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Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

Mediation for peace

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF DENMARK



The voice of youth in the Sahel

A dialogue between youth organisations and state institutions

Promoting civic engagement

Civic engagement among youth in the G5 Sahel countries is highest when dealing with social issues such as combatting child marriage, protecting the environment, supporting victims of the region’s ongoing conflicts, or reintegrating marginalised youth in society. In 2012, youth organisations in Mali facilitated the opening of the first humanitarian corridor to the country’s northern regions, which were controlled by jihadist movements at that time. In Burkina Faso, youth organisations backed the movement for political change in 2014.

Civic engagement primarily takes place through civil society organisations, as youth claim that political parties provide limited opportunities for them to express themselves. The crisis of confidence between youth and political elites has significantly decreased community participation and a sense of common interest. While elders criticise youth’s lack of respect for customs and morals, youth argue that the older generation has failed to pass these on while likewise failing to display exemplary behaviour. Amid these tensions, youth in the Sahel region struggle to find their own identity.

In 2017, meetings were organised following the establishment of 25 local and national dialogue frameworks across the G5 Sahel countries. These brought together 1,250 youth organisation delegates and representatives from their respective governments to come up with ideas to promote civic engagement. In 2018, the delegates agreed on initiatives to be launched in each of the G5 Sahel countries, in order to respond to priority issues they identified:

Paving the way for civic education

‘The youth blame everything on the authorities. But what about the responsibility of the youth who refuse to do their share of the work?’

Youth organisations have suggested that a first step in combating the lack of civic participation is to introduce civic and moral education in schools. Programmes would need to be taught in all national languages to effectively raise youth’s awareness of both their rights and their responsibilities, while encouraging them to participate in the development of their own regions.

In addition, perceptions and behaviour of the youth towards the government could improve if more public services are made accessible



beyond the urban centres and in remote areas. Youth organisations have also highlighted the importance of organising cultural and sporting events to foster national cohesion, as these would create spaces where participants from every region of their respective countries could gather.

Acknowledging new types of youth engagement

'There is a crisis of confidence between young people and state representatives. While dialogues are held between them, these only take place within the framework of this project. The two don't speak to each other in the real world and they don't trust each other. Youth forums are just window dressings. National Youth Councils can even have a divisive impact.'

Youth are abandoning political parties because they feel that they are being manipulated during the electoral period, while their concerns are forgotten once the elections have ended. This has led youth to look for new democratic mechanisms that match their needs and aspirations more closely. According to Sahelian youth organisations, a lack of consideration from political parties and authorities has contributed to the rise of grassroots movements in demanding greater state recognition. In Burkina Faso, for example, a Reggae artist and radio host co-founded a civil society movement called Balai citoyen (the Citizens' Broom), which organised large-scale protests in 2014.

The rise of new communication tools, with social media at the forefront, has made it easier to develop new forms of engagement. It is no longer necessary to be the leader of a political party or a large movement to rally people behind a cause; all it takes to gain a following now is the creation of a Facebook page, a Twitter account, or an Instagram profile.

Involving youth in decision-making bodies

'Being young does not mean being irresponsible. We will never gain experience if we don't have opportunities to get involved.'

'If only our elders would agree to become our mentors, youth would be ready to take on the burden and everyone would benefit.'

Social hierarchies in the Sahel region are still predominantly determined by age and gender, marginalising youth (and especially young women) in public affairs. With a majority of the population aged below 30, youth organisations have suggested establishing youth involvement quotas. These would provide youth with a voice within political parties and in national and local decision-making bodies, such as parliaments or municipal councils.

Youth organisations have also requested that youth be involved in designing and implementing development programmes targeted at them. In general, institutional forums for discussions between youth and their elders have been highlighted as a means to avoid further widening the generation gap while ensuring that the grievances of youth are better understood.



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