



**EuroMed Youth III Programme**



## **STUDIES ON YOUTH POLICIES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN PARTNER COUNTRIES**

# **SYRIA**



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The third phase of the **Euromed Youth Programme\*** (Euro-Med Youth III), funded by the European Commission (DG EuropeAid) and launched in October 2005, is a regional Programme set up within the framework of the third chapter of the Barcelona Process '*Partnership on Social, Cultural and Human Affairs*'. The overall objectives of the Euro-Med Youth Programme are to promote intercultural dialogue among young people within the Euro-Mediterranean region, motivate active citizenship as well as to contribute to the development of youth policy.

The overall aim of the studies undertaken in **Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey** on Youth Policies, was to be a reference tool which would give all stakeholders in the field of youth, as well as youth project organisers, an overview of the situation of young people and of provisions available for them in the 10 partner countries. The objectives were to identify whether there was a Youth Policy, legislation or any other national strategy addressing the needs of youth and what kind of provision was made through non-formal education and youth work in the relevant partner countries.

Research for the studies was carried out by 7 experts and involved gathering of information, during a 5-month period, on basis of available written materials and resources, and as a result of missions to the studied countries to interview relevant youth authorities, organisations and young people individually or through focus groups.

The outcomes of the studies, each produced in a report format following a common structure for all the ten studies, give an enlightening overview of the definition and situation of youth in the Mediterranean partner countries. The studies focused on young people's rights and entitlements as active citizens, such as opportunities to vote, get elected and contribute to the decision-making process; the challenges faced by youth such as unemployment, immigration, housing, marriage, generational and cultural conflict, young women's place in society; young people's reactions in response to such challenges and description of provision for leisure-time activities and non-formal education through governmental and/or non-governmental youth institutions and organisations.

A reading of all the studies shows that a national youth policy is not yet fully implemented in any of the partner countries. However, each of them has a number of national directives, legislations, policies and/or strategies to address youth issues, usually at cross-sector level, even if youth are not, in some cases, recognised as a priority. The definition of youth varies from country to country, sometimes even within the same country depending on the responsible national authority. Non-formal education has no, or limited, place in most of the studied countries, formal education being the main priority of national authorities. The Euromed Youth Programme is assessed positively and considered to be an essential tool for the promotion of youth work and non-formal education.

Each report, published individually, provides a factual background on youth issues on basis of information collated by the relevant researchers. In addition, one document bringing together the executive summaries from each of the ten studies has been also produced to highlight an overview on the situation of youth within the Mediterranean region.

\* [www.euromedyouth.net](http://www.euromedyouth.net)

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Syria is facing a very interesting historical moment in the field of youth. The social and economic environment of the country is changing fast and radically. Youth Policy is becoming a priority because the young people are the majority in the country and they will be the new leaders, workers and decision-makers in the coming years. The process of defining Youth Policy is still under way. Young people in Syria face many challenges because the new political and economic reforms are transforming the society and the culture in a radical way. The educational system has not been providing the young generation with the occupational skills they need to succeed in the job market. The mismatch between the skills of the job seekers and the needs of the employers has contributed to low returns on education and created an incentive to drop out of schools. The new generation is confronted with Western cultural models and with a new economic and social system. These models are completely different from the ones of their parents and teachers so the gap between generations is increasing faster than before and communication and understanding are more difficult. Syria is home to a new generation looking for its own identity but also struggling for a good job, a house and a social place in the country.

Syria is a lower middle-income country. In 2003, the income per capita was about \$3,400 and in 2005 was \$3,808. The rural population composed 49% of the population in 2005. Over the past five years, the Syrian government has initiated a series of reforms to help the country toward a "social market economy." The government has begun introducing public sector employment retrenchment policies, has removed barriers to private sector entry for most industries, has permitted development of private secondary schools, universities and banks and has introduced legislation to reform the country's labour laws. As with other countries in the Middle East, a demographic wave is moving through the Syrian population creating a youth overpopulation. The youth population in Syria had increased to 25,4% in 2005, presenting challenges for job creation for young people. The population between 0-14 years of age was of 33% in 2006. The annual population growth rate in the 2005 was of 2,5%. The unemployment rate among youth (ages 15-24) in Syria stood at 26% in 2002. The labour situation is changing, but for 80% of young people a "good" job is still a public sector job, especially for the young women. There are stereotypes about the "job life" in the private sector as less respectful, uncertain in respect to the future and dangerous for the women. Public employment offers life-long certainty.

The educational system and employment are the two turning points in today's Syrian society. This unstable situation is creating for young people a longer dependence on their own families and therefore, major difficulties in being active in civil society. The economic and social position of the families can be established if the young people can select their job or they have little choice but to work to support themselves and their families. In fact, there is not any financial support by the government for young people searching their first job or their first house. The Syrian family is important for young people to secure employment and assist with housing and

obtaining a loan in preparation for marriage. In this social framework, it is very interesting to notice that nearly 40% of the young men identified working as the most important goal in their lives compared with only 12% of the women. By contrast, more than 50% of the women ranked family and marriage as their important goal compared with 25% of the men. An almost equal percentage placed education as most important. The young people in Syria have some specific needs and challenges for achieving their priorities. They demand an educational system able to overcome the big gap between the schooling system and the new labour market but also one which can better prepare them in their own life's project. Young people need more space to be active in civil society: there are few Centres where the young people can meet for activities outside school.

The access to loans remains a problem: the regulation of the banking system is not well-developed. Another challenge is housing because the prices, especially in the urban areas, are very expensive. All these factors are at the base of the youths' large economic, as well as social, dependence on their families. Since young men are expected to provide housing in the event of marriage, the priority of the families is to support their male children. Most young women, therefore, are dependent on their own parents or husbands.

Regarding the Institutional and Legislative framework, young people can vote at the age of 18 (without any distinction between boys and girls). The Syrian Constitution affirms that the education is compulsory for all children aged between 6 and 12. The age for admission to employment is legally set at 18 years. It is prohibited to employ a person less than 12 years of age in any occupation and persons less than 15 years old must not be employed in production work. The Syrian Law make a distinction between males and females concerning marriageable age: 18 years in the case of young men and 17 years in the case of young women. It is important to note that, in the Juveniles Act, children begin to have legal responsibility after the age of 7 years. But adolescents between 7 and 15 years cannot be sentenced to penalties but may be subjected to special reform measures.

At the moment, there is no official Youth Policy in Syria but since last year, the Government has been working on a National Youth Policy that will be the base for the Five-Years Development Plan. This Plan will be the operative strategy about Youth Policy in Syria and it will define structures, activities, procedures and a budget for young people. The Plan will be the starting point for the development of laws and specific provisions about Youth Policy in Syria. This process involves a number of national and international organisations as consultants or researchers. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs (SCFA) is responsible for a national research project on the situation of young people. This research has been realised with the support of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and will be the base for the development of the National Youth Policy. A National Committee has taken charge of the National Policy. The most relevant national actors in Youth Policy are taking part in this process: Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, Revolutionary Youth Union (RYU), Syrian Federation of Youth, etc. The aim is to present a comprehensive document about young people's lives. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs is also charged with the implementation

of the Euromed Youth III Programme. In fact, the Euromed Youth Unit (EMYU) which is responsible for the implementation of the Programme is part of SCFA. The EMYU organized an informative meeting about the Programme in various parts of the country and supported the local associations in applying. In the last call for proposals, five projects were submitted and four were granted.

The situation of young people in Syria is clearly very complex and needs adequate answers. The problem of employment is only one issue. The others are the changes in society affecting their daily lives, their values and their relationships within their families. One of the most important challenges is to help this new generation adapt to a general transformation of the society. In the meantime, the gap between the two generations is increasing. The young people are living in a time of great change in the system of values. Today's society shows a cultural, social and economic model completely different from the one of their parents. The young people are experiencing an identity crisis far from their parents, but without another model. The associations are developing projects that can give possible answers to these issues through different media (cultural, debate...). This process is still in an embryonic stage. There is not a comprehensive strategy about Youth Policy, nor is there a working method to implement it in the field of youth. A large portion of the youth work is still delegated to institutions, schools or international organisations. There are not many youth centres and the majority belong to the Revolutionary Youth Union (that has been entrusted by the Government to coordinate the activities for young people in Syria). Civil society is increasing its voice and its tools to be visible and active towards the political system, but there are still some obstacles. Young people aspire to more freedom of expression and to create associations. Everything is possible, but with much uncertainty about the time it takes to complete procedures. In Syria the constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression: the right to participate in a constructive way in the life of the nation. But the State of Emergency in force since 1963 severely restricts personal liberties. The young people request complete freedom in their daily lives and the respect of their rights. The Syrian youth is living in this moment of transition and most young people are struggling to be active citizens in their own country but also to be aware about the possibilities offered by the outside world. Syria is trying to define its new path in Youth Policy to overcome these contradictions between needs and opportunities.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Objectives

This study has focused on some crucial issues with which young people are dealing and their life situation in Syria. Many things are changing or improving in the country. The study tries to highlight the most relevant changes affecting young people and the roles and perceptions of actors involved. Its main objective is to analyze the situation of young people in order to better understand their current challenges and opportunities in the frame of the National Youth Policy. This study focuses mainly on the analysis of the challenges faced by young people in the country and their strategies of reaction in order to find their own place in society (as active citizens).

The main themes investigated in the research were:

- The place of young people in society;
- The perception of young people about their role in society and about their own country (as place for development of future personal and professional projects);
- The cultural and religious backgrounds of their own identities.
- The NGOs and Associations in the country (in particularly, the ones founded by students and young people.);
- The presence of young people in the body of these NGOs and Associations (associations as a working opportunity for young people);
- Volunteering as an added value in these Organisations (role of volunteering in personal development);
- The place of young people in these Organisations (also the ones with fewer opportunities).

## 1.2 Methodology

This research about Youth Policy in Syria has investigated the following areas to define an overall picture of the country: the National law and National strategy on Youth, and the Social System and Non-Formal Educational Context.

This research has been realised in three phases. The first stage has been a desk research on several sources available about the country and specifically on young people. The situation of the Youth and National Law and its historical evolution in the country has been also investigated. The research has been based on the following selected sources about Syria: the annual reports of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), of United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other International Organisations. During this phase, official documents about the legal system were collected and analysed in Syria in order to understand their

role in society. This first phase has evidenced some priority topics to analyse (such as employability, educational system, ect). This has also been the starting point for the preparation of the interviews and the grid for collecting the outcomes. In this phase, with the support of local contacts, a list of key witnesses to interview and projects to visit were identified. The second working phase was realised in Syria and was fundamental in verifying the desk research information through interviews, visits to associations and NGOs. Nineteen on-site visits to Institutions, International Organisations, relevant projects and NGOs about Youth Policy were carried out in Syria. During the visits, it was possible to interview young people who were taking part in projects as beneficiaries, but also to interview young people with specific roles in NGOs or Associations. All the actors involved in this work have been available and interested in sharing information and reflecting upon the current situation of young people in Syria.

### 1.3 Challenges of the study

Youth Policy is becoming a priority in Syria, not only because the young people are the majority in the country and will be the new leaders, but also because the economic and social situation is not favourable to them. The government and many national and international organisations are working on this topic through projects and research in field. This situation has been really favourable to the study, but, in the same time, it was not possible to find much information because the process of definition of Youth Policy is still in progress. Specific organisations still do not exist which can deal with this topic. Youth Policy will be implemented in the new Five-Year Development Plan.

## 2. SITUATION OF YOUTH

### 2.1 Definition of youth

Most national youth policies attempt to define 'young people' to determine the main beneficiaries of policy interventions. Defining 'youth', however, is not a simple task since there is no international consensus on what the term implies or a clear-cut indicator such as age brackets to define it. Who is designated a 'youth' in your country will depend on a variety of political and cultural factors. UNESCO defines 'youth' as people between the ages of 15 and 24 and young people as those between the ages of 10 and 19. For the sake of consistency and to facilitate comparisons across national borders, the latter definition is used in this report<sup>(1)</sup>.

In addition, the Syrian Government uses the same reference in the frame of its important cooperation with international organisations. In the frame of Syrian national policy, the laws regarding the educational system, employment and juvenile delinquency define specific target groups. In general, the Syrian laws define "youth" as young people between the ages of 15 and 25. In Syrian society, the concept of young people is still not well-defined at all. Syrian society is now discovering the power of young people and their needs, because they are the majority of the population and they are the future of the society (at the international level too).

### 2.2 General statistics: Demography, young people's rights and conditions

The social and economic situation in Syria has been changing quickly and radically since the nomination of Bashar al-Assad as new Head of State in July 2000<sup>(2)</sup>. Counting on the support of the security services, he began to prepare the instruments for political and economic liberalisation ("Document on the priorities of government action", March 4, 2003). The new President aims to reform the bureaucracy, the banking and foreign exchange systems, and to encourage foreign investment in the country. While he believes that western democracy is not a suitable model for Syria, he would like for Syria to modernise as soon as possible within the framework of stability that has characterised it since 1971. In March 2001, Syria passed a new Banking Law (Law n. 28/2001) that, for the first time since the early 1960's, paved the way for the establishment of private banks, either national banks or branches of foreign banks. This has been a strong sign of opening the country to the foreign investments and of change in the national economic system. The government has stated its intention to reform, but at the moment it lacks both an overall programme and a strong base upon which to start working. In recent years Syria has significantly improved its relationship with international organisations such as with the European Union, United Nations (UN), World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nation (FAO), World Health Organisation (WHO), International Monetary Fund (IMF).

(1) United Nations educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, Empowering Youth through National Policies, Euromesco, Paris, 2004.

(2) The nomination was ratified by a popular referendum in the same year.

The current situation represents a nation facing big challenges in terms of employability, cultural identity and active participation of young people. This rapid societal change is affecting the urban area more than the rural area: in this sense, it is increasing migration to the urban areas as well as increasing the gap between them<sup>(3)</sup>. Youth Policy in Syria is becoming a high priority because young people constitute a population majority in the country and they will represent tomorrow's elite and decision-makers. Active participation in Syrian society is not still easy, but associations and NGOs are developing strategies and projects in order to be more visible and powerful in this changing process. Unemployment in Syria is essentially a youth issue with an important gender dimension. For this reason, young people rely heavily on their families and social connections to look for and obtain a stable job. The educational system in Syria has not been providing the young generation with the occupational skills they need to succeed in the job market. The incompatibility between the skills of job seekers and the needs of employers has contributed to low returns on education and created an incentive for young people to drop out of school.

Syria is a lower middle-income country. Adjusted for purchasing power parity, its income per capita was about \$3,400 in 2003 and \$3,808 in 2005<sup>(4)</sup>. The rural population constituted 49% of the population in 2005. Poverty in Syria is fairly low with nearly 30% of the population clustered just above or below the poverty line and is more common in rural areas. A recent assessment of rural poverty in the region, conducted by International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), found that half of Syria's poor rural households depend on wages for their income. One third of rural poor people cultivates crops and raises livestock to obtain income. The incidence of poverty is lowest among the 20% of rural people who rely on mixed, or multiple, sources of income. Half of the households in Syria own land, but 70% of landholdings amount to less than 3 hectares. Poor people generally do not own land, but rent or share their crop.

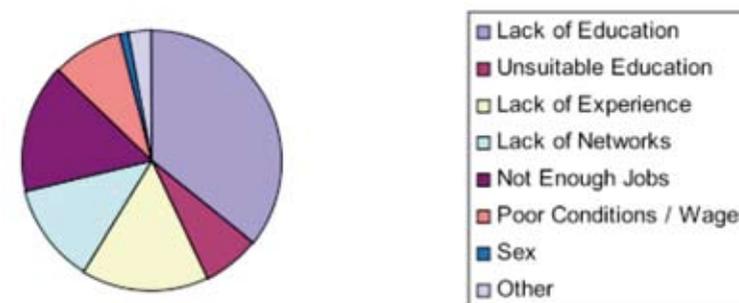
Fewer girls than boys are enrolled in schools, and women bear a heavy workload that combines household tasks with productive activities in agriculture. In rural areas, almost 50% of the labour force is employed in agriculture. Overall, about 20% of young men are unemployed, with the result that many Syrian workers migrate to Lebanon to find employment. Over the past five years, the Syrian government has initiated a series of reforms to help the country's transition toward a "social market economy." The government has begun introducing public sector employment retrenchment policies, removed barriers to private sector entry for most industries, permitted the development of private secondary schools, universities and banks and has introduced legislation to reform the country's labour laws. These reforms have started a quick process of social change at economic but also at social and cultural levels.

As with other countries in the Middle East, a demographic wave is moving through the Syrian population creating a youth overpopulation. The share of youth in the Syrian population peaked at 25.4% in 2005 presenting challenges in terms of job creation for young people. The population between 0-14 years was 33% in 2006. The annual population growth rate in 2005 was 2,5%<sup>(5)</sup>. Over 98% of young men are economically active (in school, employed or looking for work). Among young women, the inactivity rate increases from 2% at age 11 to 24% by age 15 to 73% by age 29. Labour force

outcomes are correlated with educational attainment. Activity rates are near 99% for young men (age 15-29) at all levels of educational attainment except for illiterate persons who have activity rates of only 84% due to seasonable jobs. The activity rate among young women (ages 15-29) increases substantially with the level of educational attainment from 36% for primary school to over 80% for those who have completed post-secondary school<sup>(6)</sup>. The unemployment rate among youth (ages 15-24) in Syria stood at 26% in 2002. The specificity of Syria is that the unemployment rate among youth is more than six times higher than among adults. However, this high ratio is the result of relatively low unemployment rates among Syrian adults (4%). Syrian youth face a difficult transition to regular employment. A high youth unemployment rate is mainly the result of high labour supply pressures, weak labour demand in both public and private sectors and mismatches between the skills and geographic location of youth and the skills demanded by employers. In 2002, unemployed young people constituted 77% of all the working-age unemployed people in Syria. The young women were less than half as likely to participate in the labour force compared to young men (30 versus 67%) and nearly twice as likely to be unemployed (39 versus 21%). A large majority of Syrian youth appear to spend more than a year searching for work. Possible reasons for this critical situation in the labour market could be the following:

1. Demographic factors: starting in the 1960s, high fertility rates combined with lower infant mortality and higher life expectancy raised the population growth in Syria as in other Middle Eastern Countries. The 15 to 29 age group peaked at 32% of the total of population in 2005, up from 27% in 1985.
2. Increase in the female labour force participation rate: the rate doubled between 1980 and 2005.
3. Degree of internal and international migration: emigration by Syrian youth to other countries means less competition for jobs in Syria, but higher migration within Syria results in higher competition for jobs in specific areas of the country particularly around the urban areas (Damascus and Aleppo).
4. Educational offers: the Syrian public schools seem not to be able to support the young people in entering the labour market (in particularly the private sector). Private schools are too expensive for the majority of families.

Table 1: Difficulties in searching for a job



Source: Kebbani Nader and Kamel Noura, Youth Exclusion in Syria: Social, Economic and Institutional Dimensions.

(6) Kebbani Nader and Kamel Noura, Youth Exclusion in Syria: Social, Economic and Institutional Dimensions, Brookings, Dubai, 2007.

(3) Poverty affects 11.4% of people in Syria and is more common in rural areas where 62% of all of the country's poor people live.

Poverty is deepest and most widespread in the north-eastern part of the country.

(4) World Bank World Development Indicators (<http://web.worldbank.org>)

(5) World Bank World Development Indicators (<http://web.worldbank.org/>)

Syrian young people consider a “good job” to be one in the public sector: over 80% of unemployed youths (15-29 years) in 2003 indicated that they were interested in a public sector job. By comparison, only 34% were interested in a private sector job. Faced with weak labour demand, youth may prefer trying to start their own businesses. By the age of 29, over 40% of young men in Syria were self-employed or had their own business. But years of heavy regulation of private sector activities contributes to an adverse business climate in the country. The number of women who have their own businesses is virtually nil (1%). In fact, the “dream” for women is a job in the public sector (over 50% between 19-29 years of age).

Most post-secondary education is state-provided, but legislation passed in 2001, as mentioned before, allows the establishment of some private universities and colleges<sup>(7)</sup>. Resources for education have risen in absolute terms over the past decade, but lag behind the rate of population growth. Showing an increase over 2002, 8.6% of the state spending budget was earmarked for education in 2003. Six years of primary school for children aged 6–11 years are free and compulsory and enrolment is near 100% for both boys and girls; near 3% of boys and girls fail to enrol in the primary schools, 100% of children complete a full course of primary education. As the UNESCO Statistics indicate 61% of girls and 64% of boys are enrolled in the secondary schools. As of 2006, the literacy rate was 79.8%, 86.0% for men and 73.6% for women. As a general remark, it is interesting to notice that 82,5% of adults and 93,3% of youth are literate<sup>(8)</sup>. The major differences between sexes are in respect to labour market outcomes. First, young women are far more likely to transition from school to inactivity as opposed to the labour force. This does not mean that women are not busy with household activities, only that they are not active in the labour force. Labour market inactivity rates between women increase from 2% by age 11, to 24% by age 15. Also in this regard, an interesting research of Euromesco<sup>(9)</sup> in 2007 about youth participation in the reforms in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, affirms that the majority of the young people interviewed were still living with their parents. Based on Sarabi’s<sup>(10)</sup> structural analysis of the Arab societies, it is legitimate to deduce that young people are still affected by their parents’ decisions on several topics. This is also coupled with another aspect of the patriarchal family as Sarabi defines the Arab one: economic dependence. According to the statistics, most of the young people remain unemployed or do not have enough economic power to leave the house of their parents.

The crime rate in Syria is low compared to industrialized countries. Between 1995 and 1999, according to INTERPOL data, the murder rate decreased from 1.09 to 0.95 per 100,000 population, a decrease of 12.8 %. The rate of robbery decreased from 0.26 to 0.07, a decrease of 73.1 %. The rate of motor vehicle theft decreased from 2.82 to 2.69, a decrease of 4.6 %. The rate of total index offenses decreased from 30.25 to 28.96 a decrease of 4.3 %<sup>(11)</sup>.

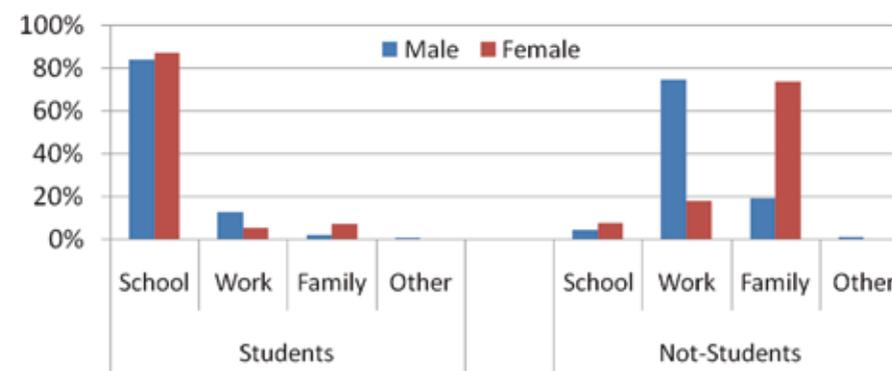
## 2.3 Youth culture and trends

The education system and employment are the two turning points for young people in contemporary Syrian society.

Young people do not easily find their own space in society for expressing their opinions or having their own experiences (if they have to respect the home’s rules and roles). They need their own space for self-expression. A big role in this case is played by the Universities because they allow a certain active participation in the voting process and in making decisions in the council of students, but, in Syria, it is still a limited experience. Another big role in this process of political awareness is played by the wide diffusion of the Internet. This media is very effective: for many young people it is the only way to communicate with other people inside and outside the country and to better understand the political situation in the Middle East and in the world. This process is very important to allow young people to become active citizens in their country. The Euromesco research affirms that a large number of young people interviewed believe that change is impossible and that stagnation, which has been prevailing for years, will remain for years to come. Yet, some do believe that political transformation is possible, but seem to be waiting for someone to bring change during a transition phase.

According to the School to Work Transition Survey data<sup>(12)</sup>, nearly 40% of the young men surveyed identified work as the most important goal in their lives compared with only 12% of the women. By contrast, more than 50% of the women ranked family and marriage as their most important goal compared with 25% of the men. Almost equal percentages ranked education as most important. The priorities of youth are certainly influenced by their families and the environment in which they were raised and socialised.

Table 2: Syria Youth’s Priorities



Source: Kebbani Nader and Kamel Noura, Youth Exclusion in Syria: Social, Economic and Institutional Dimensions.

(7) The private schools normally offer better curricula.

(8) [http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=121&IF\\_Language=eng&BR\\_Country=7600&BR\\_Region=40525](http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=121&IF_Language=eng&BR_Country=7600&BR_Region=40525)

(9) Mouawad Jamil, Young People as Actors of Political Reform. The case of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, Euromesco, 2007.

(10) Sharabi is presenting a complex reading of the Arab society and the structure of the families.

Sharabi Hisham, Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society, Oxford University Press, 1988.

(11) [http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/rwinslow/asia\\_pacific/syria.html](http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/rwinslow/asia_pacific/syria.html)

(12) The 2005 School to Work Transition Survey in Kebbani Nader and Kamel Noura, Youth Exclusion in Syria: Social, Economic and Institutional Dimensions, Brookings, Dubai, 2007

The situation of economic fragility is creating a longer period of dependence of young people on their own families and great difficulties in actively taking part in the civil society. The family forms a key support network for Syrian young people. Young people from low income households have little choice but to work to support themselves and their families. Those from middle or high-income families can afford to be more selective in their labour market choices and to wait for a good job. There is not any financial support from the government for young people searching their first job. Family support is important in ways distinct from familial circumstance. Young Syrians rely heavily on family connections to secure employment and assist with housing and credit in preparation for marriage. In fact, marriage is strongly influenced by the family. Marriage in Arab countries is still viewed as a "social and economic contract between two families" and marriage costs, housing the most important among them are usually expected of and supplied by the groom and his family. Family status, as reflected by earnings and reputation, play a role in marriage in Syria. Marriage may be a medium for both sustaining economic and social status. In addition, since many young women, and their families, expect husbands to be responsible for earning an income and providing housing, young wives may exit the labour force after marriage, even if they were previously employed.

## 2.4 Young people's needs and challenges

The young people request a better educational system more adapted to the new labour market. There is a big gap between the school system today and skills and competencies needed to work in the private (not public) sector.

The lack of educational qualification and unsuitable education appear to be the most significant obstacles to finding a good job. The National Report of Syrian Arab Republic on "Education for all," compiled by the Ministry of Education, initiated a reflection about the possible strategies for developing the French educational system into a new one. The report notes that the Syrian Republic is witness to radical political, economic, social and educational changes, namely after the election of the new president. For this reason, it is "time to find modern educational formulas that could match and interact with the progressive evolutions. The objective is to bind the educational process with the global development in order to meet the challenges and overcome the setbacks<sup>(13)</sup>." The Public Schools and Universities seem not to be coherent with the new historical period, but the Private ones are expensive. The young people need to be trained in a new educational system that can support them not only in finding a good job, but also in creating their own projects in life.

Following this topic, young people need more space to be active in civil society through associations and NGOs. These are still in a process of definition because it is not easy to create an association. There are not many Centres where the young people can meet and enjoy some of the activities proposed for them. Most of these Centres belong to the Revolutionary Youth Union, the national organisation responsible for youth activities<sup>(14)</sup>. RYU is also trying to experiment with new proposals and new activities. There is a big desire to better understand the needs of young people for developing a new possible strategy and opportunities.

As mentioned above, the conditions for succeeding in the labour market are not so easy because many young people want to start their own businesses but the regulation is very strict and there is no support in the start-up phase from the state. The number of days needed and the minimum capital requirement are the major barriers to starting a business. More than twice the number of days is needed to start a business in Syria than in other countries in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Tax and bureaucratic obstacles have encouraged many entrepreneurs to choose to operate in the informal economy<sup>(15)</sup>. A major reform was introduced in 2000 when the government revised the key Investment Law n.10.

Access to loans remains a problem in Syria. The regulatory framework of the banking system remains undeveloped, impeding the development of the already weak private sector. Among public sector banks, conditions for approving loans are prohibitive. Although private banks were allowed to open and operate in Syria since the beginning of 2003, their services are still limited. There is not an efficient banking system that can support young people in starting their own life without the support of their families. This means that only the young people coming from a middle-upper class have the possibility to realise their projects. The legal framework in Syria presents special challenges for youth in term of economic inclusion.

Another challenge for Syrian youth is housing. Between the 1990s and the 2000s, a 100-square meter property in urban Damascus was priced between \$40.000 and \$80.000<sup>(16)</sup>. Average salaries for young people in Syria are between \$95 and \$145 per month. A young employee needs to save his or her entire income for sixteen to thirty-three years to be able to purchase property in urban areas in Damascus. The prices in the rural areas of Damascus, however, were half the cost of those in urban areas. Public housing projects offer lower prices and a longer instalment period compared to the market. These projects still require monthly payments that are not affordable for young employees with one source of income. In the same time, the high cost of buying or renting formal housing units and limited access to credit have combined to exclude young people from accessing housing without the financial support of their families. Since young men are expected to provide housing in the event of marriage, the priority of the families is to support their male children. Most young women, therefore, are dependent on their own parents or husbands.

Regarding the minimum age for marriage (18 years for young man and 17 years for young woman), compulsory education has had also a big effect at the social level in the past, as the practice of early marriage had a negative influence on primary school attendance. This was the reason for the children's failure to continue their education up to the secondary stage. However, this phenomenon is decreasing and, according to the estimates produced by the 2000, Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, the average marrying age for Syrian women has risen to 25.1 years of age. This is also the result of the national effort by several Organisations such as the Women's General Federation.

(13) The National Report of the Syrian Arab Republic on "Education for All", Year 2000 Evaluation, [www.unesco.org/education/wef/countryreport/syria/contents.html](http://www.unesco.org/education/wef/countryreport/syria/contents.html)

(14) Some years ago, the inscription to RYU was compulsory to all young people.

(15) Kebbani Nader and Zafiriz Tzannatos, "Labour and Human Resource Development", in Syrian Country Profile, Cairo, 2006.

(16) "Al Thaeira," in Syrian Report, 2006.

About the communication and means to find information (also coming from abroad), it is important to recognize that the government is still the only Internet Service Provider (ISP) in the country servicing 20,000 users in 2000. Access to international sites remains relatively unencumbered, but sites about Israel, human rights abuses in Syria, free e-mail sites, and some newspapers are routinely blocked by the government. However, many of the restrictions amount to little more than minor inconveniences as they are easily bypassed through simple navigation. There are some government-licensed Internet cafés in use.

The young people need spaces where they can meet each other, but they also need adults outside of family and schools as referents. There are not many centres in Syria, but some associations are starting to develop and increase their field of activity. They also need more space for expressing their own opinions and for being more active in the local community. But the big challenge for young people is that the State of Emergency which has been in force since 1963 severely restricts personal liberties. The Emergency Law authorises the prosecution of anyone “opposing the goal of revolution”. In fact, the Constitution guarantees the freedom, but the Emergency Law restricts its exercise.

## 3. STRUCTURAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND LEGISLATIVE ASPECTS OF YOUTH POLICY

### 3.1 Provisions

The Syrian Constitution<sup>(17)</sup> affirms that every child is entitled to an education and that education is compulsory and free of charge at the primary stage. The Compulsory Education Act n.35 of 1981 makes education compulsory for all Syrian children, boys and girls, who are between the ages of 6 and 12 and requires their legal guardians to enrol their children in primary school.

There is universal suffrage for those 18 years and older. Article 54, in fact, defines voters as citizens of at least 18 years of age who are listed in the civil status register and who meet the conditions specified in the election law. Article 26 of the Constitution says that every citizen has the right to participate in the political, economic, social, and cultural life. The law regulates this participation. Women can actively participate in all areas of social and political life as declared in the article 45: “The state guarantees women all opportunities enabling them to fully and effectively participate in the political, social, cultural, and economic life. The state removes the restrictions that prevent women’s development and participation in building the socialist Arab society.” The Syrian Personal Status Law 59 of 1959 (amended by Law 34 of 1975) is essentially a codified sharia law with specific exceptions for Druze, Christians and Jews. It is applied to Muslims by Sharia courts while Druze, Christians and Jews have their own courts.

With regard to the link between the minimum age for employment, legislation has been enacted to prohibit the employment of young persons who are under 12 years old (the Labour Code n.91 of 1959, the Agricultural Relation Act n.134 of 1984, Legislative Decree n.13 of 3 April 1982 concerning the employment of children in the home and the State Employment Statute n.1 of 1985). The Syrian Arab Republic is undertaking a study to raise the minimum age for employment of minors to 15 years of age in preparation for the ratification of the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention 1999. The age for admission to employment is legally set at 18 years in accordance with Article 7 of the State Employment Status. Any violation of this provision is punishable under the terms of Legislative Decree n.13 of 3 April 1982. Therefore, there are several decisions about the question of juvenile employment left to the jurisdiction of the Minister of Labour and the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister promulgated the Decision n.3803 of 20 November 1985 approving the models and rules of procedure for all public bodies. The said rules emphasised a number of principles including the following: “Juvenile” means any male or female person less than 12 years of age. It is prohibited to employ a person less than 12 years of age in any occupation and persons less than 15 years of age must not be employed in production work. It is prohibited to assign a juvenile to operate dangerous machines and equipment. The rules prohibit the employment of juveniles in a number of occupations including cotton-ginning, printing and mining. The rules also prohibit the employment of juveniles between 15 and 18 years old to carry, push or pull loads exceeding certain weight limits.

(17) Syria has one of the oldest constitutional traditions in the Arab world, dating back to 1920. The present Constitution was approved on 13 March 1973.

Syrian Law makes a distinction between males and females concerning marriageable age. Article 16 of the Personal Status Act stipulates: "The age of eligibility for marriage is 18 in the case of young men and 17 years in the case of young women". Below this age, marriage may be authorised subject to the conditions laid down in article 18 of Personal Status Act.

The courts of general jurisdiction in Syria are divided into two levels: the one which is responsible for young people is the Juvenile Courts ('Mahakim al-ahdath') and Customs Courts ('Mahakim al.jumrukiyya')<sup>(18)</sup>. Under the term of the Juveniles Act, children begin to have legal responsibility after attaining the age of 7 years (art. 2) and cannot be held criminally liable until they have reached the age of 15 (art. 29). There is no sex-based distinction in the definition of the age of responsibility. The Juvenile Delinquents Act n.18 of 20 March 1974 divides the young people into the following categories in accordance with legal and criminal responsibility:

1. Children less than 7 years of age are defined as "incapable of discernment": they are absolved of responsibility of any act. Children of this category cannot be tried, arrested or interrogated, nor can general proceedings be taken against them.
2. Adolescents from 7 to 15 years: they cannot be sentenced to penalties for acts committed, but may be subject to special reform measures. The purpose of these reforms is that the child is safely reintegrated into society upon release.
3. Adolescents from 15 to 18 years: the penalties are applied concerning these juveniles only in one case, namely where they perpetrate a legally designated criminal offence. The penalties are lighter than those imposed on adults who committed the same offence. Otherwise, if a juvenile over the age of 15 years commits a misdemeanour, he or she is not liable to penalties, but only to reform and welfare measures<sup>(19)</sup>.

In Syria, there are institutes for minors in conflict with the law. Some of the youngsters in these institutes are "street children". This term refers to children who spend most or all of their time in the street away from their families. They may do so to work and support their families economically or may have escaped abusive environments. It is difficult to obtain information for a complete statistical analysis, but the closest indicators are the one related to the children in conflict with the law, beggars and child labour and it is suggested from these sources that there were just over 480 children (233 male and 248 female) arrested for these offences in Damascus in 2003. Most children in Damascus (22%) appear to come from the Aleppo 'governorate'<sup>(20)</sup>.

In Syria, 18 years is the age for compulsory military service (conscript service obligation - 30 months or 18 months in the Syrian Arab Navy); women are not conscripted but may volunteer to serve (2004).

## 3.2 Institutional approach to the Youth Sector

In Syria there is not, at the moment, any official Youth Policy, but an interesting and active movement is in the process of developing on this topic. Since last year, the Government, with the support of International Organisations, has been working on a National Youth Policy and on a Five-Year Development Plan. Youth will be the future leadership, but they are facing many challenges. This Plan will be the operative strategy about Youth Policy in Syria and it will define structures, activities, procedures and a budget for young people. The Plan will be the starting point for the development of laws and specific provisions about Youth Policy in Syria. This process is directed at all the young people between 12 and 18 years of age. There is not an official definition of Youth in the Laws, but it defines the minimum age for employment, schooling, marriage, voting and legal responsibility. The society is changing so fast that nobody is ready to give a structural answer but, for this reason, there is an increasing attention to projects.

There are several actors involved in this process: the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs (SCFA), Revolutionary Youth Union (RYU), and UN Organisations in Syria.

The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs (SCFA) is one of the most relevant Institutions regarding youth in Syria. The Commission was established in 2003 by a presidential decree as a corporate body affiliated directly to the Prime Minister with the aim of promoting the status of the Syrian family and enhancing its role in the human development process. It aims at promoting the status of the Syrian family interacting with national governmental institutions and NGOs. It also proposes amendments to family-related regulations. The Association has a president, a board of directors of 8 members and an administration staff. The President is nominated by a decree and presides over the board of directors and is directly accountable to the Prime Minister. The board of directors is nominated by the Prime Minister upon the proposal of the President. The board is responsible for suggesting development policies, national strategies, developing field communication plans, proposing nominees to attend conferences, preparing reports to be presented and approved by the Prime Minister, preparing studies and research, and establishing task-forces and committees. Young people (and children) are part of the responsibilities of the Commission as part of the strategy about family and human development. In 2007, UNFPA, with the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and the Syrian Planning Commission, conducted some situations analyses of all children and young people in Syria<sup>(21)</sup>. The outcome of the research will form the basis for the National Youth Plan and the Five-Year Development Plan regarding Young People. UNICEF, in collaboration with SCFA, has developed research about young people and their needs and perspectives. This research has been focus on the Syrian Associations working with young people and their projects and activities. To define the National Youth Policy, a national committee has been created in which the most relevant national actors as the SCFA, Revolutionary Youth Union, and Syrian Federation of Youth, etc. take part. The Syrian Commission on Family Affairs, in cooperation with relevant institutions and ministries, has submitted a draft National Plan of Action for the protection of children from violence, neglect and abuse, which was approved by the Council of Ministers in October 2005. The SCFA is centralised and it carries out its work in the country utilising functionaries and in cooperation with local associations and NGOs.

(21) The findings of this research were not available at the moment of the study visit in Syria.

(18) Brown Nathan "Arab Judicial Structures. A study presented to the United Nations Development Program. Programme on Governance in the Arab Region. POGAR", 2001.

(19) <http://www.right-to-education.org/content/age/syria.html>

(20) Report "Civil Society Forum for North Africa and the Middle East on Promoting and Protecting the Rights of Street Children", Cairo, 2004.

At national level, the Revolutionary Youth Union (RYU) is a key actor in working with young people. It has a particular status because it is not an institution but the Government has entrusted it with the task of coordinating the national youth policy of Syria<sup>(22)</sup> in cooperation with various youth-related ministries in the sector of education, health, employment, environment, sports, and with various youth and student organisations, especially the National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS)<sup>(23)</sup>.

The Revolutionary Youth Union is an educational and political organisation. It consists of youths between the ages of 13-35 from different backgrounds (labourers, farmers, students, etc.). It was established in 1968 and it works with the support of the party leadership and the State. The RYU has 1,200,000 members, of whom 40.77% are females and 59.33% males. Most of the members are students from secondary and high schools. The Union Commission consists of the General Assembly, the highest authority in the RYU, which is charged with dealing with general political issues in the country. Its decisions affect all party authorities including members and institutions. The General Assembly convenes once every five years. RYU leaders are the highest leadership authority in the Youth Union and are responsible for RYU activities. A Division represents the RYU in each governorate<sup>(24)</sup>. Groups represent the RYU at the city or administrative level. The RYU has around 4200 branches in Syria and it has some thematic clubs: 82 scientific clubs and 14 environmental clubs. It is usually involved in improving educational curricula as well as organising educational activities such as exhibitions, group discussions, lectures, scientific and entertainment activities, meeting with parents and vocational training. RYU is also interested in conducting research and surveys on youth problems such as smoking, drugs and educational achievement. In its Centre for Research, University lecturers are working as volunteers. They are completing a study about "Youth and Families". It is also interested in raising awareness among youth and the rest of population about specific issues such as: prevention of AIDS, Environment, Population and Reproductive Health, Youth and Law. RYU cooperates with other Governmental and non-governmental organisations (such as Syrian Family Planning Association, People's Council, State Planning Commission). It also cooperates with international organisations such as UNICEF, UNFPA, and International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). In recent years, the inscription to RYU is no longer compulsory, but it is the main and most widespread youth organisation at national level. The RYU is a centralised organisation with a large network spread across the country.

In the formal Educational Field the institutional actors involved in developing strategies for youth are the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education<sup>(25)</sup>. They are primarily responsible for all aspects of administration of the Syrian schools, colleges, and universities, including curricula development. Schooling is divided into 6 years of compulsory primary education, 3 years of lower secondary education, and 3 years of higher secondary education. General secondary education offers academic courses and prepares students for university entrance; the last 2 years of this stage are divided into literary and scientific streams. Vocational secondary training offers courses in industry, agriculture, commerce, and primary school-teacher training. The usual entrance age for higher secondary schooling is 15, but it is 14 for teacher training institutions.

The Ministry of Higher Education in 1984 supervised four universities, one each in Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia, and Homs. The University of Damascus, founded in 1923, has faculties of law, medicine, pharmacology, letters, dentistry, Islamic jurisprudence, agriculture, architecture, engineering, science, fine arts, commerce, and education. The Higher Institute for Social Work, established in 1962 to conduct research into social and economic problems, also was affiliated with the university. The resources for education, as the UNESCO Institute for Statistics indicates, accounted for 14.2 % of government's expenditure in 2006. It is more difficult to define the budget for young people and Youth Policy because there is not an official institution dealing specifically with this topic. The budget, in this case, is spread between Education and Social Affairs.

### 3.3 Non-formal education and youth work

There is no formal recognition of Non-Formal Education and Youth Work, but there are several projects that are starting to implement some parts of these methods. There are some associations that are developing activities based on experimentation and the reflection which follows within groups of young people. These have been, until now, isolated experiences and not within a precise theoretical framework, but it is definitely a starting point. The experience of some UN organisations which are implementing an experimental method about life skills in refugee camps is different. The associations are starting to improve their activities to further promote opportunities to do voluntary work. They are starting to organise some Volunteering Days for presenting their activities and receiving support from the local community. Most of the associations are working on a voluntary basis for promoting projects in different fields as schools, youth centres and so on. There are no specific laws or rules about volunteering work, but it seems to be part of the Youth National Plan for the next year.

Some Institutions are starting to promote non-formal activities in the country similar to those of the General Commission for Environmental Affairs which is very active at national level with projects and activities for young people and schools. The Ministry of Education, the SCFA and RYU are active in promoting projects for young people in their leisure time. This is an ongoing process based more on practice rather than on theory. A reflection process about the non-formal pedagogical approach and its implementation, has recently been implemented, but it is still at a starting point.

(22) May 2004.

(23) [http://www.infoyouth.org/cd\\_rmed/English/countrygov/syriagov.htm](http://www.infoyouth.org/cd_rmed/English/countrygov/syriagov.htm)

(24) Syria is divided into 14 governorates ('muhaazafat').

(25) [www.unesco.org/education/wef/countryreports/syria/rapport\\_1.html](http://www.unesco.org/education/wef/countryreports/syria/rapport_1.html)

## 4. THE YOUTH ASSOCIATIONS AND NGOs DEALING WITH YOUTH

In Syria it is still difficult to have a clear picture about the Associations and NGOs present and active in the national territory. UNICEF is finishing research about all the actors working with youth in Syria in the different domains.

There are not precise categories such as Youth Associations, but most of the Associations deal with young people and the youth presence on their boards is high. The main challenges for these associations are the sources of funding and the unclear rules about their status.

The 1958 Law on Associations and Private Societies (Law n.93) governs the establishment of any type of association or organisation in Syria. It was adopted during the short-lived union between Egypt and Syria as the United Arab Republic (1958-61). Many of the relevant legal details are contained in the implementation rules adopted by presidential decree in 1958 (Decision 1330 October 1958). In 1969, Syrian authorities amended certain provisions of the law through a legislative decree (n. 224) to further increase state control over associations. The Legislative Decree n.224 allowed the government to “merge” associations that do similar work and introduced the idea that there need not be more than one association doing any single type of work. Sometimes, this rule has been the reason to refuse to register new associations. The Law designated the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MoSAL) as the entity responsible for administering the law, including exercising the authority to dissolve groups. The Syrian security authorities are involved in verifying the status of the groups when they apply. When a group applies for registration, it has to fill in the required forms at MoSAL and undergoes an official inspection. The association can acquire legal recognition after MoSAL publishes its documents on the official registry (Articles 7 and 9 of Law n. 93). The MoSAL reviews the documentation of the association from a legal point of view and from the importance and need of its activities and asks the General Security (‘Amn ‘Am’) to conduct an investigation of the founders of the organisation (Article 6 of Executive Regulations). MoSAL has 60 days to respond to a registration request. Before issuing its registration, MoSAL has to get the opinion of Ministry of Interior and other actors that can be interested in the work of the association. Registration is compulsory and the law forbids unregistered groups from any activity (Article 8 of Law n.93). Anyone conducting any activity before registering can be subject to a term of imprisonment of up to three months. This is the procedure that all the potential associations have to follow in order to be recognised and to be able to act. There is a certain level of uncertainty in the process and in the real-time frame of the registration request.

It is difficult to have an official picture about organisations and associations dealing with youth. It is very interesting to notice that the associations are generally open to all the religions present in the country. Of course, there are some specificities, but there is no specific impediment to taking part in the activities proposed.

The main role in Youth Work outside school-time is assumed by the Revolutionary Youth Union (RYU). Its position is quite special, as mentioned above, because it is not an institution but was entrusted by the Government for developing national activities<sup>(26)</sup>. It is the most relevant and widespread organisation and it is working in all parts of the country (also in rural areas).

Under the umbrella of RYU but with independent committees, the Boy Scouts de Syria<sup>(27)</sup> have started their activities again after the reduction of their power in the country and their exclusion by the World Scout Movement (WOSM). In fact, the Boy Scouts de Syrie were removed from WOSM-membership in November 1999 due to non-payment of membership fees. Syria still participates in Scouting activities with Arab Region neighbours while seeking to return to WOSM status. The membership of the Scouts of Syria has increased substantially since 2005 and now totals 9,358 (1,170 Cub Scouts, 4,500 Scouts, 3,000 Advanced Scouts, 250 Rovers and 438 Adult Leaders). The association is open to boys and girls. The World Scout Bureau has received an application from the Scouts of Syria for re-recognition by the World Organisation. The Scouts of Syria is very active in delivering quality scouting, and has produced a number of documents and tools for the local, district and national levels. Local groups are very active and the range of their activities and programmes (environment, peace, refugees, children facing difficulties in school, etc.) are a good indicator of the group’s willingness to respond to the needs of young people in the community through the provision of what the group defines as good scouting.

The Young Syrian Federation is working with young people in High Schools and in Universities. It is nation-wide and is developing projects and training opportunities for Youth.

The Mouvement de Jeunesse Orthodoxe (MJO) is one of the most important and widespread Associations in Syria. It is strongly linked with the Lebanese branch.

MJO is developing several activities and cultural proposals in its centre: catechism, aid in homework, music activities, etc. The target group consists of orthodox young people. Specific target groups for the activities are defined according to the following age divisions:

- ages 4-6; ages 6-9; ages 9-12: three different groups, all belonging to the “children group”
- ages 12-15: college group.
- Then, there are some specific groups:
- “Family of Universities”,
- “Family of Workers”,
- “Group of Families”.

These three “groups” are doing volunteer activities to support the centre and the young people. They contribute collaboratively using their own “talents” in music, peer -to-peer support, etc. MJO have already participated in two Euromed Youth Projects involving young people with hearing and speech impediments. To develop new competencies for working with young people and target groups with special needs, MJO members are attending training courses in addition to sharing common background experiences.

(26) RYU is taking part in the Committee for the National Youth Plan.

(27) <http://www.scouts.org.sy>

Kufataro Foundation<sup>(28)</sup> and Abunour Mosque<sup>(29)</sup> play a big role in schooling education, in leisure time and in working with young people facing difficulties, but also in the Inter-religious Dialogue. They were founded 70 years ago as a small mosque at the foot of Kaasyoun's mountain and today have become both a foundation and mosque, consisting of nine floors and 18,000 square meters of space. The foundation includes three Islamic colleges, two Sharia institutes, research and translation centres, dormitories for males and females, a snack canteen, an extensive library and the Al Anssar charitable society which sponsors more than 2000 orphans. The organisations are proposing new curricula in the Schools and Universities. They also deliver scientific or technical lessons in French or English. The foundation offers programmes in Islam, the Islamic sciences and the Arabic language. Options exist for those at all levels of knowledge, including beginners and advanced students. Each year, 12,000 students from over 55 countries around the world study in the foundation. The Kufataro Foundation's department of Inter-religious Dialogue is very active in proposing activities and discussions not only for the students, but also in the local community with the cooperation of other associations.

A very interesting association that has numerous young people on its board is the Syrian Family Planning Association (SFPA). It was founded in Damascus on behalf of the General Assembly and deals with family planning and activity throughout the Syrian Arab Republic. Its aims are to preserve the family and provide health care and psychological and social assistance to families in line with article 44 of the Constitution. They manage a "clinic" in Damascus and in other cities in which young people can go in order to get information and to spend their leisure time. They have started to propose some specific activities for gathering youth together and developing new projects. In its Strategy Plan (2005/2010) there is a specific part about Young People in which SFPA explains that all categories of adolescents and young people aware of their rights and unable to make decisions and choices are given information about reproductive and sexual health. Their objectives are:

1. Strengthen the commitment and support for the rights and needs of young people in the area of reproductive and sexual health.
2. Development of youth participation in the governing bodies of the General Assembly in the preparation, management and development and implementation of programmes related to them.
3. Increasing access to integrated services with youth-friendly, gender-sensitive concepts of sex education and reproductive health in line with social values.
4. Increasing young people's access to reproductive health services in line with social values.
5. Work to overcome obstacles related to social and gender issues that affect public health and reproductive health rights of young females.

In Damascus, the number of associations dealing with cultural proposals, like Shams that are working to promote music culture among young people, is also growing.

Last year, the Syrian Environmental Association realised an interesting project in the centre of Damascus. They cleaned a large garbage area with only the support of volunteers and they created a botanical garden and opened a bar.

There are some organisations that are working with specific projects to support young people in the schools and in summer camps to acquire life skills needed to enter into the labour market and, perhaps, to start their own businesses.

One such organisation is named SHABAB (Strategy Highlighting and Building Abilities for Business). The members are all young people proposing ideas and projects in the schools with the aim of overcoming the gap of competencies of young people in the labour market. They work on the skills to find a job, how to manage job interviews and start up activities. They organise summer camps on the same topic too. In the last years, SHABAB produced some short-cut movies about life working in a job in the private sector. In fact, most young people would prefer a job in the public sector because there are many stereotypes about the private job world<sup>(30)</sup>. These short movies attempt to change the vision of the people about the private sector while valorising its opportunities.

Very active in the same field is the Syria seat of Junior Chamber International (JCI). JCI Syria was launched in 2005 and it quickly expanded. It currently has over 300 members and three local chapters in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs. Work in JCI Syria is dependent on the work and efforts of its members and volunteers and is divided into four areas of opportunities: Individual, Community, International and Business. Projects are conducted in each area. Some activities realised by JCI were the "Children Fair" (to build and encourage the principle of volunteering among students), "Job Fair for People with Special Needs", "Creative Young Entrepreneur Award" (CYEA), "Best Business Plan Competition" and a number of seminars on leadership skills, strategic planning, communication and various personal development subjects.

Currently, it is quite difficult to identify national networking of NGOs or Federations but it is a priority of many Syrian associations to develop a common working strategy. Perhaps the Future Youth Policy could support the creation of an official networking of all the associations working with young people.

(28) www.abunour.net

(29) In 1958, Sheikh Ahmad Kufaro was appointed First Mufti of Damascus and a member of the Supreme Council of Fatwa. In 1964, he was elected Grand Mufti of Syria and Head of the Supreme Council of Fatwa as well as of the Supreme Council of Waqf (religious endowments).

(30) These stereotypes are stronger among young women: the fear is the lack of respect from colleagues or from the boss.

## 5. THE EUROMED YOUTH PROGRAMME

The Euromed Youth Unit (EMYU) responsible for the development of the programme is located within the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs which is actually responsible for most of the Youth activities.

The EMYU, in the start up phase of the Programme, held some informative meetings as well as some trainings in Damascus and in rural areas. A strong impact is not evident, but they granted, in the last deadline, four projects out of five applications received. These projects will be implemented this summer, so it is not yet possible to verify their impact.

## 6. OTHER YOUTH SUPPORT MECHANISMS

In Syria there are several International Organisations working in cooperation with national Associations and with the Government on the topic of Youth Policy. Some of them, which have already been named, are UNICEF and UNFPA in addition to United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in Near East (UNRWA) and UNESCO. Also included are International NGOs like Movimondo. They are developing projects in partnership and supporting local community and local social workers (also in developing professional skills). Some projects focus on special target groups such as young Palestinians or Iraqis living in camps or on youth in conflict with the law.

Three years ago the UN agencies began a joint project in the Jabal Al-Hos, an area in North Syria marked by the scarcity of resources and low social development indicators. The six agencies (UNDP, UNICEF, WHO, UNFPA, FAO, and WFP) involved in this project support different components of the project, reflecting their own expertise.

WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA support activities such as the Healthy Villages Programme, Iron Fortification, School Health, IMCI, AIDS, etc. As an example, in early 2007, UNICEF launched a five-year project aimed at transforming the Syrian basic education schools into Child Friendly Schools (CFS). Child Friendly Schools aim to provide safe and happy learning spaces for children. They should be free of corporal punishment and strive to instil positive attitudes in their students. Building good character and helping students to achieve academically are central to the philosophy of CFS. Child Friendly Schools should be clean and hygienic centres of active learning. They are inclusive of all children, and reach out to the parents and the local communities to create networks of support to the education process. Following the successful adaptation of 53 UNRWA schools into Child Friendly Schools in 2006, UNICEF's Palestinian Programme expects to expand the experience to all UNRWA 118 schools. UNICEF and UNRWA are working to support Palestinian refugees in Syria, in particular in the areas of health and education. Of particularly strong relevance in the last years is the reflection about environment and climate change. Some organisations belong to the Agenda 21 programme and they have started to take part in international campaigns which include a large number of young people. Some activities are realised with the cooperation of the UN as in May 2008 when volunteers planted a forest near Damascus to increase biodiversity in their area. Staff from UNV, other UN agencies and many local volunteers were involved in the planting of 3,500 cedar, cypress, stone pine and wild pear trees in a nine-hectare plot. The creation of the 'United Nations Forest' took place in cooperation with the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform and was opened by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) representative Lina Mousa.

In the area of Reproductive Health for youth, including the prevention of HIV in line with the national AIDS programme, UNFPA will support the Revolutionary Youth Union in institutionalising peer education.

There are some charity institutions working in Syria such as the Karim Risa Said Foundation. This is a British foundation working in the social field with the objective to encourage the development of the Middle East through the education of young people for whom such opportunities would not otherwise be available and to support the development of disadvantaged children. They are active in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Iraq. The Foundation has run a Disability Programme in Syria since 1996 and works in close cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and local non-governmental organisations. They do not work directly with the target groups, but they support the local actors with training courses and project development.

Other NGOs, which are working with a specific target group, are groups such as Movimondo in the Al Ghazali Institute for minors in conflict with the law. They are developing a cultural project through shadow theatre.

## 7. PERCEPTION OF THE ACTORS

Young people, associations and leaders seem to share the feeling that their country is changing very fast. The general perception is that the social change is too fast and that they have not had time to adjust their educational system, their vocational training, or their understanding of life. Clearly, the young people have started to find opportunities to better realise their desires in the country, but they have not had enough support or enough skills to do it. The problem of lack of employment for young people is only one side of the complex issue. The National Institutions are well aware of this critical situation and they are trying to work to provide youth with more political and social power but also better and more updated educational preparation. All the studies realised by or for the Government are a concrete sign of their interest and awareness. The other side is that this change is also affecting their daily lives, their values and their relationships within their families. During the research in Damascus, most of the interviewees said that now the challenge is to support this young generation in this general transformation of the society. In the meantime, the gap between the two generations is increasing and there is a huge difference between their systems of values. This is linked to an identity crisis among Syrian young people: their culture is different from that of their parents, but they have no other model. As many representatives of Associations and youth leaders have said, the Western model is becoming very strong, at least in Damascus. It is a way for young people to find an alternative model to the traditional one but it is not enough for defining the complexity of this new generation. Young people are searching for ways to act and to live actively within their own society as a way to find or to define their own cultural model. The associations are developing projects that can give possible answers to these issues through different media (cultural, debate, etc.). This process is still in an embryonic stage. It is not yet sufficiently dispersed throughout the country. Young people need space where they can meet and discuss things (like in the MJO or the Syrian Family Association). The associations' representatives are aware about the importance to give to young people spaces for discussion and debate to support them in their personal development and in their relationship with families.

The inter-religious context is generally perceived by all the interviewees as an added value in Syria: something like a model for the other countries. Some NGO and foundations are promoting specific projects about this topic in networking with other local actors for supporting the cooperation between associations belonging to different faiths.

An issue is young people's perception of the young people of not having enough freedom in their daily lives: they refer to feeling controlled<sup>(31)</sup>. The leaders in the Governmental and in the national organisations feel the "pressure" of the new generation. They feel the responsibility to develop new and efficient tools for them to guarantee young people's employability, but also to support their participation in society. For this they need to implement specific programmes that can support young people in gaining the needed competencies to be active citizens in their country.

(31) The constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression and the right to have access to supervision and constructive criticism. It guarantees the rights of citizens to meet and demonstrate peacefully in accordance with the law. However, the State of Emergency which has been enforced since 1963, severely restricts personal liberties.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Syria is trying to define its new path in Youth Policy. The research developed in the last years, the efforts to define a National Youth Policy and a Five-Year Development Plan show this wish to improve a concrete plan for the young people in all the sectors. There is an interesting effort on the specific topic of volunteering with specific target groups such as people with less opportunities and women. The purpose of the National Youth Policy and the Five-Year Development Plan will be essentially to overcome this moment of uncertainty and lack of reference points. The young people need to be led toward new objectives and new cultural borders in respect to their identity and roots.

The other two key topics in contemporary Syria are the employment sector and the schooling system that are too old and not updated to the country's new economic system. These factors appear to be an important element in the study of Youth Policy in Syria. Young people rely heavily on family and social connections to look for and obtain stable jobs. Young people in Syria face difficulty in securing a good job and are therefore unable to participate fully in society. But without an appropriate education, it is not so easy to find a place in the society (not only in the labour market). Education is important to ensure that young people acquire the skills they need to navigate the changing economy and society. Educational institutions and associations can provide them with adequate support in this growing process in a changing country. They can also be a link between young people and their families: they need support to better understand each other because they no longer share the same cultural background. Young people seem to be in between two different cultural worlds: the traditions of their families and the model proposed by the Western world. They need to be prepared to face these changes and supported in understanding their own identity crossing these two worlds.

## ANNEXES

### Annex 1: Acknowledgements

The writer is grateful to all the actors involved in the interviews and in the projects' visits held in the region to discuss the concept note. The study tries to include all of their voices and opinions as much as possible. Last but not least, the writer would also like to thank all of those who contributed and participated in the various stages of the production of this study providing information, data and support in the redaction phase.

### Annex 2: Country profile (part 1)

|                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>Full name of the Country</b> | Syrian Arab Republic   |
| <b>Government Type</b>          | Presidential Republic  |
| <b>Area</b>                     | 185.000 Km   |
| <b>Capital City</b>             | Damascus   |
| <b>Other main cities</b>        | Aleppo, Latakia, Homs, Hama  |
| <b>Population</b>               | 19,405,000 (2007)<br>Note: in addition, about 40,000 people live in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights - 20,000 Arabs (18,000 Druze and 2,000 Alawites) and about 20,000 Israeli settlers (July 2008 est.) |
| <b>Gender Ratio (F/M)</b>       | F: 9,488,00                      M: 9,913,000  |
| <b>Ethnic composition</b>       | Arabs 90%, Kurds 5%, Armenians, Assyrians/Syriacs and other Christians 5%  |
| <b>Language</b>                 | Arabic (official); Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian widely understood; French, English somewhat understood   |
| <b>Religions</b>                | Sunni Muslim 74%, other Muslim (includes Alawite, Druze) 16%, Christian (various denominations) 10%, Jewish (tiny communities in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo)  |
| <b>Age Structure</b>            |  |
| <b>0-14</b>                     | 36.2% (M: 3,679,473 / F: 3,467,096)  |
| <b>15-24</b>                    | 60.5% (M: 6,119,459 / F: 5,822,376)  |
| <b>65 and over</b>              | 3.3% (M: 310,838 / M: 348,344) (2008 est.)   |
| <b>Median age</b>               | 21.4 years   |

## Annex 2: Country profile (part 2)

| Educational background (F/M ratio)            |  |              |
|---|--|--------------|
| <b>Primary</b>                                | F: near 100%   | M: near 100% |
| <b>Secondary</b>                              | F: 61%   | M: 64%       |
| <b>Tertiary</b>                               | F: 22%   | M: 22%       |
| <b>Literacy rate</b>                          | Youth: 93,3%   | Adult: 82,5% |
| Unemployment rate                             |  |              |
|   | Youth: 26%   | Adult: 4%    |
| Summary of age related regulations and rights |  |              |
| <b>Compulsory education (up to.....)</b>      | Education is free and compulsory from ages 6 to 11   |              |
| <b>Compulsory military service</b>            | 18 years of age for compulsory military service; conscript service obligation - 30 months (18 months in the Syrian Arab Navy); women are not conscripted but may volunteer to serve (2004) |              |
| <b>Legally employable (from...)</b>           | Generally from 12 years (person under 15 years of age must not be employed in production work)   |              |
| <b>Marriage without parental consent</b>      | The age of eligibility for marriage is 18 years in case of young men and 17 years in case of young women   |              |
| <b>Minimum voting age</b>                     | 18   |              |
| <b>Minimum age to be elected</b>              | 18   |              |
| <b>Driving licence</b>                        | 18   |              |
| <b>Local Currency/ Exchange rate (Euro)</b>   | 1 € = 60.1900 Syrian Pound   |              |

## Annex 3: List of Abbreviations

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| <b>EMYU</b>      | Euromed Youth Unit   |
| <b>EuroMeSCO</b> | Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission                              |
| <b>FAO</b>       | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation           |
| <b>IFAD</b>      | International Fund for Agricultural Development                  |
| <b>MoSAL</b>     | Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour                            |
| <b>MJO</b>       | Mouvement de Jeunesse Orthodoxe                                  |
| <b>NGO</b>       | Non Governmental Organisation                                    |
| <b>JCI</b>       | Junior Chamber International                                     |
| <b>OSAC</b>      | Overseas Security Advisory Council                               |
| <b>RYU</b>       | Revolutionary Youth Union  |
| <b>SCFA</b>      | Syrian Commission for Family Affairs                             |
| <b>SFPA</b>      | Syrian Family Planning Association                               |
| <b>SHABAB</b>    | Strategy Highlighting and Building Abilities for Business        |
| <b>UN</b>        | United Nations   |
| <b>UNDP</b>      | United Nations Development Programme                             |
| <b>UNESCO</b>    | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| <b>UNFPA</b>     | United Nations Population Fund                                   |
| <b>UNICEF</b>    | United Nations Children's Fund                                   |
| <b>UNRWA</b>     | United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees    |
| <b>UNIFEM</b>    | United Nation Development Fund for Women                         |
| <b>WFP</b>       | World Food Programme   |
| <b>WHO</b>       | World Health Organisation  |

## Annex 4: Glossary

**EuroMeSCo:** Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission. EuroMeSCo formally began in June 1996, with an inaugural conference in the Portuguese town of Sesimbra organised by the Instituto de Estudos Estratégicos e Internacionais (IEEI), which is based in Lisbon and now serves as the EuroMeSCo Secretariat and the operational base.

It was based on an earlier initiative, MeSCo - the Mediterranean Study Commission - organised by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome, with the support of the European Union, in February 1994. The purpose of MeSCo had been to encourage cooperation between research institutes dealing with policy and security issues around the Mediterranean basin, thus bringing together institutes from five southern European Union member-countries and their Southern Mediterranean counterparts, together with Cyprus and Malta.

**RYU:** Revolutionary Youth Union has been entrusted by the Government to coordinate the national youth policy of Syria in cooperation with various organisations and institutions.

**SCFA:** Syrian Commission for Family Affairs was established in 2003 by a presidential de-creed as a corporate body accountable directly to the Prime Minister with the aim of promoting the status of the Syrian family.

**UNDP:** United Nations Development Programme is the UN's global development network: an organization advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life.

**UNESCO:** United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization is a specialised United Nations agency and its aims are the contribution to global security and peace through collaboration and development of education science and culture.

**UNFPA:** United Nations Population Fund is an international development agency that promotes the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity. UNFPA supports countries in using population data for policies and programmes to reduce poverty and to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, every young person is free of HIV/AIDS, and every girl and woman is treated with dignity and respect.

**UNICEF:** United Nations Children's Fund is active in international projects and activities in humanitarian and development relief work for children in each country.

**UNRWA:** United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East is a relief and human development agency, providing education, healthcare, social services and emergency aid to over 4.6 million refugees living in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic.

**UNIFEM:** United Nations Development Fund for Women provides financial and technical assistance to innovative programmes and strategies to foster women's empowerment and gender equality.

**Youth:** The UN defines "youth" as people aged between 15 and 24 and young people as people aged between 10 and 19.

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