

WORKING TOWARDS THE INCLUSION OF YOUTH: THE CASE OF ETTADHAMEN AND DOUAR HICHER IN TUNISIA

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INTRODUCTION: MARGINALISED YOUTH IN TUNISIA

The issue of youth inclusion in marginalised areas is one of the most important, yet challenging, issues in post-revolution Tunisia. The high hopes of young people, one of the most active groups in the revolution, have turned to bitterness, in the face of chronic underemployment, underdevelopment and political exclusion. Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher, two working class towns situated in Greater Tunis, embody this shift.

In both places, as with other towns further inland, such as Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, young people played a decisive role in the social uprisings that led to the fall of the former regime in 2011. Today, however, both communities suffer from stigmas associated with poverty, crime and Salafism (fundamentalist Islam), an image that has been accentuated by the Tunisian media following a series of clashes between the police and Salafist groups. Both towns are seen as recruiting grounds for groups promoting violent extremism, including those sending Tunisians to Syria for jihad. News stories relating to events in those neighbourhoods often concern violence, crime or terrorism. This image of fear has even fuelled mistrust of civil society.

THE RESPONSE: UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Convinced that the consolidation of a peaceful democratic transition in Tunisia requires the empowerment of excluded communities and the strengthening of their voices, International Alert is working with young people in Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher. The first stage of the project consisted of conducting research, the first of its kind in Tunisia, allowing us to produce knowledge on young people in these neighbourhoods and begin to establish trust with the various local actors, such as civil society, authorities and political parties.

To carry out this research, in 2014 International Alert collaborated with social science researchers to conduct a quantitative and qualitative study of 18 to 34 year olds living in the towns of Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher. Young enumerators were involved in the process, many of whom were recruited from the two towns and given training in field research techniques. Over 740 young people completed a questionnaire on their perceptions of their neighbourhood, schooling, career path, relations with local institutions and police, political views and religious practices. The qualitative part of the study was conducted through individual interviews and focus groups attended by marginalised young people, members of community organisations, entrepreneurs, young unmarried mothers, rappers and Salafists.

The questionnaire revealed that the marginalisation and exclusion of young people takes many forms: social, economic, urban, cultural and political. Youth unemployment is particularly high among graduates, and as a result young people do not believe that going to school will promote their social prospects; instead, most say that they go to school to keep their parents happy. Only 10 per cent of young people think that their situation has improved since the revolution, and most say that they are disillusioned with the revolution, and express a defiant attitude towards politicians. Young people are very suspicious of institutions because of corruption, a lack of accountability and feelings of marginalisation.

The study also confirms that young people encounter difficulties as a result of the stigmas attached to their neighbourhoods. These stigmas serve to widen inequalities, particularly in terms of young people's access to jobs. Both towns have very few cultural and sports facilities, and they are marked by high rates of drug consumption, particularly cannabis and Subutex, a heroin substitute. Young people nonetheless have a strong sense of identity associated with their residential area, creating a sense of solidarity.

Further, when young people sympathise with Salafism, it is for two main reasons: either political, because they share its anti-system ideology, or residential, because they feel a sense of solidarity with young Salafist activists who live in the same neighbourhood as them and with whom they share the same daily suffering and deprivation. Many young people from Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen have left for Syria since 2011. The friends and families of those who have gone to fight in Syria are worried about what will happen to them when they return.

FOLLOWING UP ON THE FINDINGS

All these findings have generated a substantial amount of national and international media interest on the issue of youth marginalisation, with the aim of influencing national policy debates.

The research has shown that the key requirement needed to promote the inclusion of young people is the construction of their confidence in the state. This should be built through the reinforcement of young people's ability to have a voice in local governance, and by involving them in processes of participatory democracy where they are able to articulate their needs and expectations towards the public policies of the state.

From August 2015, International Alert launched the second phase of the project, with the implementation of a series of activities that aim to address the social and political marginalisation felt by young people. This 18 month project combines International Alert's dialogue and mediation experience, and tried and tested dialogue and political participation methodologies, with innovative digital community mapping tools. It is targeted towards previously overlooked young people, and tackles marginalisation where it is most needed, by using the following approaches:

- Building trust and establishing lasting partnerships between local authorities and young people by creating sustainable consultation mechanisms.
- Encouraging young people, and the general population of Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher, to exchange views with local and national authorities through a participatory dialogue process. This process aims to connect local people's voices to the national level and central government.
- Stimulating local development in Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher and promoting youth employment by establishing two or three pilot initiatives to set up solidarity-based social economy enterprises.

The crucial tool that was designed to strengthen the coherence of the group, increase its visibility and run the process in a fun and progressive way was the OpenStreetMap.

Initially, the biggest challenge for International Alert was to win the trust of young people and gather their support for this project by convincing them that they are able to commit to their community, be creative, be disciplined and are able to engage constructively and convey their views to the local and national authorities. This challenge was particularly important, given the fact of that in the two towns, international civil society organisations (CSOs) are absent and local civil society is mainly engaged in charity.

Through an inclusive approach, the project has succeeded in setting up a platform of CSOs in Ettadhamen, which helped to reach out to a number of young people to participate in the project's activities. International Alert also adopted various methods to reach out to and recruit participants; these included an open call for applications through a poster campaign, and contacts with high schools to facilitate access to young people deemed as harder to reach. More than 30 young people, gender balanced and from various backgrounds, were selected and trained in various topics such as leadership, local democratic governance, local elections and accountability and street art.

The crucial tool that was designed to strengthen the coherence of the group, increase its visibility and run the process in a fun and progressive way was the OpenStreetMap. This innovative tool, never used before in Tunisia, is a digital mapping project that allows young people to work together to create an interactive map of their neighbourhood. Its use can be seen as a pioneering exercise in social re-appropriation, geared towards both identifying problems and suggesting ways to improve neighbourhood life. For example, young people can map locations not marked on official maps, unsafe areas, such as those prone to accidents or violence, social requirements and facilities in need of development. In addition, the objective of OpenStreetMap is to give young people the opportunity to inform and influence local government constructively. This tool has already achieved this, having convinced local authorities of the need to begin to integrate young people's opinions in consultations relating to urban planning in the region, and in next year's budgeting.

The crucial ongoing phase is to establish a participatory process between local authorities and young people through participatory budget planning that should integrate a focus on young people's needs. The challenge is to continue to gain the confidence of young people and encourage their mobilisation in a very complex environment, while also ensuring the meaningful engagement of local authorities. Already, the project has managed to gain the support of local civil society, and today enjoys the enthusiasm of young people, who are determined to change their environment and break free from their stigma.

We hope to give hope to young people and demonstrate to other actors that marginalisation is not inevitable. The promotion of young people's capacity to work, and the development of projects such as this, is the only way to give meaning to their citizenship.