



Save the Children

# AL BAWSALA

# REGIONAL PROGRAM

Youth Civic Engagement in the Middle East

“...I realized the power of my voice and learned how to express it to influence others through this platform...”.

*Bassma\*, young participant, female, Yemen.*



MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
OF DENMARK  
Danida

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\*Pseudonyms to protect their privacy

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# 1. Introduction

Al Bawsala is a 4-year regional program (2018-2021) funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Denmark – DANIDA, which recognizes and supports young people's agency by helping to amplify their voices and remove systemic barriers to their meaningful participation.

Through this program, Save the Children has engaged some of the most marginalized and hard-to-reach groups of young people in the Middle East in order to protect and support their participation in influencing key policies that affect their lives.

## OBJECTIVE OF THE PROGRAM:

***Young people are listened to and have equitable choices in a protective environment realized through strengthened civil society actors and regional platforms.***

The program utilizes a multi-pronged approach that strengthens the capacity of youth groups and civil society actors (CSAs) to become strong advocates for their interests and needs; supports and generates evidence on youth groups' and CSAs' advocacy work and participation in regional platforms; and facilitates youth groups' and CSAs' access to hold duty bearers to account.

Young people in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) wish to be active and influential members of a society that unfortunately rarely includes them. The region has one of the youngest populations in the world, with around 35 per cent between the ages of 10 and 24, and 60 per cent below the age of 30.

Youth in the MENA region are standing at the crossroads of major change in their countries, and support, especially for the most marginalized, is vital. Legal frameworks, institutions, policies, and society must adjust in order to give young people a greater voice in shaping the region's future. We can view young people as a challenge, a burden or a threat or we can choose to recognize them as an asset, as unlocked potential and as an opportunity for growth and prosperity.



## THE PROGRAMS APPROACH:

**Go when no one is there:** The program aims to adapt and adjust work methodologies to reach the most marginalized and hard-to-reach young people in the Middle East.

**No size fits all:** The implementation of the program differs from one country to another depending on the youth groups and their interests, the conflict dynamic of the country and the political context.

**Nothing about them without them:** We adopt a participatory approach in every step of the program's implementation through youth participation and leadership. We believe the program has greater chances for success and sustainability if young people own it.

**Diversity and Inclusiveness:** The program strives to reflect the diversity of young people in the MENA region and their concerns. We build trust and safe spaces for equal opportunities and participation.

**Do no harm:** We conduct conflict sensitivity analyses with young people and youth-led groups to mitigate the risks and protect them during and after the program.

## 2. Understanding youth organizing

The Arab Spring uprisings in 2010 and 2011 boosted youth agency and voice in the Middle East and North Africa and expanded the civic space. Various forms of youth-led platforms proliferated out of this momentum. However, the environment of democracy and freedom of association did not last long, and civic space, especially for young people, has been shrinking across the region. A vast majority of youth have distanced themselves from politics, as the high hopes held during the uprisings gave way to feelings of disenchantment and despair. Many countries in the region experienced a crackdown on political activism, which affected youth in particular. However, young people have continued to organize, utilizing informal structures.

The al Bawsala program produced an analytical mapping to understand informal youth organizing. We have studied and analyzed 42 informal youth-led platforms in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Yemen, and the results show that:

- Interviewed youth were careful not to associate themselves with any political affiliation or commercial activities, in order protect their platforms and maintain communities' trust in their motives. They defined themselves as 'active youth' or 'volunteers' rather than as 'activists,' as the latter has a political connotation that most were reluctant to claim. As volunteers, youth seem more credible in the eyes of their local communities in comparison to NGOs and formal civil society actors.
- Youth-led platforms were created in response to specific problems or needs that arose within their communities.
- Passions and interests were the most common driving motives for youth-led platforms. Through those platforms, youth offered alternative and innovative visions for achieving social change within their communities.



## THE STUDY RECOMMENDS:

- To introduce youth organizing as an approach to harness collective power for social change
- To expand youth's understanding of social change, power relations and social and economic justice
- To avoid disempowering youth-led platforms by imposing specific mindsets, knowledge and working models
- To ensure safe and enabling spaces for youth-led platforms
- To co-design responsive support schemes with youth-led platforms

## 3. Supporting youth and amplifying their voices

### 3.1. YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

*In collaboration with the Jordanian CSO Ahel, that works with communities and activists in the MENA region, and in partnership with youth groups and individuals from Jordan, Sudan, Yemen and Syria, al Bawsala developed a youth-led organizing and advocacy manual, upon which many aspects of the program are based. The manual is a guide for a 5-day workshop for collective action, estimated at 35-40 hours of training. The objective is to build youth understanding and capacity for leadership, community organizing, and advocating for their shared interests.*

### #ENOUGH PAIN - PUBLIC SAFETY IN A PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMP IN LEBANON

Residents in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are often injured or killed by loose electrical cables. In the Palestinian camp Borj El Barjneh, young people have used the al Bawsala youth-led community organizing and advocacy manual to organize and design a campaign to ensure public safety related to this problem, titled **#ENOUGH PAIN**. Young people conducted a series of interviews with residents and specialists to research the issue in order to propose concrete recommendations to key stakeholders such as the popular committee and the UNRWA. Youth are mobilizing the community and families of victims to put the matter of safety on the agenda of the camp's management as a key priority.

*"My personality got developed, and I became more social; I gained more trust in myself and the ability to make decisions. Before that, I was an introvert and did not talk with anyone"*

*Yasser\*, young participant, male, Lebanon.*

*"In Lebanon, the program has significantly enabled participating youth to revisit what they had taken for granted and question who was responsible for the deteriorated electricity wires that exposed people to the risk of losing their lives."*

*Finding from the Mid-term Learning and Reflection Exercise.*



Photo: Tola Bo Trahne-Hanghej/Save the Children

### 3.2. YOUTH-LED ADVOCACY – YOUTH VOICES IN THE PEACEBUILDING PROCESS IN YEMEN

In Yemen the al Bawsala program has supported the creation of the first youth-led national coalition on peacebuilding called Youth Platform for Peace Building (YP4PB) which consists of 12 civil society organizations from different governorates in the country, represented by 24 youth members.

The YP4PB serves as a platform for the coalition to counter the victimhood narrative that contributes to further marginalization and stigmatization of Yemeni youth who are often framed as a problem to be solved or a threat to be contained. The platform has successfully issued advocacy statements to various stakeholders, engaged in a dialogue with the UN Special Envoy Office for Yemen and briefed the UK's Minister for the MENA region. Furthermore, the platform launched a national consultation with young people to evaluate, monitor and present recommendations to the UN Special Envoy Office for Yemen for better youth participation in the peace process.

*“On a personal level, I started to feel change in our way of work and thinking. We started to think of which youth issue we want to advocate for. ... after the training we knew many things that have to be changed ... we now have a new plan for our community action”.*

*Amina\*, young participant, female, Yemen.*

### 3.3. YOUTH-LED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH – SCHOOL DROPOUT POLICY PAPER IN MOSUL IRAQ

Youth civic engagement brings a sense of agency and belonging to young people as well as hope for a better future for their home countries, which serves to discourage participation in acts of violence and terrorism. With this mindset, al Bawsala partnered with two informal youth-led groups and a local organization to address the issue of school drop-out and engage in evidence-based advocacy.

Youth in Mosul produced their first ever policy brief based on participatory action research supported by SC. The research combined a desk review, interviews, and surveys with a targeted sample of parents, school dropouts, school principals, and teachers in two districts of Mosul. The youth conducted 150 surveys and 70 interviews and were coached, mentored and supported during the writing of the paper.

The policy brief presents a comprehensive analysis of the root causes of school dropout in Mosul following the liberation from ISIS and offers several recommendations to address this social phenomenon. Young people are calling for an increase in the education budget, attesting in their policy brief that military spending constituted 22.6% of the total 2017 federal budget while only 9.3% was allocated to education. Young people are also calling for additional reforms to the education sector and changes at community level.

**Policy papers developed by the youth** can be shared upon request in both English and Arabic





*“After data collection, we attended data analysis training where we learned about the weight of each factor for dropping out of school, which was mainly due to financial and destroyed infrastructure more than other factors... accordingly we started to develop a deeper understanding of the problem”.*

*Hayat\*, young participant, female, Iraq*



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### 3.4. COMING TOGETHER - REGIONAL NETWORKING AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

During the program, partners from different countries have come together to learn, share and create a sense of regional coherence. The project organized this collaboration through workshops on issues such as leadership and gender equality, discussions on global topics such as COVID-19 or racism, as well as an annual meeting to reflect on the work that has been done and to strategize for future action.

These regional get-togethers present an opportunity for young people to share their experiences and be exposed to the challenges faced by youth in other parts of the region. The movement of youth in MENA is highly restricted due to visa barriers for males, and cultural and traditional barriers for females. Hearing about the experiences and struggles of others made youth participants feel less isolated and enhanced their feeling of solidarity.

*“The regional workshop was inspiring for them to see how others overcame challenges in their communities. Accordingly, it will be very enriching to facilitate this learning exchange across countries through such reflective learning workshops, where they can find space to question, revisit what they experienced, and learn from each other.” From the Mid-term Reflection and Learning exercise”.*

## 4. End note

The program aimed to amplify youth's voices and support them to leverage change in their communities. Through this program, participating youth were introduced to youth-led advocacy, which broadened their understanding of how change happens, beyond aid and charity work, and shifted their thought paradigm regarding social change to one that is more rights-based and advocacy-focused. This shift made them redefine their own role and recognize the collective power of their voices.

“ ... the concept of community organizing was new for our community. We did not know how to claim our rights ... The idea of community organizing helps groups who suffer from problems to organize themselves in a way that amplifies their power ... ” . *Rabia\*, young participant, female, Yemen.*

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