Youth, Adulthood, and Social Integration in the Framework of SDGs and Youth, Peace and Security in the Arab Region

Luay Shabaneh, PhD

Regional Director, UNFPA Arab States Office

Introduction

Youth transition refers to the journeys undertook by young people (15-24 years) into more permanent adult status (e.g. transition from education to employment, from family home to independent living, and the move to family formation). This transition is interlinked with the relationships that young people establish with their surrounding society throughout the transition process. This dynamic in which these relationships are developed and interlinked between the individual and the society has been referred to in the literature by "social integration of youth".

Youth transition and social integration have significant connection with the human rights agenda that UNFPA advocates for. This document presents some observations about youth transition and social integration within the context of the Arab States region. It reviews also some determinants of youth social integration in the Arab region taking into consideration that youth is heterogeneous group (e.g. migrants, vulnerable, well-off) and that many young people in Arab region have been experiencing protracted crisis and humanitarian settings as a result of wars and conflicts.

Determinants of Youth Transition

The different ways in which adolescents and young adults make their transition is mainly explained in the literature by well-known determinants such as education, social background, gender and resources available. Additional determinants like war, humanitarian setting and societal conflict have appeared lately as new determinants. While lengthening of the transition from adolescence into adulthood has been observed in most developed countries as a result increased years spent in education, it is not the case in countries suffering from conflict and humanitarian settings where a mixed impact is observed. In the latter cases, shorter transition times are witnessed where more female adolescents are forced to early marriage, while more male adolescents dropout from education to enter workforce. Longer transition times are reported for family formation due to difficult economic capabilities and additional family responsibilities. Furthermore, entering the formal labor market is becoming more difficult delaying a more permanent transition to work: this transition is characterized by temporary and irregular part-time work and frequent unemployment periods.

Successful youth transition is determined also by the level of support that family can provide to adolescents. In the case of many young people who face problems during the transition phase, this support is frequently lacking. Individual problems and a lack of a social network can lead to failure of transitions. Family support is also an important factor in the transition towards independent living. In view of high property prices, most young people are dependent on financial help from their parents. The influence of the family is particularly apparent in the development of civic engagement: young people who grow up in a politically interested and socially committed family more often show interest

in politics themselves and develop their own political and social commitments. Parents are not only important role models but also often deliberately encourage their children's commitment. Young people who are unable to rely on support and advice from their parents are disadvantaged in many ways. While support services outside the family is an attempt to compensate for these disadvantages, they can never fully replace support within the family.

Gender is also another determinant of transition as there remain differences between the genders in making the transition into adulthood. On average, young women achieve better educational qualifications than young men and are more likely to acquire a university degree; consequently they remain in the education system longer. The main challenge concerning successful youth transition from education to the labor market is that youth often lack the necessary and relevant skills and personal qualifications needed in the workforce.

Transition Period

Over time, transition from youth into adulthood has changed; it has extended over a longer period and becoming less structured and standardized. The prolonging of the transition phase is due to the fact that young people have to invest more in education nowadays and therefore spend a longer period of time in the education system before they start looking for work.

Dynamics of Transition

Transitions of individuals from one live stage to another influence each other but are not necessarily connected in terms of either time or common practice. Significant differences in the order in which transition into working life, private transitions and the transition towards civic engagement occurred during the past few decades. With the de-standardization and diversity of transitions and patterns as a consequence of individualization and social differentiation, there is much greater freedom of choice in life-plan decisions, with many different possible routes into adulthood in most developed countries. This is not the case for young migrants and youth in some developing countries, particularly those facing humanitarian setting. In Yemen for example, some male children transit from childhood to soldiering, and in Syria, some female adolescents transit from childhood to motherhood skipping education.

Traditional patterns are becoming less significant to many adolescents while the increased freedom to decide is creating greater insecurity and risk and unseen consequences on their individual lives. While some adolescents and young adults wisely utilize their freedom of choice the situation is not without uncertainty and anxiety. Life skills including cognitive skills, social skills, self-sufficiency and social environment (family, friends) are important to determine the extent to which young people are able to use this freedom to choose

Unlike in the past, when social norms and conventions expected young people only to move out of the parental home when they were about to get married, and parenthood was inconceivable outside marriage, nowadays these different transition events are often widely separated in time. Furthermore transition in one area of life may occur while transition in other areas has not yet begun (e.g. young adults who are working but still living with their parents).

Transitions once made are not regarded as finished forever; instead, they more and more frequently turn out to be reversible situations. For example, this is the case for students who, after a period of

living independently during their studies, go back to live with their parents. Also, the loss of a job or a divorce can mean that young people have to give up their independent living and return to their parents' home.

Impact of Protracted Crisis on youth transition

There are 1.8 billion people between ages 10 and 24 most of them live in developing countries. Yet too many youth are unable to participate fully in society. In fact, about half billion young people aged 15-24 live on less than $2 a day, and over 73 million are unemployed. For young girls, the barriers to participation are even higher. Already vulnerable in stable situations, their situation becomes even more precarious in settings determined by natural and manmade crises. 600 million young people live in conflict ridden or insecure parts of our world

Through transition to adulthood, youth face increasing barriers to access quality health and protection services, in particular those related to sexual and reproductive health, protection from gender-based violence, child marriage and trafficking. This results in high maternal and new-born mortality/morbidity and a high incidence of Sexual & Gender Based Violence. One third of displaced/refugees are under the age of 25. The needs of adolescent girls in particular are often missed. Women and girls' needs are usually silent issues that are not considered a priority.

Protracted crisis can have a significant impact on youth transitions into adulthood, both by delaying and accelerating them. Waithood is a term commonly used to describe the state in which youths find themselves when their transitions to adulthood are delayed. There is consensus in the literature that economic independence and family formation are key components of youth transitions into adulthood. A number of studies also include political citizenship in this list. The concept of public space narrative appears here on the role of family in youth transition particularly in the field of civic education and participation.

The dynamics across transition components of adulthood including economic independence, political citizenship and overall wellbeing including reproductive and sexual health is often complex, and failure to achieve one of these milestones often prevents young people from achieving any of the others. There is also consensus on the disparity between boys' and girls' experiences in this context. It is generally accepted that the "youth" period for women/girls tends to be shorter than for men. This is because, in most societies, young women are considered to be adults when they enter motherhood. While protracted crises tend to delay transitions to adulthood for young men, they often accelerate transitions to adulthood for young women, through early marriage and assuming more responsibilities for other family members. The following important observations further illustrate the point:
- Delayed transitions to adulthood can be the result and the cause of conflict, fragility, and violence. Lost years of schooling and poor quality education in conflict-affected areas impede young people's chances of achieving economic independence.
- Family formation is often difficult for young people who are not economically independent because economic independence seen as a prerequisite for marriage in many cultures.
- Young people do not always resign themselves to waithood; faced with delayed transitions to adulthood some can create new sub-cultures and alternative forms of livelihoods and social relationships including sexual relationships.
- Accelerated transitions into adulthood are not necessarily permanent; some children who assume adult roles may later find themselves in waithood (e.g. child soldiers in the aftermath of conflict).

- Transitions to adulthood might be delayed due to not meeting the milestones required for this transition (e.g. economic independence and family formation), despite having fulfilled an adult role during times of conflict.
- Conflict related transitional changes and mixed levels of maturity of youth during the transitions related to poverty and lack of education often have an impact on family formation as they often lead to early marriage, inadequate medical care, poor information/services related to sexual and reproductive health, delayed family formation, unprotected sexual relations, child labor, separation of families and failure at school.

Challenges of the Paradigm of Youth Social Integration

Young people are event makers and are not only influenced by events around them. Youth alienation, solidarity and co-presence represent important dimensions of their integration in society. This gives rise to the question related to defining the normative and mainstream that youth are expected (or pushed) to integrate to. If young people do not want to adhere to so-called standards, they will simply ignore them.

The United Nation referred to three different lenses to understand social integration: 1- *positive* - through inclusionary measures implying equal opportunities and rights 2- *negative*-conjuring up the image of an unwanted imposition of uniformity, and 3- *neutral* as a way of describing the established patterns of human relations in any given society. This adds to the existing challenges in the discussion on youth social integration which has been sought in many cases without giving sufficient attention to the need for cultural diversity which leads to an imposition of uniformity. International discussion of youth social development is viewed in terms of integrating those with nothing into the modern mainstream, as though the groups defined as excluded are surviving in a virtual vacuum; but even the most impoverished and apparently disorganized have their own forms of social organization, and the focus on the normative goal of social integration will make disintegration of existing systems of social relations essential before moving forward.

In practical terms, indicators of social skills were used to predict the degree of adolescent social integration both at the individual and the contextual level. Adaptive peer relationships is important in schools for example because the degree to which adolescents are socially integrated in class is not merely related to their own but also to their friends' social-psychological constitution.

Role of Family on Youth Transition and Social Integration

Family plays a dominant role in youth transition and social integration. Family could be viewed as the initial public space for adolescents where s/he can enjoy and practice rights. But Arab families, for example, suffer from patriarchy and hierarchy meaning not all family members enjoy the same rights (gender disparity, son/parent disparity) which challenges the idea of social integration leading to the enjoyment of individual rights. The strength of the impact of the Arab family on youth transition and social integration varies by country and level of urbanization. The narrative concerning family should be changed from discussing the family structure per se to the ability of the family (and reform changes needed) to ensure the end goal which is the enjoyment of all individuals of all their

rights, as well as an analysis of the comparative advantage/disadvantage of the current structure to make successful transition and successful social integration.

Drivers of Youth Transition and Social Integration

Enabling young people to develop the skills, knowledge and support needed to make informed decisions about their bodies, lives, families, communities, countries and the world in of utmost importance. Working with and for young people is the most appropriate way forward. UNFPA during the WHS, was one of the co-signatories of the Youth Compact, which looks into Transforming Humanitarian Action with and for Young People to ensure that the priorities, needs and rights of young women and young men, girls and boys are addressed. Institutionally, SDGs called for "leaving no one behind" therefore focus needs to be made on the less advantaged, poorer and marginalized young people. Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), adopted by the United Nations Security Council in 2015, is the first resolution fully dedicated to the important and positive role young women and men play in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security. YPS is a comprehensive development framework on youth based on several pillars, namely participation, protection, prevention, partnerships and disengagement and reintegration constituting a good overall framework to address youth transition and social integration within a comprehensive programming and wider platform of youth development.

YPS is a good framework towards advocating for a world fit for adolescents and youth in which their rights are promoted and protected and girls and boys have optimal opportunities to develop their full potential and transit to adulthood within an enabling environment, to freely express themselves and have their views respected, and to live free of poverty, discrimination and violence. This could be achieved by empowering adolescents and youth, girls and boys, with skills to achieve their dreams, to think critically, to negotiate risky situations, and to express themselves freely. Providing access to health, including sexual and reproductive health information, education, commodities and services is critical. Connecting young people to livelihood and employment programmes and upholding their right, specifically girls and marginalized groups, to grow up healthy and safe is equally important as well as advocating for young people's participation in development plans and recognizing their rights to a fair share of education, skills, and services, with a special focus on the economically disadvantaged, socially marginalized, and vulnerable groups.

Youth, unlike many other "unchanging" forms of identity (such as ethnicity or race), is a transitional phase of life. Exclusion, as described by many young people from across the globe, is considered a form of structural and psychological violence that is deeply rooted in the reciprocal mistrust between young people, their governments and the multilateral system. This exclusion, and young peoples' responses to it, is manifested across six core areas; political inclusion, economic inclusion, education, gender, injustice and human rights, and disengagement and reintegration.

Young people play a critical role in supporting the disengagement of their peers from violent groups and their reintegration back into society. Through their presence on the ground and their better understanding of the needs and local realities of disengaged youth, they may serve as a bridge between disengaged youth and the community. Finally, if the right investments in youth is made, and their peacebuilding work is recognized and nurtured, societies may reap a peace dividend.

In the absence of meaningful opportunities to participate socially, politically and economically, marginalized young people are strikingly creative in forging alternative places of belonging and meaning through which to express themselves.

The power of choice is key in making successful transition and social integration, however choices need to be informed decision through enforcing access to information, skills and opportunities.

The proper support from family is another significant enabler or accelerator for successful transition and social integration, but family should be incubator for individual rights and free choices of young people particularly in decisions related to their bodies, emotions, and networks.

A lifecycle approach is an appropriate programming to support successful transition and social integration because different stages influence each other although not dependent on each other.