



INTRODUCING THE NEW GENERATION OF SOCIAL COHESION ADVOCATES IN EGYPT

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Introduction

As of November 2022, more than seven million people have fled Ukraine since the conflict (United Nations, 2022). The European Union (EU) and other key players have undertaken urgent actions in response to the crisis. More than 523 million euros helped support refugees through humanitarian aid and more than 3 billion euros were provided to strengthen the Ukrainian armed forces (European Council, 2022). The narrative around this support, whether transmitted over media channels or online platforms, has aggravated conflict and hate speech towards vulnerable groups and key supporters, all of them leading to awakening social cohesion within different communities. For example, different organisations and researchers criticised the EU for what many called double standards on handling the Ukrainian crisis compared to the measures imposed to support non-European refugees, including Syrian and Afghani refugees (Prange, 2022). According to the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), there is an increasing concern about hate speech around the support provided to the Ukrainian refugees arriving in European countries, which is directly linked to online disinformation around it (2022).

With the increasing power of emerging technologies, misinformation rates on the Ukraine war have increased since the onset of the crisis (News Literacy Project, 2022). With the absence

of awareness of misinformation among the public in addition to a limited number of trusted and validated pathways to obtain information through virtual reality, many users on social media platforms have promoted fake news on the crisis (Tenbarge & Collins, 2022). One study conducted by Plan International on online misinformation revealed that more people are on the internet than ever and more prone to tweeting statements related to wars and misinformation without validating these statements, leading to negative consequences on youth wellbeing (Plan International, 2022).

Nonetheless, the war in Ukraine introduces a unique model on uniting people from different cultures, races and genders to fight for the rights of vulnerable groups at a time of crisis. Despite the different measures taken to alleviate the negative impact initiated by the war across the world, the social and economic consequences of the crisis have deeply impacted many countries, including Egypt. The country has suffered a major hit on its food security, as Egypt is one of the top countries worldwide importing wheat, with 75% of its consumption coming from Russia and Ukraine. Egyptians started to transmit messages on social media platforms, especially TikTok, expressing their anger about the deteriorated situation (Dadouch, 2022). Egyptian citizens complained about the price surges increasing their financial vulnerability, leading to cutting food portions or skipping meals (Saleh, 2022).

The first objective of this policy brief is to shed light on key contributions from youth clubs established by international organisations in Egypt, to social cohesion and fighting misinformation. The second goal is to explore possible pathways to support these youth structures to promote sustainable self-management after the end of funding to ensure the continuation of their advocacy for harmonious coexistence between both shores of the Mediterranean. A qualitative research approach was adopted in order to analyse current contributions of youth clubs towards social cohesion, and also their views on the support provided to Ukrainian refugees. This policy brief provides policy-related recommendations for the EU and other policy-makers in Egypt to strengthen the action delivered by youth clubs to support the next generation of youth advocates for harmonious coexistence in Egypt.

The analysis provided here capitalises on the findings extracted from key informant interviews with: 1) management staff leading the establishment and maintenance of youth clubs from local and international organisations; and 2) youth representatives from different youth clubs/groups supported by international and local organisations in Egypt.

Social cohesion in diverse communities

Almost three decades ago, the Council of Europe and other entities started to utilise the concept of social cohesion in their policy documents in response to the rising fears of globalisation and the impact on countries, especially in Europe (Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007). The outbreak of war in 2001 in Afghanistan, followed by Iraq, accelerated pre-existing concerns related to social cohesion in the communities and their contribution to the nations' safety and security. As a common understanding of social cohesion and its pillars is an essential step in designing and implementing actions promoting the concept in Egypt, this section introduces its definition of the concept globally.

Many public policy researchers and leaders have introduced different definitions of the social cohesion concept and its pillars in a community. According to Judith Maxwell, the previous President of the Canadian Policy Research Networks, social cohesion is defined by establishing and strengthening frameworks of shared values while reducing inequalities in financial status across different members in the community, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and are members of the same community (Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007). Additionally, a study

issued by the World Bank focused on social cohesion in conflict-sensitive situations, such as cultivating a strong bond between social groups for confidence-building interventions that enable participatory and inclusive practices while strengthening a sense of belonging to the wider community (De Berry & Roberts, 2018). Social cohesion here is defined based on the level at which different social groups are able to come together to promote the community's welfare and also ensure its members embrace a sense of belonging to the same community, respect for others, and commitment towards addressing social issues jointly.

The EU Youth Strategy and its linkage to social cohesion

Youths are recognised by the EU as an essential element for transformative change as highlighted by the EU Youth Strategy. Moreover, research has suggested that young people's contributions to solving community issues usually lead to more impactful change. For example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s recent study on youth contributions to the community during the pandemic revealed that, globally, 31% of the surveyed youths reported volunteering to support their communities by spreading awareness or leading action in the field to provide assistance to vulnerable groups. These actions were considered by many as a successful and efficient approach to help alleviate the negative impacts on the wider community. Furthermore, in alignment with the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027), in a promising move the EU launched, in October 2022, their first Youth Action Plan in its external action. Many organisations deemed this Action Plan to be an integral step towards strengthening youths' participation in cultivating sustainable change in the field of inclusion. For example, in a recent report issued by Plan International on the analysis of the EU Youth Action Plan, the report highlights youths' contributions towards inclusion and peaceful coexistence as a pillar of EU external policies (Caminati, 2022). Moreover, fostering inclusive societies and peaceful coexistence was highlighted by the Council of Europe as a priority in their efforts in support of young people.

Beyond theoretical frameworks and policies, Europe is leading different initiatives on promoting community cohesion and security, with a special focus on countries with a high concentration of refugees and internally displaced persons living in rural areas alongside host communities. For example, in 2017, funded by the French government and the European Commission (EC), the Peace and Resilience Fund "MINKA" initiated different projects, with total funding estimated at 250 million euros per year in four locations across the globe. The key objective of the fund is to promote non-violence and peaceful coexistence (Agence Française de Développement, 2019). Another example is the African Union (AU)-EU Youth Cooperation Hub, where youths from more than 30 different countries in Africa and Europe with diverse backgrounds jointly discuss common issues and take action to ensure a collective response for enhancing their communities' welfare. Finally, in Egypt the EU highlights social cohesion as one of the top three priorities of cooperation to allocate financial and technical assistance according to the EU Indicative Programme in the country from 2021 to 2027. This is highlighted through different opportunities and projects that are funded and geared towards youth empowerment and social cohesion in Egypt, including exchange opportunities for educational or volunteering purposes between different European countries and Egypt.

Social cohesion in Egypt

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report on refugee statistics of October 2022, Egypt hosts 288,173 refugees from 61 countries. Egypt is considered one of the unique environments for refugees as the groups are integrated into the local communities and not settled in camps separated from the host population. This places more importance on establishing and maintaining social cohesion in the country as

an inevitable requirement to promote peace and safety for all resident groups. Moreover, Egypt's model can later be a learning moment for those working on the promotion of social cohesion in conflict-affected situations. Policy-makers, along with non-state actors, can capitalise on the practices deemed impactful in this model and also address any missed opportunities to ensure youth-led clubs are empowered to combat disinformation and contribute to peaceful coexistence. Another fact that highlights the importance of further exploring this model concerns the population's characteristics in Egypt, as young people make up over 60% of the country's population with a median age of 24.6 years (Worldometer, 2022). This presents a unique opportunity for Egypt to promote peaceful coexistence with the presence of different cultures, genders and backgrounds by capitalising on youth participation.

Accelerated by the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011, youth participation for social cohesion has been a key theme for actions taken by several international organisations in Egypt, such as Plan International and Terre des Hommes. With funds contributed by large European donors, such as Switzerland, the Netherlands and the EC, actions are mainly focused on establishing, strengthening, and maintaining youth-led structures/clubs to promote social cohesion in Egypt and tackle community issues. In Egypt, different projects aimed at strengthening youth participation are usually structured around providing relevant capacity-building to youths to become agents of change for social cohesion in their communities, which includes soft skills, planning, and understanding community issues. The youth groups across all clubs are then mentored to design and implement their community initiatives through a diverse group, including different nationalities and genders.

Youth contributions in Egypt. A spotlight on youth club models

This section highlights different initiatives supported to promote social cohesion through youth-led actions. Some initiatives discussed in this policy brief highlight the level and type of impact created when youths, from different groups and backgrounds, take the lead in delivering community-level interventions that promote peaceful coexistence.

Funded by the Swiss Embassy in Egypt, the Hope Together project, which ran from 2019 until mid-2022, launched more than 30 youth clubs in Alexandria and Damietta, with Syrian refugees residing in Egypt and local communities. The key aim of the clubs was to equip young people from diverse cultures and backgrounds to contribute to the welfare of their communities while providing a shared space for interacting and learning about different cultures. This approach provides an indirect strategy to promote social cohesion, as different youth groups are united to enhance their wider community situation while interacting and learning to accept and respect different backgrounds and cultures. During the interview for this policy brief, the last project officer stressed the effectiveness of this approach of giving youths the space, financial means and technical support to launch their community initiatives, as it provided a solid pathway to tackle various community issues while advocating social cohesion and common understanding. Moreover, this approach has a multiplier effect as youths who participated in these activities were also able to promote this understanding within their surrounding groups and communities, leading to a wider circle of impact. For example, one of the youth groups developed actions on combating bullying against children in schools with both refugee and local communities, addressing a common issue for social groups from different backgrounds. This approach of uniting youths from refugee and local communities and addressing common social issues was deemed impactful and beneficial according to evaluations of the project.

The key informant also revealed that a comprehensive youth empowerment curriculum addressing key skills needed to promote social cohesion is essential to enhance youths' capacity on this matter. However, the sustainability of these clubs is a challenging aspect for any project as continuing with actions to promote social cohesion requires human and financial means, which the youth clubs

usually lack after the project's closure. Hence, networking between youth clubs and national policy-makers with maintained relations is essential to ensure youths continue to advocate social cohesion.

Similarly, several youth organisations in Egypt consider the combating of misinformation to be a strategic and essential step for cultivating transformative change and achieving social cohesion. Hence, different organisations in Egypt have established this as a core strategy in their programme. For example, according to a South Sudanese youth leader, supported by capacity-building programmes provided by different international non-profit organisations in Egypt, her youth club, composed of refugees and forcibly displaced youths, has successfully delivered several awareness-raising campaigns using social media platforms to ensure a common understanding of cultures and customs of different refugee groups, as well as local communities. For example, the youth leader mentioned sharing information about culture norms and practices from both South Sudan and Egypt, while highlighting differences between the two cultures and the importance of respecting both backgrounds. The club has also been fighting online disinformation campaigns, especially those claiming conflict between local communities and refugees by sharing accurate information related to peaceful coexistence. Moreover, as it is sometimes challenging to reach vulnerable groups from refugee communities due to their digital illiteracy or lack of resources to access the internet, this youth-led action was able to reach different groups through offline outreach activities to share the information they provide online.

Moreover, to better understand refugee communities' views in Egypt about the support provided to the Ukrainian refugees, the youth leader said that it is essential to ensure that the narrative communicated from different entities, especially the EU, stresses the rights of refugees from all countries, and that these rights are provided equally, without discrimination. This view expressed by the youth leader is a core pillar for achieving social cohesion. Different social groups are encouraged to adopt non-discriminatory practices when addressing community-level issues; for example, youth-led actions are inclusive and open to different nationalities and backgrounds. In order to maintain this spirit, it is important for youth leaders who believe in equality and human rights to see other actors adopting the same practices.

These youth-led actions heavily reduce the level of conflict inside the community and promote social cohesion, especially within the unique situation in Egypt, as refugees are not settling in camps but are integrated inside the local communities for housing and employment. However, many youth initiatives were launched and did not continue due to the lack of financial resources to run their activities.

Finally, the leader mentioned that female participation in these clubs is considered an effective approach to enhance their own skills and professional development as well as to promote gender equality, as many of the club members are female. However, she noted the possibility of females facing different risks based on their participation, such as harassment in streets when taking part in outdoor community-level volunteering.

Another example of the contribution of youths towards social cohesion was mentioned by a member of the Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) established by Plan International Egypt in the Beheira Governorate. The youth leader mentioned that YAPs launched different online and offline awareness campaigns after the COVID-19 breakout to provide accurate information about the virus and fight against misleading or inaccurate information distributed by the community members, especially on infection and vaccine. This was done via social media channels, especially Facebook. The YAP also led different campaigns to fight against gender-based violence and mainstream female participation in different community-level actions. This structure is fully engaged to promote community cohesion, gender equality, and other societal topics due to their commitment to promote a better future. Even though the members of YAP are taking on full-time jobs and education courses, they view their community volunteering as an essential part of their life, which they try to sustain regardless of their professional commitments.

However, the interviewee also highlighted that it is essential to consider youths' socioeconomic conditions when crafting youth clubs' methodologies. For example, male participation in the Beheira Governorate in youth-led actions is usually less than female participation due to the need to work at a young age to contribute towards household expenses and support their families financially. Thus, when using this model to promote social cohesion in conflict-sensitive situations, it is important to enable a socioeconomic environment for youths to ensure they are able to proceed with their future professional goals while also contributing to their communities. This is essential, especially for refugee groups, due to socioeconomic vulnerabilities that might prevent them from participation.

This model presents another opportunity for the EU and policy-makers in Egypt to replicate the same strategy to utilise youth as a sustainable resource for spreading accurate information. Advisory boards were able to function beyond the funds provided to them while using low- to no-cost tools/channels, while they were also able to reach different groups in their communities at the time of crisis and disseminate life-saving information. However, for this model to be successfully replicated, a level of trust in these actions should first be established, especially within conflict-sensitive situations to ensure they are impactful.

The above initiatives shed light on youths' willingness and eagerness to contribute to their communities, as well as to enhance peaceful coexistence. However, they also highlight the importance of human and financial resources in addition to enabling policies that promote their actions. In fact, in order to have greater impact and a more efficient implementation of the funds, the need for national coordination and synergies was remarked on in the interviews conducted.

Challenges, opportunities and support pathways for social cohesion agents of change in Egypt

The local and international key informants interviewed highlight several challenges related to the overall environment of community volunteering in Egypt in addition to unique challenges when promoting social cohesion actions through youth-led structures. These should be carefully tackled by state and non-state actors on the national, regional and global level to successfully ensure capitalisation of youths as agents of social cohesion.

Contextualised and standardised understanding of social cohesion in Egypt

There is an urgent need for a common understanding of social cohesion within the Egyptian context given the unique model for hosting refugees within the local communities. The definition should further expand on the conflict-sensitive analysis needed to define interventions related social cohesion in this context. This also ensures the definition of pillars of action for policy-makers and non-state actors when addressing the theme with different populations in the country. This common definition will ensure relevant, efficient and impactful interventions designed to tackle the topic, ensuring that investments are directed efficiently and effectively. This concept should be standardised and adopted across different donors and humanitarian players to ensure collective action with common understanding.

Financial resources to sustain youth club action

Maintaining the action taken by refugee and local community members after the end of funding is one of the most challenging topics to be tackled in Egypt given the high financial vulnerability, as explained earlier in this policy brief. Due to the lack of financial means and technical guidance, many youth clubs were not sustained after the end of funds allocated to

support these actions. According to one of the youth leaders interviewed for this policy brief, her club members, due to their engagement in their university studies or pursuing professional career, could not maintain the momentum after the project's closure and the clubs remained inactive. As presented in this policy brief, replicating the YAP model could be an opportunity for developing a sustainable approach for cultivating youth agents who embrace collective action while proceeding with their professional goals.

On the other hand, the representative of associations and international organisations interviewed confirmed that it is essential to link youth clubs to formal entities such as the Ministry of Youth to ensure the club members are provided with technical guidance, financial means, and a space to carry out their club meetings. However, the key informants stressed that an action plan should be outlined by different Egyptian ministries, with the support of civil society in Egypt, to ensure an effective and efficient transition of this model under the Ministry's supervision and support.

An enabling environment that promotes leadership roles among youths

Egypt has a golden opportunity to capitalise on the power and motivation of youths from both refugees and local communities. However, this entails an enabling environment to prepare young people for leadership roles as provided by the state actors to ensure sustainability. Mainstreaming youth participation in different processes at the national level, from both refugees and local communities, will sharpen their ability to design and lead relevant and impactful community actions.

Inclusion of people with disabilities in youth clubs

The key informant from the local association interviewed for this policy brief highlighted the challenges youths with disabilities face in order to access and participate in youth club activities. This is due to multiple factors: the first barrier is related to the buildings where the clubs are usually held, which in many cases are not accessible to youths with physical disabilities; the second concerns the design and content of the curriculum used in different youth clubs and embraced during the design and implementation of community initiatives, as it does not provide guidance for the club mentors or the youths themselves on how to include young people with disabilities in the implementation; and the third and final barrier, as highlighted by the informant, is related to the mobilisation approach as she confirms that few people with disabilities apply to attend youth clubs funded by different projects, which means that better mobilisation with this specific target should be adopted by the implementing entities.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Empowering youths in Egypt is considered a promising approach to build a better future where different groups are brought together to ensure the welfare of the diverse populations living in Egypt. Youths have proved their capacity and willingness to contribute to their communities, promoting human rights and mutual understanding. Consequently, investing in strengthening youth clubs composed of refugees and local communities could be an effective and powerful approach to promote social cohesion, not only in the country but also to link the two shores of the Mediterranean. The current efforts launched by international organisations, supported by European donors and other stakeholders in Egypt, provides a successful model that should be capitalised on to further the advocacy of solid relations and common understanding. The following recommendations provide local and international policy-makers with actions required to support social cohesion agents of change in Egypt.

- As part of the operationalisation process of the Youth Action Plan launched by the EU, technical manuals and guidelines should be developed to assist youth-led actions in conflict-sensitive countries and regions with a high concentration of refugee populations. The materials should also highlight the EU's practical steps for ensuring that youths, from all backgrounds, are fully engaged and participate in social cohesion.

- The EU, in collaboration with the Egyptian government, should explore potential pathways for sustainable funding of youth-led structures to ensure that the efforts, skills and knowledge disseminated through the projects funded are not lost after closure. This could be an opportunity to integrate the leaders from refugee and local communities within the community-level actions adopted and led by the government to benefit from their experience with community development. The EU in Egypt, in accordance with the country's Indicative Programme cooperation, should carry out leadership exchange visits between youth leaders from refugees, forcibly displaced youths and host communities in Egypt and their counterparts from European youth-led actions. This is to empower youths with real experience in community-led action in European countries and capitalise on existing successful models.
- International and local organisations in Egypt, especially those operating with EU funds, should establish a coordination structure at the national level to ensure that efficient and coherent support is provided to youth initiatives and clubs.
- A multi-stakeholder action, including European donors, such as the Swiss development cooperation and non-profit organisations, should ensure that the social and financial conditions of youths involved in these clubs do not mean they have to withdraw from community volunteering in order to focus on their work to financially support themselves and their households. This could be ensured by providing professional career opportunities in community development for qualified youths participating in these clubs. It is recommended that the EU should foster the same approach in its NextGenerationEU fund initiative launched after the onset of the pandemic as part of the recovery plan to ensure young people are equipped with the resources to cope with their financial conditions.
- The Egyptian government should ensure that the youth-led actions are integrated in the country's strategies for promoting youth empowerment. This integration may include providing them with spaces for holding their meetings in national youth centres. Additionally, the government should provide leadership roles to promote youth participation within their efforts to enhance and strengthen their skills and knowledge.
- A national strategy should be developed and adopted by the state actors to foster leadership roles for young people while working on reducing barriers to participate in youth clubs and initiatives. For example, state actors can work to ensure national youth centres are disability-friendly, while also promoting the importance of community engagement among youths through their educational process. Overall, this strategy should carefully identify and eliminate potential risks derived from participation in community volunteering, especially for vulnerable groups from refugee communities.
- With the support of the Ministry of Youth, the initiative structures should ensure that a solid alumni network is established composed of previous volunteers who would act as mentors for the new generations joining the clubs. The Ministry should hire these alumni as youth coaches to ensure they provide guidance to the initiatives. This recommendation is in alignment with the Ministry's efforts to enhance the conditions of youths at the national level through mentoring and coaching.

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