issues in nonthreatening ways and bring people together on common issues.

-Arts have the ability to elicit emotional responses, which research shows leads to behavior change. Combining this with the power of celebrity role modeling, youth people can change attitudes and norms regardless of politics and laws.

Society and Culture

Conversations about development usually leave out psychosocial components like healing, cultural pride, and identity, but these factors are just as important as economic and political agency.

-For countries that are recovering from colonialism and war, arts and culture are especially useful tools for reclaiming cultural power and pride. As unique arts scenes are allowed to emerge, young can identify with positive, creative movements that tie them back to their histories, their communities, and their personal identities.

-The legacy of colonialism and war includes trauma, which few youth development programs address. Through the storytelling, bearing witness, and creative self-expression enabled by arts and culture, youth are able to give voice to their pain and begin a public healing process.

-Youth are able to use arts and culture to challenge single-story representations of what it means to be Muslim and/or Arab and/or Middle Eastern and/or North African. Through arts, culture, and media, they are able to draft their own narratives and tell their own stories about contemporary identity and experiences for young people.

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[6] Nigeria offers a great example of this. The afrobeats industry has utilized south-south relationships-identified in Morocco and Egypt as important connections- to become one of the fastest growing music industries and Nollywood is the third largest film industry in the world.

-Arts and culture allow youth to connect across differences and borders, enabling them to cultivate meaningful relationships based on common interests and creative values. Those relationships can be peer-to-peer, intergenerational, or south-south, all of which can lead to new spaces for collaboration, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

Recommendations

-We recommend that arts and culture be strategically included in all youth development programs, not just as outcomes but as critical parts of the design process.

-We recommend that artists and cultural producers be included in decision-making spaces and that a special, joint youth-driven committee be created between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Youth and Sports to ensure that both youth and arts are represented in political spaces.

-We recommend that economic programs, including those aimed at entrepreneurship, microloans, and innovation specifically target and include the creative industries.

-We recommend that each government set aside funds specifically to support creative projects designed and led by youth. These funds should be made accessible through a neutral, no-cost, and transparent application process.

-We recommend that UNAOC alum in each of the countries identify cultural influencers and artivists in their communities and begin to develop mutually beneficial relationships where the artists reinforce the alum's work and the alum amplify the artists' work.

-We recommend that UNAOC sponsor an annual arts-focused conference that brings together different players in the creative industries for a face-to-face opportunity to build new relationships, exchange best practices, and foster new collaborations. The conference should include a public concert.

-We recommend that UNAOC set aside funds to support follow up from this conference, to include creative collaborations, information-sharing platforms, and production costs for new projects. We recommend that an entertainment industry expert from the UNAOC Alumni Network be brought in to facilitate post-conference follow up and projects.

-We recommend that #CultureFix and Borderless Films be brought in as consultants to create country-specific, tailored arts engagement strategies for youth and artists. These would include industry development workshops, the building of regional relationships between artists and youth so as to grow individual markets, and developing an inclusionary action plan for the recommendations above.

UNAOC 2015 Fellowship: EUNA Cohort
"In seek for Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogue: Youth Civic Engagement and Empowerment in the MENA region through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)"

"Taking the Youth seriously…"

I.   Introduction and Background

Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is commonly considered to be comprised of 18 countries, however there is no unique approach and consensus in defining the exact territories belonging to this geographic area. For the purposes of this report and considering the geographic territories visited by the UNAOC 2015 EUNA cohort, our main focus of studies will be 3 countries: Morocco, Egypt and Qatar. Specifically, our studies will be focused on the civic engagement and civic education of young people through the usage of innovative technologies and ICT.

Young people (aged 15-29) make up roughly 30% of the total population for these countries (Egypt, Morocco and Qatar) with certain deviations in considering the age range for young people[7]. The conducted desk research, as well as observations, discussions and clarifications within the 2-weeks visits emphasized and re-confirmed the hypothesis that the young people are facing more or less similar issues regardless of the geographical location of their country, socio-economic conditions and educational level or background. The main points can be summarized:

- Youth unemployment rates are still high in the aforementioned countries with a rough estimate of twice more than the world average (ILO data);
- Inequalities (youth polarization, absence of the sense of belonging, sense of participation) and marginalization remain a major challenge, particularly uneven economic development inequalities marked by urban vs. rural development and youth engagement.
- Youth face the issue of an access to a qualified education with developed curriculum and agenda for civic education and involvement. *"We no longer face the issue of access of information rather today's educational challenge is about analytical mind and ability to select the right information…" (Faculty of Economics & Political Affairs, Cairo University)*

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[7] The question for the definition of the age range of "the youth" was raised by the UNAOC fellows. Still, the official reference is the UN definition of the "the youth", whereas certain MENA countries consider 35 years old citizens as "youth".

Nevertheless, the recent political events triggered the political awareness of not only the general public but the youth specifically. The awakening of the "new vision" brought certain possibilities and opportunities for young people, whose ambitions and energy could be used to stipulate new political environment with more accountable and transparent policies and institutions. At the same time the political awareness pushed toward the formulation of a "creative mindset", which we believe may be considered as a pre-requisite for the application of innovation technologies and their usage in civic engagement. Among other factors and driving forces, young people have started to adapt ICT to build more successful communities and interactions.

The agenda of the fellowship was developed to ensure wider participation of different layers of society: the governmental entities, media agencies, public administrations, religious institutions, universities, civil society and NGOs. Following institutional presentations, the meetings were mainly structured in a way to open a space for questions and answers and discussions.

Qatar FREEDOM ON THE NET
N/A

II.   Problem Statement

The key question we aim to study:

"What are the main determinants and factors of youth civic engagement through innovative technologies and ICT?"

III.   Objectives

This report will explore challenges and opportunities experienced through the UNAOC fellowship program 2015 trip to Morocco, Cairo and Doha, with focus on how these countries can implement small and medium sized reforms to more effectively support youth cohorts within their populations.

We tried to study and assess:

1) The current state of ICT and digital technologies usage for youth engagement and participation in MENA countries visited;
2) The potential of intercultural collaboration (networking, project design etc.) with the youth of MENA countries visited.

In order to reach our objectives, alongside with the official meetings and discussions, we tried to address questions of our interest with the MENA cohort, while meeting in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Moreover, although Jordan was not among our destination countries, through the facilitation of the mentor, we were able to have a quite productive skype call with the Founder of the digital platform For8sa http://www.for9a.com/en - which is an online database of educational opportunities worldwide, including scholarships, fellowships etc. The team members also conducted a desk review with available literature on the subject of study.

External factors to be considered include matching appropriate technologies with the audiences who will use them, ensuring access and influence for marginalized members of society, harnessing the trust of young people and shaping their position within society to

be one of collaborative co-creation, instead of being seen as threats to be managed or as mere beneficiaries of projects and programs. Another important factor is whether these governments are fully committed to supporting young people, doing so may entail losing control and influence which may be seen as potentially threatening to existing systems of power.

IV. Key Points

Overall, governmental institutions do not fully represent the diversity of the population of these countries. The representatives and processes do not fully correspond to the population dynamics of the country, nor the needs of a digitally literate connected generation. By supporting, connecting and scaling local culture and multimedia projects, MENA countries could meaningfully accelerate youth development.

Generally, there is no unified approach and certain strategy/policy for further applicability of ICT tools. The current trends of ITC usage worldwide are deeply associated with: 1) usage of digital tools for educational, learning perspectives; 2) creating cost and time-effective tools for technologically advanced industries; 3) using digital tools for community mobilization and civic-driven changes; 4) developing synchronized "big-data" and artificial intelligence based tools, 5) applying digital tools for creating social change.

Unfortunately, yet all three countries have very limited or no examples of ICT on this very level, however this is partially true about Egypt and the examples are discussed below.

Morocco

Visits to cultural producers such as the Boulevard music festival collective and (Informal meeting with the sector representative/ activist) the vibrant arts and cultural fusion of Morocco is geographically and culturally situated at the intersection point between Europe, Africa and the MENA region. We heard about the need to more fully invest in youth and arts culture and how Arts programming like the Boulevard, Ekinawa, and Fez festivals have received little support, despite the high return on investment delivered by tourism to these types of festivals. A challenge identified was the ability to properly value, measure and demonstrate culture as an economic driver. An estimate of 10 to one was quoted as a return on investment for cultural initiatives.

There is amazing potential for Morocco to grow itself into a cultural and technology hub between the three polarities it finds itself in. If cultivated correctly, Morocco could imagine itself as a festival venue country, expanding the scope of some of its music festivals into inter-cultural and multimedia festivals similar to South by South West.

Another challenge identified was the large informal sector and bureaucracies which slow down the innovation cycle.

Meeting with the Ministry of Youth and Sport also illustrated the growth potential for ICT specifically, given the fact that the Ministry already runs a quite well-developed network of Youth Centers. As clarified during the meeting, the Centers are equipped with

internet and the communications patterns are conducted through e-mails. The Ministry pays special attention to the sports and the development/usage of young people's potential through the appliance of sports and respective events.

Egypt

We met with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and learned about the challenge of creating inclusive transparent democratic, responsive systems. These integrated challenges are taking place in a regional context of less than stable and members of the international community have been forced to overlook certain challenges in order to maintain connections with a relatively stable country in a dangerous neighbourhood. It was emphasized that the government is interested in orienting their efforts towards proactively building a resilient society, as managing conflict itself is not enough and there is a need to focus prevention to avoid relapse and positively support young people's development.

The meeting with the academia was conducted at the University of Cairo. The presentation was quite vivid in terms of the usage of digital tools as powerful and cost-effective means for creating self-organized, civic-driven community movements.

Bey2ollak http://desktop.bey2ollak.com/ - Traffic information and ridesharing app, transforms how we see each other. Set up ride sharing for people returning to their families for the holidays. Allowed for excess capacity in cars to be harnessed for the collective human need. Ecologically more friendly and created unexpected organic connections across political affiliations and classes. Mixing up people in unexpected situations allows for the sharing of culture and perspectives in a friendly, personal way. #Whereisthebomb - a hashtag for warning Egyptians about violence related Traffic , allowing drivers finding information about potential terrorist attacks so you can avoid traffic stoppages or go and watch.

Cairo Runners http://www.cairorunners.com/ - A collective of people who meet together and run in different neighbourhoods in Cairo public spaces to run together, improving health and social cohesion simultaneously.

These examples demonstrate how young people are creating media which changes the perception of challenges of conflict and healing.

Qatar

Generally speaking youth are well educated, have access to capital, a culture based on entitlement and role.

Would benefit immensely by focusing on alignment of their 15 year development strategy (NDS) with the SDGs, they already share a time frame.

Qatar needs to ensure its development is achieved in a sustainable manner, it has the resources and the ability to attract talent, but ensuring proper management, planning and integration are delivered is challenging for a country which has developed so rapidly.

V.   Recommendations

All the three countries (Egypt, Morocco, Qatar) need to take into account the available ICT "heritage" worldwide and become more open for cooperation. The usage of ITC and

digital tools is quite limited in all three countries of our visits. The assumption that the digital technologies are just websites, social media, mainly Facebook and Twitter, is widely present in all layers of society (ordinary citizens, governmental entities, media etc.). Infrastructure to support a robust ecosystem of responsive institutions needs to be upgraded, improved and scaled up to meet the needs of youth populations in the modern connected age. Moreover, supportive environment for innovative youth development practices should be introduced. The action plan for the creation of the enabling environment could be: 1) non-formal education and learning open calls for start-ups run by young people; 2) organization of social good summits, barcamps and hackathons with participation of experts worldwide – the formats of these events allow the wider applicability of online tools and on a certain scale there is not even a need to travel to the destination; 3) more open and inclusive talks with young people through digital tools, allowing them to scale e.g. public services; 4) provision of small-scale grants/ seed funding to social start-ups, young entrepreneurs etc.

The UN should continue to support local innovation and regional exchange across the MENA region through programs like the Game Changer Fellows. These efforts should be scaled and replicated to support more young people from a variety of backgrounds to collaborate on innovative cultural projects. It would be very useful to have sufficient notice to ensure proper access to groups who may not have the access and networks to find out in time.

In order to promote Intercultural practices, these programs should also involve inter and intra-regional exchange. Programs like the Game Changers Fellowship in Egypt, could potentially support certain projects from which was open only to Egyptians, it would be more effective if participants were from the entire MENA region. Scaling these via technology, and promoting the exchange of ideas and the development of campaigns is an essential component of successfully engaging young people in realizing their development potential.

As discussed and emphasized during the sessions, the UNAOC alumni network should be strengthened and equipped with opportunities to cooperate and collaborate more often through meetings. As an alumni, certain social media tools should be always updated and serve as a reference point, while discussing the fellowship with wider public.

Having in mind the intercultural dialogue, we consider that there should be a possibility for a wider geographical territories be involved into the UNAOC fellowship.

The meetings of different cohorts should be always present in any round of fellowships, given the informal and most useful possibility for talks and discussions.

Resources:

Interculturalleaders.org - exclusive skills & knowledge-sharing platform for civil society organizations and young leaders that work on addressing cross-cultural tensions.

CityBugs.org – a civic-driven platform forming a dialogue between the society and governments, pushing the latter toward more transparent and open talks, actions.

Alumni Network Facebook Page

Government Connections

Analind Foundation

Diaspora Communities

UN trainings like the The Game Changer Fellowship in Egypt

Corporate Social Responsibility Programs

SDG financing

Notes:

http://www.icicp.org/

http://www.brookings.edu/

https://www.mercycorps.org/

http://icma.org/en/international/home

http://www.mjs.gov.ma/

http://www.youthpolicy.org/mappings/regionalyouthscenes/mena/facts/

http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/MENAEXT/0,,contentMDK:20529511~pagePK:146736~piPK:226340~theSitePK:256299,00.html

http://reports.weforum.org/outlook-global-agenda-2015/regional-challenges/building-for-better-middle-east-north-africa/

UNAOC REPORT – EMPATHY ACROSS DIFFERENCE

Introduction

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) Fellowship Program aims at fostering intercultural exchange and interfaith understanding by engaging with emerging leaders and young professionals from across the world.[1] In October 2015, a group of youth development practitioners from Europe and North America participated in an exchange visit to Egypt, Morocco and Qatar. This report presents some preliminary findings from the visit on how to foster empathy across difference. In particular, it investigates how youth development programs can bring together people of different backgrounds and encourage discussion, empathy and fruitful action.

Challenges and opportunities

Events such as the Arab Spring show how young people in the Middle East / North Africa (MENA) region play an important role in shaping developments and leading changes in their societies. In this context – where there are numerous tensions over political ideology, social values or identity – young people are often seen as agitators or victims. However, as stated by the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon "Many people worry about how impressionable young people are being deceived by violent extremists. They are victims and they need our help. At the same time, we should also focus on the millions of young people who are looking for a higher purpose. They want to promote understanding, not intolerance."[2]

Objective of the report

The objective of this report is to provide some basic findings and recommendations on how to assist young people in their efforts to promote understanding. In particular, it looks at how to bring together young people of different backgrounds, notably in sports activities, in order to foster empathy. It should be noted that this report provides only a rudimentary analysis with findings that will need to be further investigated and verified. Hence, one of the recommendations of the report is to conduct further research on this topic.

As mentioned above, this report looks at how organizations can bring together young people of different backgrounds in order to create empathy. Empathy was a term heard frequently from officials who worked with youth. It was especially cited by those officials who plan and implement programs aimed to foster understanding, reconciliation and dialogue with polarizing and traumatized populations. Empathy is an important characteristic to have, even more when promoting understanding is the goal of a program. Difficulty arises when a working definition of empathy is needed and, how to foster and measure that your audience more empathetic. It is important to first (list/create) define empathy. General definitions of empathy say it is the ability to understand the feelings of others, but when you actively seek to bring together youth from different backgrounds, empathy needs a stronger and clearer definition. For the purpose of this report, empathy includes an emotional state, cognitive perspective and behavioural aspect. All these aspects help individuals create shared feelings, understanding or an otherwise intangible connection. From our experiences in our respective

fields coupled with various dialogue throughout the fellowship, we understand one proven method to create empathy is by bringing individuals from diverse backgrounds together. By doing this, empathy can be used as a means to connect young people with one another and have them learn from one another.

Key points

Interactions

Interviewees invariably stated that they felt that providing opportunities for young people to interact with each other was one of the most effective ways to foster intergroup understanding. The Director of the League of Arab States Department for Dialogue among Civilizations specifically cited the UNAOC Fellowship Program and their own programs such as the "Arab Young Voices" platform as examples of this kind of work. These exchanges are felt to profoundly affect the participants and contribute to developing more open and positive viewpoints of people from different backgrounds or with different perspectives. The Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies equally mentioned their annual summer training for university students, where they inform them of how to critically analyze politics. While their program does not specifically target participants of different backgrounds, it nevertheless achieves diversity in its cohort, which strengthens the analytical learning process for its participants.

Implementers

However, the Assistant Deputy Foreign Minister of Egypt for UN Affairs underlined that it was important for activities such as these to be youth-led, reflecting the Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding.[3] Furthermore, rapprochement work of this kind can be very effective when groups of young people from different backgrounds work together to implement these activities. For example, a young Moroccan civil society actor stated that having a mixed team, in his case one that included progressive and conservative colleagues made it easier for them to design and implement activities that attracted young people from across the ideological spectrum.

Additionally, the Moroccan Ministry of Youth and Sports highlighted three key aspects which promote intercultural dialogue. Of particular interest is the National Institute of Democratic which provides youth the opportunity to voice their perspectives on many political issues. Regardless of political parties these young people are brought together to discuss their role in political decisions, policy-making and various other processes of the political parties. According to Mr. Yacine Bellarab, Director of Communication, the outcomes and results have been promising and positive despite the diversity of political affiliation during the meetings.

Focus

Another key element of success for bringing together young people from different groups, as stated by a member of the Moroccan Economic, Social and Environmental Council, is to "work on burning issues that are a magnet that draw youth in", mentioning poverty, new

technologies and the environment as some of those issues. In a similar vein, the Director of the Egpyt Media Development Program (EMDP) stated that their local newspaper Mantiqti was popular for the "guy in the store and the executive in the bank", because it reports on topics that concern a wide cross section of society. For instance, one of their stories tackled the issue of sexual harassment on the streets of Cairo, profiling the experiences of five different women ranging from very liberal to highly conservative.

Culture

Cultural activities were identified as one of the most effective tools for bringing together young people of different backgrounds. The Directors of the Hiba Foundation and Boultek (two separate music bodies) described how the 'Boulevard Festival' in Casablanca (Morocco) was the primary event in the country that was attended by young people from all socio-economic groups. One way that the festival further extended its appeal to different groups was to deliver a wide variety of musical styles. They also found that traditionally wealthier groups in society were afraid to attend events were less economically well-off young people were present, due to concerns about security. Therefore the festival organisers took steps to ensure that the event was safe and to project that image to potential participants.

Innovation

Lastly, the Director of the Political Sciences Department at Cairo University explained how some innovative tools found great success in ways that they were never intended for. In particular, she highlighted a travel app for smartphones called Bey2ollak. This app was originally intended to help people navigate the famed traffic jams of Cairo. However, during some of the more tense periods of the Egyptian Revolution people from all walks of life ended up using it for information about how to avoid unsafe parts of town, and in particular it recommended its users to travel in groups. In that way, the app began to bring together strangers who would walk in groups, who did not know each other before and might have wildly different viewpoints. A similar movement that was highlighted was 'Cairo Runners', a group for jogging where again people from all stripes who did not know each other came together, in what the Director called and example of the "community saving each other".

Cost/benefit

Like all other groups in society, young people will consider how participating in an activity will benefit them, and weigh that against the associated financial costs or the time they need to invest. This is why the EMDP and Boulevard Festival ensure that their activities (such as training workshops and concerts) are free of charge. This is especially important to ensure that young people with less money – considering the high rate of youth unemployment in the region this is a key consideration – are able to take part. Furthermore, these activities should render some reward. Many young people wish to receive certificates to recognize their participation in activities such as training workshops or exchange programs, often in order to bolster their work experience and credibility as they seek employment.

Recommendations

This report puts forward two series of recommendations. The first series of recommendations is related to the shortcomings in this analysis. They are namely to:

- Conduct further and more extensive research on this topic in the region.
- In particular, conduct research in Qatar where the role of young people and their initiatives were less evident during the Fellowship Programme.
- Test the hypotheses and verify the information contained in this report.

The second series of recommendations concern how to build programs that bring together diverse groups of young people in order to build empathy:

- Promote activities, events and spaces (such as youth centers) where young people from different backgrounds are able to socialize with each other.
- Following Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding, implement programs that are youth-led.
- Include young people of different backgrounds in the design of youth programs, in order to ensure that those activities are appealing and accessible for young people from different backgrounds.
- Consider cultural sensitivities, notably related to gender, in order to ensure gender sensitivity in activities. Again, having a gender-balanced team designing and implementing activities will help to ensure this aspect.
- Promote activities that bring together young people across the MENA region, as during our Fellowship Programme we witnessed the diversity and indeed lack of connection between the different countries we visited. This diversity could be a source of strength for promoting understanding between different groups within those countries and between those countries and the wider world.
- Provide opportunities that MENA and EUNA youth could meet to discuss work within a similar field, or dissimilar fields but has some common denominator. These opportunities could include workshops, brainstorming sessions, small group "think tanks" to critically assess and help one another. This would not only build empathy, but cultivate a community of young leaders who are willing to learn from one another and continue conversations across borders.
- Link current organizations in MENA countries, such as Le Boulevard or EMDP (which work to create new avenues for young people to express themselves while helping others) with EUNA leaders and could benefit from meeting or having some type of brief shadow experience.

There are also several partnering organizations - such as the Boulevard Festival and EMDP which are mentioned in this report - that could be a great asset. Their organizations understand the importance of youth involvement at all stages ofthe process, from planning through evaluation, and have been doing previous work that convenes youth and has had success.

[1] UNAOC 2015 EUNA participants Call for Applications

[2] Secretary-General's remarks at the UNAOC Group of Friends Ministerial Meeting. 1 October 2015.

[3] https://www.sfcg.org/guidingprinciples

What YOUth believe?
Engaging young people, religious leaders
and civil society in dialogue
by Daniel Overskott (Norway) and Taras Dzyubanskyy (Ukraine)

UNAOC, EUNA 2015 Cohort

In a globalized world of today, a clear need for dialogue arises from the complexities of relations among various segments of society. Religion and religious views have always been an important factor in the lives of the people and religions still play a significant role in our societies.

Always based on our observations and conclusions, we would like to elaborate on our own understanding of interreligious dialogue and its implications for society and especially the role of young people in dialogue (the role of religious education in the lives of young people). From a Christian perspective, an interfaith dialogue is necessary for a few reasons: it draws people closer to a mutual understanding, it helps us understand ourselves better, it paves the way to respect and acceptance of "the other" and it helps eradicate fear, anxiety and prejudices. Without a doubt, when we speak about faith or belief, in our minds we always have something that is very personal and sacred. As social beings, men and women show their internal faith by their external actions: prayers, rituals, deeds and actions. In our report we are less concerned with faith as an internal category, but rather with faith as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

Certainly, religions can never come to a consensus on theological issues. However, religious leaders and followers of religions can and should strive to search for common ethical grounds which is fundamental in building just and peaceful societies. Religions have great potential and power to make a difference in people's lives and to make this world a better place.

At our home countries, Norway and Ukraine, we are engaged in interreligious dialogue. In our work we meet people of different faiths, particularly Christians and Muslims. In Norway, the question of Muslim immigrants is one of the "hot" issues and much needs to be done in this respect. In Ukraine, with the continuing Russian occupation of the Crimean peninsula, many of the Crimean Muslims have left their homes and migrated to the west of the country. So there is a need for an interfaith dialogue on this level as well.

In our paper, we would like to raise some questions which are based on our observations during the trip to the MENA region. Among the questions are the following:

1. How do religious authorities see and define the problem of atheism among Muslim population? Is there such phenomenon as "secular Islam"? What do they see as remedies to secularism and secular culture?

2. How does the state and religious authorities deal with conversions?

3. Are there any programs that young people can learn about other religions than Islam?

4. How does Islam deal with such issues as human dignity, human rights, freedom of religion, freedom of speech?

5. What are the fundamental values of Islam that are similar to other religions, especially Christianity?

1. How do religious authorities see and define the problem of atheism among Muslim population? Is there such phenomenon as "secular Islam"? What do they see as remedies to secularism and secular culture?

We will narrow this question to be about Egypt and our visit to the Al Azhar Institution. That is one of the most influential Muslim institutions in the Arab World. This is also where we got most answers about atheism in the region. We asked one of the leaders at Al Azhar Institution if he could see a growing number of youth that converts to atheism. He said that they almost did not have atheism in the country, which made us wonder. We see in the Western Europe that youth often do not want to identify themselves as religious and certainly not in terms of a traditional religious belief. It sounded like the people at Al Azhar were not aware about this movement and that he was wrong.

After checking out this fact in different reports, we saw that it was hard to say who is right. There seems to be no statistics of atheism in Egypt[8]. It seems though that atheism is rising amongst youth after the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood[9]. In this article, we can see that the governments see atheism as a threat even without the proper facts that atheism is a rising phenomenon[10]. Here we can also see that an outspoken atheist prisoned for blasphemy – a result of a Facebook-page he made for atheist Egyptians. Atheism looks like an underground movement which is not easy to quantify and that the government sees this movement as a threat. Since there are no statistics (that we could see) that show any increase of atheism in Egypt, the Al Azhar Institution may be right about their conclusion.

2. How does the state and religious authorities deal with conversions?

We got some statements about this from a religious guide in Qatar and from the Al Azhar Institution in Egypt. I will answer this question from these experiences.

In Qatar we visited the National Committee for Human Rights. They said that apostatizing and proselytizing was forbidden in Qatar. Later we met a guide at a mosque who spoke to us about Islam. We asked if he knew the rule of apostatizing (since that was a clear intention for him). He laughed and said that he didn't know about this rule but didn't care about it. We thought after the meeting with the National Committee for Human Rights that they were only talking about apostatizing from other religions than Islam. It seemed that we were right after the response from our guide. The law in Qatar does forbid apostatizing[11].

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[8] http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/egypt-government-fears-atheism.html#

[9] http://www.salon.com/2013/10/27/a_christopher_hitchens_dream_atheism_on_the_rise_in_egypt/

[10] http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/28/opinion/mona-eltahawy-egypts-war-on-atheism.html?_r=0

[11] http://www.loc.gov/law/help/apostasy/#qatar

At the Al Azhar Institution they said that it was easy to convert in Egypt. After checking this out on the internet, it did just seem like this was for easy for non-Muslims to convert to Islam, and not the opposite[12]. We were surprised by the answer because we have heard of many converts from Islam that tells of a very hard life after their conversions, and similar stories come from many of the Arab states[13].

In not one of our visits we were told that it is hard to convert from Islam to Christianity. Is the case then that it is ok to convert? The organization "Open Doors"[14] tells us that this is not true. Many fear for their lives after they want to change their religion they say and it seemed like none of our visits told us about this, maybe deliberately or because they don't know.

3. Are there any programs that young people can learn about other religions than Islam?

We didn't see any programs where young people from different religions can meet and explain their religion openly. Of course we cannot conclude that there is no such arena in the countries we visited, but the organizers for our trip should recognize the value a meeting like that would be for our trip. The whole point of our trip was to learn about the multi-cultural and multi-religious activities of the countries we visited and we could not see any youth activates that had this as an objective.

One of the leaders at the Al Azhar Institution said that the youth in Egypt learn about other religions in the school. He also said that it is not normal that youth learn about another religion from people who represent the religions themselves. We think that countries all over the world need to make programs where youth get to meet different religions through the eyes of people who believe them. This is something that happens in a small scale in Europe and in no extent in the MENA-countries. This is something that could be improved in the countries we visited to improve the understanding of other religions and cultures.

4. How does Islam deal with such issues as human dignity, human rights, freedom of religion, freedom of speech?

During our UNAOC Fellowship to the MENA region, we were exposed to an interesting world of Islam. As most people that we met -- either state authorities or civil society leaders – were of the Muslim background, it was curious to see how much of religion was present in their lives.

In Morocco, for instance, it was very interesting to hear a presentation of Islam as a religion of joy. Actually, it is the first time that we heard such an interpretation and we think that, in the field of interfaith dialogue, it is very important to present such a view of Islam. In view of the media reports and news, in today's western world, Islam is represented by a small minority of radicals. In our minds, it would be good to organize special training programs and

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[12] http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/egypt-copts-convert-muslims-crisis-kidnappings.html#
[13] http://answering-islam.org/Testimonies/

[14] https://www.opendoors.org/

seminars for youth who would learn about the basics of Muslim religion. Such trainings and seminars could be also organized for young leaders of religious communities and even for those who are in training to become leaders (seminarians, for example). In this way, when they become pastors and priests, they will have the knowledge of how to communicate with the followers of Islam.

Many times during our trip, as well as in a conversation with our mentor, Wadia Ait Hamza, it was repeated that education is fundamental for building a just and peaceful society. Educational programs – either formal or non-formal – have the power to change people's attitudes towards religion. Indeed, authentic religious values can never be directed against human persons.

In our understanding, one of the problems of the Islamic world is the lack of hierarchy which would offer an "official" interpretation of the Sacred Texts of the Quran. In view of this, many independent groups and organizations take advantage of this situation and they produce their own interpretation to "fit" their needs and goals.

While we were not able to study Islam as a religion, our experience and meetings with prominent leaders demonstrate that Islamic tradition does not discourage respect for human rights. It is a selective interpretation of Islam and an intentionally purposeful application of its laws that present a danger in any country and society today – be it in the "west" or "east" of the world. Such selective approach presents a challenge for interfaith dialogue.

Another area of imminent importance is to combine forces in eradicating radicalism and fanatism. Particularly useful in this respect we found a presentation in Morocco at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. The professor presented some of the "reasons" for extremism and the ways to fight it. Such approach – in understanding the way that radical groups use their methods to recruit young people and indoctrinate – would be particularly important for finding ways to counter it and to find ways how to discredit such groups.

5. What are the fundamental values of Islam that are similar to other religions, especially Christianity?

We are convinced that our religions, Islam and Christianity, do have common values. Interfaith dialogue should be based on promotion of those values through common initiatives and projects, especially in social sphere. It is only in this way that we will be able to become authentic witnesses of our religions and their worthy representatives.

In the framework of moral and ethical systems, values constitute the core and essence. If we look at the monotheistic religions – the three Abrahamic faiths – we do find common ethics and morals. All of those religions uphold the sanctity of human life, respect for human dignity, human rights. Family, justice, wisdom, peace, respect are categories that can be found within the pages of the Sacred Texts, the Torah, the Gospels and the Quran. The study of Sacred Texts and their comparative analysis will lead to a deeper appreciation and knowledge of our traditions and will definitely constitute a strong foundation for dialogue.

In light of the tragic terroristic acts in France, we would like to stress in our paper that those who committed such horrible crimes in no way can be described as belonging to any religious traditions. It is not religion, but terror. Our prayers for the victims and their families!

We would also like to express our gratitude to the UNAOC and to all the people who made our trip possible. Special thanks to Paloma Haschke-Joseph for her dedication, spirit and attention.

With gratitude,

Daniel Overskott and Taras Dzyubanskyy