

Input for the UNGA 81st Thematic Report

“Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association Youth Activism Report: Gen-Z Activism and the Future of Civic Space”

Submitted by the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND) and the Arab Youth Network (AYN)

Introduction

Youth in the Arab region represent a promising force with unique potential to contribute to addressing the structural and systemic challenges facing the region. Realizing this potential requires adopting an approach that moves beyond viewing young people merely as a demographic group and instead creates meaningful opportunities designed with them and for them to shape the future they aspire to build. The urgency of such an approach is further underscored by the fact that the Arab region is home to one of the youngest populations in the world, with youth accounting for nearly one-third of its population.

Despite the intergenerational challenges they face, including growing inequalities, social and economic injustices resulting from prevailing economic policies, the impacts of climate change, and various forms of exclusion, young people continue to demonstrate resilience, creativity, and a strong commitment to positive change. Empowering them as active partners in decision-making and development processes is essential for fostering more inclusive, just, and sustainable societies. Recognizing this, the 2030 Agenda highlights youth as key drivers of change, emphasizing in paragraph 53 that **“The future of humanity and of our planet lies in our hands. It also lies in the hands of today’s younger generation, who will pass the torch to future generations”**.

The Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND) and the Arab Youth Network (AYN) work closely with young civil society representatives in the region to ensure their effective engagement in rights-based advocacy. It is crucial that their role moves beyond mere consultation and symbolic participation, toward being meaningfully informed through capacity building, actively monitoring and researching the policy processes they engage in through transformative advocacy.

ANND and AYN believe that this requires initially acknowledging the role of young people and strengthening it through an enabling environment, relevant tools, and appropriate mechanisms, including safe spaces for constructive dialogue and exchange to elaborate ideas, plans, and strategies. In many parts of the Arab world, youth face significant barriers to accessing education, employment, and political spaces, all of which limit their ability to meaningfully participate in policy-making. As a result, many young people increasingly rely on civic engagement, grassroots initiatives, social movements, and public demonstrations as avenues through which they can make their voices heard, advance their demands, and contribute to public affairs. Yet these forms of participation are often constrained by restrictions on freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, limitations on civil society organizations, digital surveillance, online censorship, and other measures that restrict civic space. Without specific strategies or institutional frameworks to dismantle these barriers, commitments undertaken within Agenda 2030 or by national plans risk remaining purely symbolic.

This submission is prepared by ANND and AYN to shed light on youth activists’ perceptions of the

situation of freedom of peaceful assembly and association in the Arab region, as an input for the UNGA 81st Thematic Report. The responses below address a selected set of questions explored in the context of youth activism and civic participation in the Arab region.

Specific Characteristics of Youth Movements and Activism

Guaranteeing the Sustainability of Youth Activism

Sustainability of youth work means the ability of young people to transform their political and social participation from a temporary, ad hoc, tokenistic interaction into organized, continuous action with real impact. It is not based only on the intensity of youth presence in available spaces (whether online forums, platforms, or in-person meetings) but rather on the ability of this presence to produce long-term initiatives, projects, and campaigns oriented toward transformative change.

Sustainability means that young people should not remain merely producers of content whose outcomes they do not control. Rather, they should be able to reclaim control over the meaning and impact of their activism. Therefore, sustainability requires organization, digital safety, collective trust, protection from fear and surveillance, and a continuous link between the digital space and field-based action. It also requires access to timely and accurate information and access to resources that are not conditional or tied to donor preferences.

Sustainability in the Arab region is often challenged by restrictions on online expression, monitoring of social media activism, and legal and administrative frameworks that constrain civic engagement. In some contexts, cybercrime laws and security-related legislation have been used to prosecute young activists in countries including Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia for online speech or mobilization. Similarly, youth-led associations and informal collectives have at times faced administrative barriers, registration constraints, or suspension measures that limit their ability to operate continuously.

The Role of Youth Activism in Sustaining Long-Term Collective Action

Youth activism has been essential in sustaining long-term collective action by mobilizing communities, promoting civic engagement, strengthening social cohesion, and supporting peacebuilding and development efforts. Historically and today, young people across the Arab region have played a key role in driving social change, building community resilience, and fostering inclusive participation in addressing local and national challenges.

The ability to work together through participation, develop and disseminate initiatives, raise awareness, and encourage ongoing engagement are among the defining contributions of youth activism to collective action. In the Libyan context, for example, youth-led volunteer networks mobilized during the COVID-19 pandemic to organize awareness campaigns, distribute aid, and support vulnerable communities across cities including Tripoli, Benghazi, and Sabha. Organizations such as H2O Youth Organization, Fezzan Libya Organization, and Together We Build It have engaged young people in community development, peacebuilding, and leadership programs, helping sustain civic participation at the local level. Youth-led peacebuilding initiatives supported by international partners have also brought together young people from different regions to promote dialogue, reconciliation, and social cohesion.

Specific Risks Associated with Digital Methods: Surveillance, Doxing, and Biometric Profiling

The risks associated with social media, including digital surveillance, doxing, biometric profiling, and visual disinformation, must be understood as factors that directly affect youth activism. These tools open a wide space for youth expression, participation, and advocacy, but at the same time render this activism subject to exploitation or repression.

This dynamic can be understood through the concept of the alienation of youth activism, rooted in the Marxian insight that producers are separated from the outcomes of their labour. Applied to the digital sphere: young people produce political and symbolic content through social media. They write, publish, photograph, document, participate in digital campaigns, and launch hashtags, yet they do not always control the fate of this effort or its political consequences. Every comment, share, or interaction leaves a digital trace that can be used to track activists, map their networks, monitor their ideas, or categorize them politically.

Doxing poses a serious and direct threat to young activists. Their personal information, names, photographs, home or work addresses, may be published with the aim of threatening, silencing, or defaming them. Biometric profiling (the use of images and videos to identify faces or determine the identity of participants in a protest or campaign) further increases this vulnerability. Visual disinformation poses an additional layer of risk. Fabricated or decontextualized images and videos can distort the causes that young people defend, undermine trust in campaigns, or shift debate from rational political discussion to rapid emotional reaction. These risks compound one another: they deepen the alienation of youth activism by ensuring that young people produce political discourse and public content that may benefit digital platforms through data and engagement, or serve political and media actors, while the young people themselves remain far from centers of decision-making.

In the Arab context more broadly, these risks take on a sharper character. A significant portion of young people do not enter participation from a position of trust or agency, but from a position of fear. The digital space thus transforms from a space of freedom into a space of surveillance, producing fear as much as mobilization, as seen in the Arab uprisings, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia, where social media enabled unprecedented mobilization but also left participants exposed to tracking and prosecution.

Ensuring the sustainability of youth activism therefore requires moving beyond symbolic participation - by transforming digital campaigns into grassroots initiatives, associations, and protection networks, through training in digital security and clear mechanisms for information verification and political follow-up.

Key Trends and Challenges

Narratives Used to Delegitimize Youth Movements and Their Impact on Mobilization

The narratives circulating in public debate around youth movements differ depending on political and social context. In many cases, however, young activists are portrayed through framings that weaken their legitimacy rather than recognizing them as exercising legitimate forms of political and social participation.

In the Lebanese and Syrian contexts, youth movements are sometimes presented as instruments of chaos, as actors seeking to destabilize security, or as extensions of foreign powers. Narratives of treason, accusations of foreign allegiance, threats to civil peace, and the incitement of disorder are deployed to delegitimize protests, associations, or campaigns led by young people. This dynamic was evident during the civil society protests in Syria at Marjeh Square in March 2025, as well as during the October movement in Beirut.

This can be understood as a form of symbolic violence: the state and dominant political forces do not only monopolize physical force; they also hold significant power to name phenomena, classify actors, and impose specific meanings on social movements. When authorities describe a youth protest as “chaos,” a “conspiracy,” or a “threat to security,” they create a social reality that makes repression appear justified and youth participation appear suspicious.

In the Libyan context, public narratives about youth activism are mixed. On one hand, civil society organizations, international partners, and some media outlets portray young activists as agents of change, peacebuilders, and community leaders who contribute to volunteerism, humanitarian action, and local development. On the other hand, youth-led movements have at times been portrayed by political actors or influential groups as inexperienced, politically motivated, foreign-funded, or disruptive to stability. Youth activists calling for political reform, anti-corruption measures, or greater participation in decision-making have sometimes faced accusations of pursuing political agendas or serving external interests.

When young activists are stigmatized as traitors, foreign agents, or sources of chaos, others may hesitate to join them out of fear of stigma, prosecution, or social isolation. This fragments trust among young people themselves, weakens solidarity networks, and pushes youth activism toward secrecy or withdrawal. Youth activists across the Arab region face a range of concrete legal and administrative challenges in relation to mobilizing, organizing, and sustaining their work. These include:

- Suspension or freezing of organizational activities through government decrees or administrative decisions;
- Legal penalties including financial fines, imposed through government decrees, for participation in or organization of protest activities;
- Prison sentences in some cases, particularly where cybercrime laws or broadly worded security legislation are used to prosecute online speech or mobilization;
- Restrictions on the activities of associations and harassment of their young members;
- Arrest, physical violence, travel bans, and other forms of intimidation targeting youth activists;
- Burdensome and discretionary registration requirements that effectively block formal recognition of youth-led groups, as documented in Tunisia.

Social Media Bans for Youth Under 16: Implications for Freedom of Assembly and Association

Bans on social media use for young people under the age of sixteen can have a dual effect. On the one hand, such bans may be understood as a preventive measure aimed at protecting minors from some of the risks associated with platform misuse such as manipulation, bullying, exploitation, disinformation, and exposure to harmful content.

On the other hand, if applied in a broad and rigid manner, these bans may deepen the problem rather than resolve it. The age of sixteen is often the stage at which young people begin preparing to enter collective life, engaging with social issues, and interacting with public affairs. It is also the age at which the first foundations of a culture of participation, collective action, and civic engagement begin to take

shape. At the same time, restricting access at this age may weaken young people's resilience to future online challenges by limiting opportunities to develop digital literacy and coping skills through supervised exposure.

Social media platforms are no longer merely spaces for entertainment; they have become tools for communication, mobilization, learning, and civic discovery. Through them, young people become familiar with initiatives, campaigns, debates, and forms of advocacy, and they begin to develop awareness of their rights and the possibilities for their participation. Restricting access to these platforms therefore risks affecting young people's enjoyment of their rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

For this reason, the solution should not be based solely on prohibition, but rather on digital and civic education. What is needed is to equip young people with the skills to use social media safely and responsibly, protect them from surveillance, exploitation, and disinformation, and at the same time enable them to exercise their rights to expression, assembly, and association in a gradual and safe manner.

Specific Vulnerabilities and Protection Needs

Concrete Legal and Policy Adjustments to Protect Youth Assemblies and Foster Intergenerational Dialogue

Concrete legal and policy reforms are needed to protect youth assemblies and protests, not only through a theoretical recognition of freedom of peaceful assembly and association, but by creating a safe environment that allows young people to participate without fear, stigma, or prosecution. ANND and AYN advocate for the following:

Laws that treat youth protests as a security threat should be amended. The role of the state should be to protect young people's right to peaceful assembly, not to prevent, disperse, or pathologize it. Any restrictions on protest should be necessary, proportionate, and clearly defined by law, rather than based on vague formulations such as "threat to security" or "incitement to disorder." The Gen Z 212 movement in Morocco, which mobilized thousands of young people between September and mid-October 2025 across several cities illustrates this dynamic clearly: protests were framed by official discourse and security responses in terms of public order and stability concerns, reinforcing the treatment of youth mobilization as a security issue rather than a legitimate exercise of fundamental freedoms. Such framing contributes to limiting youth participation to spaces where it is pre-authorized, controlled, or tolerated by existing power structures, rather than recognized as an autonomous exercise of rights.

In the Lebanese and Syrian contexts, youth mobilizations are often framed through narratives of treason, foreign allegiance, or threats to civil peace. **Policies should be adopted to prevent incitement and defamation against young activists, particularly when these originate from public officials or media outlets linked to political forces.** Protecting protest means not only preventing physical violence but protecting young people's right to be recognized as civic actors. Protection should also cover civil movements and peaceful protests, and requires state institutions and security forces to be adequately trained and equipped to uphold human rights standards while ensuring public safety.

Clear mechanisms should be established to hold law enforcement agencies accountable when excessive force is used against youth assemblies. This includes training security forces on dealing

with peaceful protests, preventing arbitrary detention, ensuring the presence of independent monitors, and providing effective complaint and accountability mechanisms. Protests in universities and schools should also be explicitly protected. Legal aid and protection by lawyers should be made available to young activists facing prosecution.

Many youth movements operate through flexible and horizontal structures that do not resemble traditional civil society organizations. Registration procedures, funding rules, and requirements for opening bank accounts should not become tools for obstruction. **Flexible legal frameworks that recognize unregistered youth initiatives and allow them to access support and protection, without imposing excessive bureaucracy, are needed.** Committees acting as official spokespeople for activist associations, organized advocacy campaigns, formation of joint committees between organizations and governing bodies can strengthen protection frameworks.

Since a large part of assembly and organization today takes place through social media, **young people must be protected from digital surveillance, doxxing, biometric profiling, and online defamation. This requires data protection laws, digital security training, and rapid reporting mechanisms for digital targeting, especially in cases of doxxing or online threats.**

It is not enough to create symbolic youth advisory committees. **Real participation mechanisms must be built to allow young people to influence agenda-setting and decision-making.** This includes local and national youth councils with clear powers, regular hearings with decision-makers, youth involvement in public policy design, and open spaces for dialogue between young people, civil society, universities, and public authorities

Youth in Situations of Movement: Migrants, Refugees, and Forcibly Displaced Persons

Young people in situations of movement, including migrants, refugees, and forcibly displaced persons, face severe barriers to exercising their rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. Their precarious legal status does not permit them to appear publicly, as visibility risks becoming a direct cause for deportation or detention. Beyond this, legal frameworks in host countries may treat any form of public organizing by non-nationals as interference in local affairs.

Widespread racism and prejudice further constrain the ability of displaced youth to build solidarity networks or access the civic spaces that are nominally available. The intersection of precarious legal status, limited language access, lack of documentation, and social exclusion creates compounded vulnerabilities that make meaningful participation exceptionally difficult.

Roles and Relationships with Civil Society Organizations

The Role of Established Civil Society in Supporting Youth Movements

Established civil society organizations have both a responsibility and an opportunity to actively support youth movements. This support must be offered in ways that do not replicate the hierarchies and exclusions that youth activism challenges. It should be grounded in partnerships with youth-led movements and initiatives based on mutual respect, solidarity, and shared objectives, recognizing the autonomy, leadership, and agency of young people.

ANND and AYN's network model reflects a conviction that **the role of established CSOs is to enable, not to lead, youth-driven action.** This means providing access to institutional infrastructure from legal

support, financial management, to communications platforms, and international advocacy networks, while fully respecting the autonomy, horizontal structures, and strategic priorities of youth-led groups. Co-optation, whether intentional or structural, is a real risk when established organizations act as gatekeepers rather than allies. Such collaboration should also promote meaningful participation, intergenerational dialogue, and the exchange of knowledge and experience.

Established CSOs can play a critical bridging role, connecting youth activists to UN human rights mechanisms, regional advocacy spaces, and donor communities that would otherwise remain inaccessible. This includes facilitating youth participation in processes such as Universal Periodic Review, treaty body reporting, and regional human rights dialogues; not by speaking for youth, but by creating the conditions for them to speak for themselves.

Defending the civic space conditions under which youth activism can thrive (including challenging restrictive association laws, foreign funding restrictions, and the criminalization of peaceful protest) is a shared responsibility of the broader civil society ecosystem. ANND and AYN call on established CSOs to prioritize enabling environment advocacy as integral to their own mandates, recognizing that the shrinking of space for youth movements ultimately shrinks the space for all civil society.

Paths for Advancing Youth Political Participation

The political participation gap facing youth in the Arab region is not incidental - it is structural. Closing it requires deliberate, systemic interventions at both national and multilateral levels. ANND and AYN advocate for the following:

Too often, youth “participation” in policy processes is reduced to tokenistic consultation: young people are invited to speak but not to shape outcomes. This is particularly visible in regional intergovernmental processes, including those under the League of Arab States framework or within UN regional mechanisms, where youth representation, when it exists at all, tends to be ceremonial rather than substantive. These regional and international bodies should strengthen partnerships with youth-led initiatives through inclusive platforms enabling direct and meaningful engagement in decision-making. Meaningful participation requires that young people be present at the agenda-setting stage, not only invited to validate decisions already made. Building regular dialogue platforms that bring together young activists with regional decision-makers is one concrete step toward addressing this gap.

ANND and AYN’s experience working with youth across the Arab region demonstrates that sustained and effective participation requires investment in political literacy, rights-based advocacy skills, and knowledge of the policy processes young people are engaging with. Capacity building must be designed with young people, not for them, and must be accompanied by access to information, mentorship, and peer learning networks.

National development planning processes, including those linked to Agenda 2030 implementation and national SDG reviews, should establish binding mechanisms for youth input - not advisory committees with no decision-making power, but structured, resourced, and transparent processes in which young people can monitor commitments, track implementation, and hold governments accountable. Regional peer review mechanisms should include explicit youth civil society components.

At the international level, the UN system (including the Human Rights Council, treaty body processes,

and the Voluntary National Review mechanism) should strengthen pathways for youth civil society engagement that are accessible to informal and unregistered groups, not only accredited NGOs. ANND and AYN specifically call for the UN Special Rapporteur's report to recommend that multilateral bodies adopt flexible accreditation and participation frameworks that recognize the organizational realities of youth movements.

Recommendations for Donors

Donors both traditional and new, have a critical role to play in supporting youth organizations and movements in ways that take into account their particular forms of organizing and their exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. ANND and AYN make the following recommendations:

- **Reduce bureaucracy:** Simplify application procedures and financial reporting requirements and eliminate prohibitive conditions that exclude non-traditional youth movements and informal collectives from accessing support. Strengthen coordination, harmonization, and coherence among different donors to avoid fragmented and inconsistent requirements.
- **Provide mentorship and capacity support:** Offer training programs in governance, leadership, and financial transparency without burdening youth organizations with complex legal requirements that are designed for large institutional actors.
- **Support networking and advocacy:** Actively support emerging initiatives and non-registered groups, providing access to regional and international advocacy networks alongside financial support.
- **Move beyond short-term project funding:** Adopt funding models that allow for longer-term, flexible support aligned with the strategic priorities of youth-led groups rather than donor preferences, in order to strengthen continuity and long-term impact.
- **Recognize and support informal structures:** Acknowledge that many of the most dynamic youth organizations operate outside formal registration frameworks and develop funding mechanisms that do not require legal registration as a precondition for support.