

Beirut, Nov. 12, 2010

One of the most important priorities for research-, service delivery-, and policy-oriented institutions in the Middle East and North Africa today and in the years ahead is a systematic analysis of many aspects of the life conditions and worldviews of young people in this region. This is due to the large numbers of Arab children and youth under the age of 29, in absolute and relative terms, who comprise a majority of the population -- around 60-65 % of the total -- rather than a self-contained or isolated sub-group. How young Arabs see themselves and their place in their societies and the world largely defines how they behave; and their behavior in the years ahead will help determine if the region remains mired in stagnant political systems and economic disparities, or taps its full human potential and shifts onto a track of sustained and more balanced growth.

Research that the Issam Fares Institute at AUB and the Unicef regional office have conducted or commissioned in the past 18 months for the first regional report on Arab youth, combined with analyses of existing data and studies, suggests several key themes related to the conditions and views of youth and the importance of conducting more integrated, cross-sectoral research into these issues. The most significant are:

- 1) This generation of young Arabs is the first to routinely break through the constraints that adult society has placed on them, either through their actions in the real world or their activism and self-expression in the digital realm. They do so because they are the first generation in modern times that has both the need and the means to assert or express itself, thus signaling the end of docility as a defining characteristic of young Arabs.**
- 2) Young people who are concerned about securing a quality education that leads to decent employment and a smooth transition to adulthood and parenthood increasingly express their concerns through any available means, and often create new avenues of expression through the new media. Though youth are staying away from traditional political institutions for the most part, they are creating new channels for self-expression or for social activism and collective mobilization, even if only in the virtual realm at times.**
- 3) Young Arabs often manifest several simultaneous identities in their daily life routines, at home, in school, in the neighborhood, at the mall or the mosque, at work or in the digital realm on-line. These multiple identities are not necessarily contradictory, and young Arabs shift from one to another effortlessly and naturally, including identities related to Islamic or Christian religion, ethnicity, tribalism, state or pan-Arab**

nationalism, professional associations, Western or global culture and other such attributes, in the personal, ideological, sexual, cultural and national realms.

4) Young Arabs are the best available barometer of both the grievances and the promise that define Arab society as a whole; therefore making an effort to listen to their views is critically important to identifying the priority issues that governments, private sectors, civil society and international partners should address through research, analysis, policy interventions and service delivery.

5) The key issues that require more research and policy action in the lives of young Arabs relate to several broad themes, of which the most important seem to be:

i. Identity and values – understanding the various value systems that define young Arabs and how these correspond to the multiple identities they manifest. A better grasp of youth values and identities would open up important opportunities for communicating effectively with you and engaging them in civic, economic and political endeavors.

ii. Migration and its causes – Young people are moving within and beyond their own countries in large numbers, due to several different reasons that need to be better understood. Migration management can be a significant positive factor for intra-Arab economic integration and political stability.

iii. Citizenship – Many young Arabs, like their parents, have never fully articulated or grasped what it means to be a citizen of their state, in terms of their rights and responsibilities, the duties of the state and the limits of state power and control. Youth are the most dynamic actors in Arab society in exploring parallel identities to state citizenship.

iv. Sexuality – This is one of the last remaining taboos in the Arab world but is increasingly significant in the lives of youth because the delayed marriage age means that sexual relations that are normally sanctioned only within marriage are also delayed – yet young people are becoming sexually active before marriage without adequate guidance or services. Arab public culture (especially media advertising and pop music culture) is highly sexualized, but this contrasts with strong social restrictions on sexual behavior.

v. Media and expression – Young people who have access to the internet and cell phone have developed extensive new communications systems that are predominantly entertainment-based but also provide insights into their political, social, and other grievances. We need to better grasp how youth express themselves through existing media that they have used to carve out new public spheres for themselves, where they speak about issues of concern to themselves that they are not allowed to raise in their normal lives.

vi. Invisible girls – Adolescent girls are an invisible sub-culture in the Arab world, with neither opportunities to make their views known nor to enjoy themselves in their leisure time and achieve their full potential in society, due to severe controls on what is deemed appropriate behavior.

- 6) The study and analysis of youth-related issues cannot be approached any longer through the narrow lens of single sectors, like education, sports, health or labor. An integrated approach is needed because many dimensions of young lives blend together now as they do for adults also, with political, economic, social, religious, environmental and other factors all playing roles in how individuals see themselves and their place in their world. The UN system has a major opportunity to lead a significantly enhanced and more serious approach to youth-related rights and wellbeing in the MENA region, given its credible links with governments, civil society, international donors and others who are active in this arena.**

###