

Youth as a smart investment towards a stable Mediterranean region

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Analysing the stances and perspectives of the Euro-Mediterranean youth on intercultural interactions, barriers to intercultural communication, youth migration, and cultural and religious diversity, Abdelrahman Aldaqqah advocates investing in youth and dialogue as a long-term solution in challenging radicalisation. The author proposes youth empowerment, education, debate initiatives, youth exchanges, and intercultural activities as effective instruments in overcoming the misunderstandings and stereotypes, and hence, prevention of radicalisation at its root level.

Youth represent a major constituent in the Mediterranean region. The Arab Spring was supposed to be the start of a new era of hope, freedom and democracy and yet the region's youth still face social exclusion, migration, unemployment and radicalism.

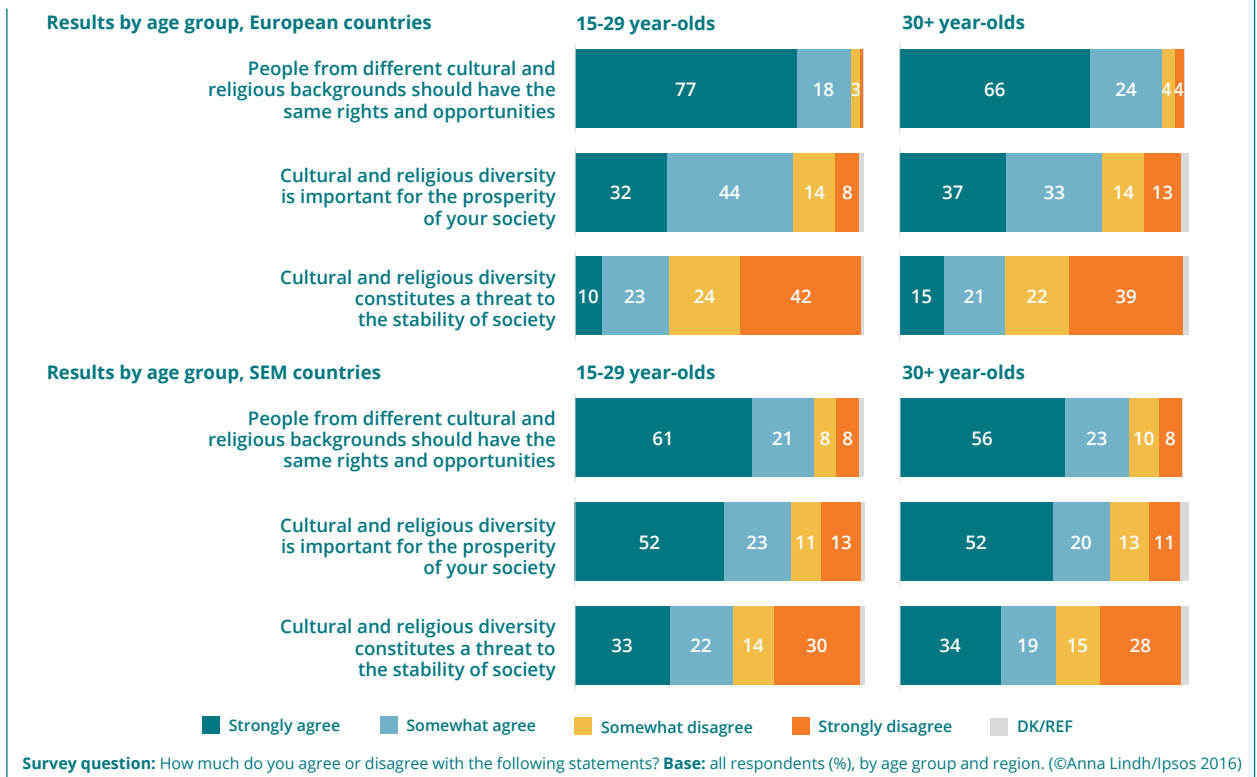
However, the results of the newly conducted Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey reflect optimism towards the future. This paper adopts a perspective oriented to the idea of social engagement and empowerment of youth as the future guardians of peace. It also puts emphasis on the importance of intercultural dialogue and cooperation,

youth-led initiatives and education as areas to prevent conflict and radicalization as well as the expected advantages from the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.

Religious and cultural diversity: a challenge or an opportunity?

The principles of coexistence and tolerance are of high value to build mutually acceptable relationships between highly diverse communities. The mismanagement of religious diversity in the region has alternated between fragile integration and disputes. Many ethnic groups in

Chart 12.1 Perceptions about religious and cultural diversity in European countries, by age group



the Middle East have not been able to positively benefit from diversity. The continuous damage and devastation caused by the religious and ethnic conflicts in the Middle East was clearly reflected in the Survey when 55 % of SEM (Southern and Eastern Mediterranean) youth described cultural and religious diversity as a threat to the stability of society compared to 33% of European youth (Chart 12.1).

Nevertheless, although more than 70% of the Survey respondents from both sides of the Mediterranean strongly or somewhat associate the Mediterranean region with concepts of instability and insecurity, this perception was lower among younger European respondents compared to older ones (64% vs 72%) (Chart 12.2).

The vast majority of European youth think that people from different cultural and religious backgrounds should have the same rights and opportunities (95%), while a lower percentage shared the same view among SEM young (82%). Overall, youth on both sides consider cultural and religious diversity an asset for their societies (76% and 75% in Europe and SEM respectively). One can argue that diversity can be a viable instrument of conflict resolution in the region if peace education and exchange programmes become a feature of educational processes.

Long-term solutions through youth empowerment and quality education

Working with young people is the most important factor in the prevention of radicalisation since this group is considered to be the most vulnerable to extremism. Education is a factor of change that allows youth to realise their potential. The EU's child education rate in 2012 was 93.9 % (European Union, 2016). In the Middle East, while the average level of enrolment in education has quadrupled since 1960, it has also contributed to a tremendous increase in the number of unemployed graduates or people with inadequate skills (World Bank, 2014). The mean years of schooling reflect

the cumulative impact of education development but do not directly reflect the quality of education. Surprisingly, previous data shows that 69% of the so called Islamic State's recruits reported at least a secondary education with the average age of recruitment being 27.4 years old (Devarajan and Mottaghi, 2016). Referring to the Survey, the majority from both sides of the Mediterranean think that education, youth programmes, youth participation in public life, inter-religious dialogue, exchange programmes and cultural/artistic initiatives are efficient measures in tackling radicalisation, with the majority (81% of Europeans and 86% of SEM respondents) believing that education and youth-led dialogue initiatives would be very efficient or somewhat efficient (Chart 12.3).

More SEM youth believe that education and youth programmes are 'very efficient' compared to European youth (64% and 43% respectively). Similarly, the support of youth participation in public life seen as 'very efficient' was higher among SEM youth compared to European youth (62% and 39% respectively). These results coincide with the priorities of the 'UN Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism 2016' that emphasises the role of empowering youth, investing in education, skills development and dialogue in conflict prevention. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) study (Pratchett et al., 2010) found that the two most successful interventions with young people are 'capacity building or empowering young people'. This evidence, together with the Survey results, provide a concrete approach to prevent radicalisation and provide better stability for the region

The regional examples are of high value in promoting Mediterranean cooperation to prevent radicalism. Besides, expanding youth horizons through initiatives such as debating, youth exchange, and intercultural activities is critical in overcoming misunderstandings and the reinforcement of stereotypes.

Chart 12.2 Perceptions about the Mediterranean region in European countries, by age group

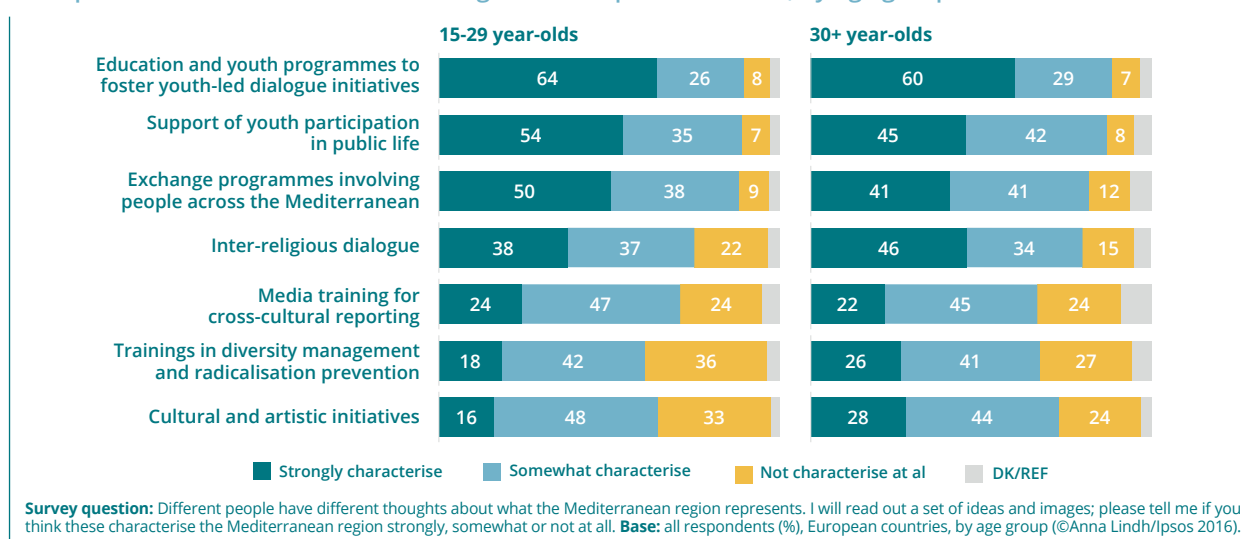
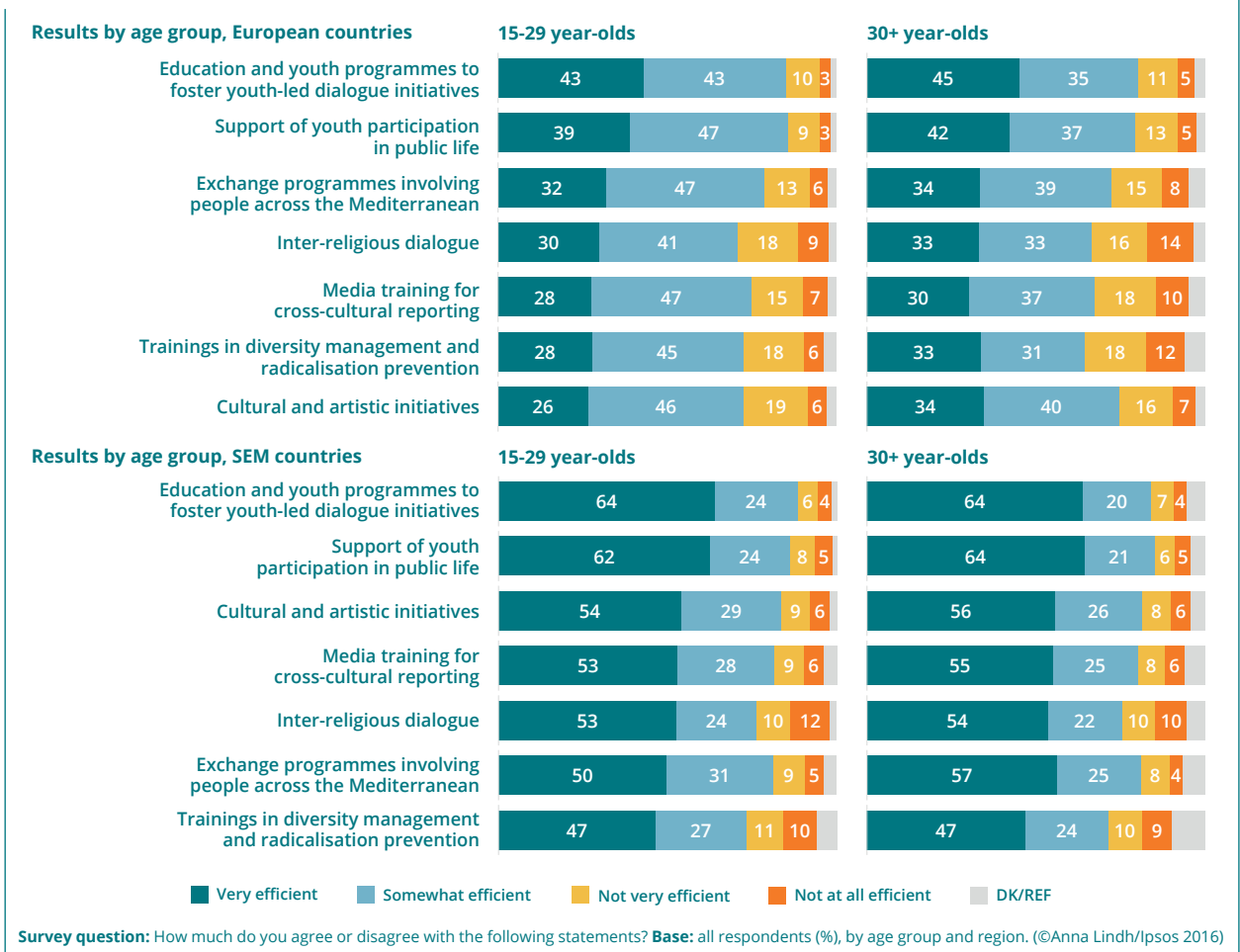


Chart 12.3 Perceptions about mechanisms to prevent and deal with conflicts and radicalisation, by age group



Deradicalisation and youth-led initiatives

Intercultural interaction and peacebuilding are at the centre of many public debates across the Mediterranean. The ‘Slotervaart Project’ is a community-based project aiming to build resilience to radicalisation in the Netherlands. The project included organised debates and interaction among Muslims and non-Muslims, examining topics in Islam as well as political issues. The key factors in the success of the outreach approach adopted by the project were the mode of interaction and engagement with the wider community.

The ‘Young Arab Voices’ is another successful regional programme jointly launched in 2011 by the Anna Lindh Foundation and the British Council aiming at developing skills and opportunities for youth-led debate across the Arab region. The programme involved hundreds of youth and was aimed at enriching democratic dialogue through training, youth participation and exchange of views. The programme was expanded and strengthened in 2017 into the ‘Young Mediterranean Voices’ to upgrade the level of exchange between European and Arab youth and the youth advocacy component.

In response to the worldwide call to engage and empower young people, the UNDP’s first Youth Strategy 2014-2017 (UNDP, 2014) underlines youth potential to build bridges of dialogue across cultures. It also addresses youth challenges and recommendations for empowerment around the world. The strategy outcomes include: economic empowerment of youth, engagement of young people as a positive force for transformational change and enhancement of youth civic engagement and participation in decision-making process. Furthermore, in 2015 the UN Security Council unanimously adopted the Resolution 2250 calling on Member States to increase representation of youth in decision-making at all levels and to set up mechanisms to enable young people to meaningfully participate in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

Of course, many other countries and organizations have taken far-reaching and exemplary action, but we are not able to cite them all here. A piece of research entitled ‘A comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven youth programs’ revealed the importance of giving youth the opportunity to lead initiatives in which youth experienced a higher degree of ownership and empowerment reporting more development of leadership and planning skills than adult-driven programmes (Reed L. et al, 2005).

Openness and dialogue as basis for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation

The countries in the Euro-Mediterranean region are bound by history, geography and culture. The apparent curiosity and mutual interest amongst both SEM and EU individuals represented in the Survey characterise a foundation for more efficient cooperation across the Mediterranean region. Interactions with people from different countries is registered as 53% among European youth with those who have a high interest in information and news from SEM countries representing 69% and those who have high level of tolerance 57% whereas 40% of SEM youth reported interaction with a person from Europe. When asked about methods of interaction, particularly noticeable is the relatively smaller proportion of European youth who used the internet and social media to get in contact with people from SEM countries (7% compared to 32% of youth in SEM countries). For 30% of European youth, school is the main area of intercultural interaction while only 7% of youth from SEM referred to it.

Lower levels of interaction are most frequently attributed to language differences and stereotyping. Indeed, despite modern communication methods, language differences remain a barrier when meeting or talking with someone from the other side of the Mediterranean – particularly among European youth (75%), compared to relatively fewer in the SEM countries (41%). Cultural barriers and stereotypes are quite relevant for young Europeans (37%), and less for under 29 year-olds from SEM countries (25% and 17% respectively). In all of the countries where the question was asked, no more than one-in-four expressed worries about difficulties in obtaining a visa or travel warnings from the country of origin (18% and 14% in SEM and EU countries, respectively).

In relation to the potential benefits of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, the majority of both sides of the Mediterranean agreed that cultural diversity and extremism prevention is a promising outcome (80% and 79% in EU and SEM respectively). Other agreed areas of cooperation include: promoting education and training, gender equality, youth empowerment through entrepreneurship and innovation, implementation of human rights such as rule of law and freedom, engagement and support for civil society organizations. Compared to older people, youth showed a greater belief in the potential gains in terms of more education, training, employment and innovation opportunities.

In the context of regional cooperation and integration it is worth noting the tendency of people to move within the region. The Survey, contrary to expectations, shows that when asked 'If you could start a new life, in which country of the world would you start it?' only 36% of Europeans chose their own country of residence compared to 60% of SEM people. However, in SEM countries youth were more inclined

than older people to start in another country (50% vs 35%). When SEM young respondents were asked to identify their preferred new destination, 44% of them indicated Europe, followed by other SEM countries, 17%, North America was represented by 14% and Gulf countries 12%. On the other hand, only 16.5% of young Europeans would stay in their country of origin whilst 36% would go to another European country and 22.5% would go to North America.

The results among respondents from both shores indicated a positive relationship between the educational level and inclination to emigrate. Furthermore, youth constituted the largest proportion of respondents who chose to start a new life in another country (80% in EU and 49% in SEM countries respectively). Among European youth, where countries have various economic growth rates, looking for opportunities in education and employment might be the leading causes for migration whereas in SEM countries employment consideration might be combined with political outlook while choosing to relocate in another country.

The Survey also shows the social links currently existing between people of the two shores with 72% of the respondents in SEM countries stating that they have relatives and friends in European countries versus a lower, but still significant, rate of 27% of Europeans having family or friends in SEM countries. These linkages can probably strengthen cooperation around the Mediterranean.

A call to action

Current regional policies focus on security and defence rather than dealing with root-causes of radicalisation. Thus, governments, youth organizations and civil society in the Middle East should be an integrated part of a comprehensive policy that targets the international, regional and local levels to promote regional dialogue and cultural understanding. Several initiatives from the UN and EU focused on actions in that direction. One of the brightest examples is the Anna Lindh Foundation, which runs the largest and most diverse civil society network in the Euro-Mediterranean region with over 4000 organizations, representing a unique platform of exchange in the region (ALF, 2015). The Euro-Mediterranean collaboration framework should promote engagement between states and civil societies on both sides and thereby aim to create a zone of peace and stability founded on the principles of respect for the promotion of democracy and human rights. Youth should be an integral part of this approach – they are currently reforming the world, building communities, developing technology and sustaining economies.

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