Youth Wellbeing in the Occupied Palestinian Territory: Facing Incredible Challenges During a Critical Period

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Introduction

Youth account for nearly one-sixth of the world’s population, where the proportion of youth is expected to increase over the coming decades. This population is important, not only because it constitutes a significant and growing proportion of the world’s population, but also because youth represent the future of society, and can play an important role in social, political, and economic development (1) nationally and globally. On a personal level, this period represents an important transitional period (2) that is often characterized by changes in social roles and responsibilities, setting the way for independence (2,3,4). Importantly, at the present time, many youth face significant internal and external challenges and stressors, often as a result of broader structural factors (1,2).

The challenges youth face and the opportunities they are offered are key in determining the future direction of any society, and in fact, the UN Population Division considers inadequate human capital investments and unemployment among youth to be a critical challenge for many countries. Understanding the needs of youth and the factors that determine their wellbeing² are important in formulating policies that invest in youth.

In the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), youth between the ages of 15-29 constitute roughly one third of the population (5). Despite their importance, Palestinian youth face significant difficulties or obstacles, including high unemployment, poor living conditions and heightened insecurity stemming from the Israeli military occupation (5, 6, 7). Furthermore, within Palestinian society, youth are marginalized and excluded from full participation in public and political life (8). They also face increasing social pressures caused by conservatism, patriarchy, gender discrimination and unequal distribution of social and political power (5). These

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²Well-being is a multifaceted, culturally and contextually sensitive concept and have different definitions and connotations. Mainly, it means feeling and functioning well. The WHO5 index for mental wellbeing used in the quantitative survey covers the constructs of positive mood, vitality and general interests.
challenges shape the environment in which Palestinian youth live through and navigate, and are likely to have adverse impacts on their wellbeing. Due to the important linkages between wellbeing and living a healthy and productive life, the sections that follow are guided by the following questions:

1. How do Palestinian youth define and assess their wellbeing?
2. What are the main determinants of youth’s wellbeing?
3. And, what can be done to improve the wellbeing of Palestinian Youth?

The qualitative findings revealed that Palestinian youth in general have a good conceptual understanding on the meaning of wellbeing, which could be very close to the various definitions found in literature. Palestinian youth definition of wellbeing revolve around the interaction between both physical and psychological health concepts, such as energy, strength, peace of mind, tranquility, vitality, stability, comfort, satisfaction, and happiness. As a youth from Jerusalem said referring to wellbeing “peace of mind and psychological, social and economic comfort”. Another participant from Rafah referred to wellbeing as “happiness, satisfaction and everything beautiful”.

Overall, the youth participating in the qualitative portion of the study felt that their wellbeing was lower than youth globally, but that it was better than youth in some Arab countries, especially those undergoing conflicts (like Syria and Iraq) and political strife (like Egypt). Based on the findings from the survey portion, Palestinian youth have a mean wellbeing score of about 59 points (out of 100), which indicates that Palestinian youth have low to average wellbeing. What is striking, however, is if we take the WHO guidelines into consideration, nearly 36% of Palestinian youth have low wellbeing⁴, and about 10% of Palestinian youth are in the extreme low wellbeing range, placing them at greater risk of mental illness.

We divided the determinants of youth wellbeing based on the results of the statistical analysis into the social dimension including family and broader social community, contextual factors that consist of political, economic and environmental dimensions and finally personal factors that interact with all other determinants. There were variations among youth in relation to the importance of each determinant on their wellbeing, but almost all youth reported that the interactions of these determinants with each other affect wellbeing. Diagram 1 illustrates the determinants of wellbeing and their interactions with each other.

**SOCIAL FACTORS:**

**Family support, positive family environment and trust in family and community are crucial for wellbeing**

“If a young person passed the childhood period with good quality upbringing and gained life skills she/he will grow in wellbeing”. ~ a young woman from Hebron

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³The ICPH research team used both quantitative and qualitative methods for this study. The quantitative part is based on a secondary statistical analysis of a collected data with young people aged 18-29 years from the West Bank and Gaza Strip (n=1353). For the qualitative part, we conducted 12 focus group discussions with youth of the same age group throughout the oPt.

⁴The WHO considers a score below 50 to indicate low wellbeing, and below 28 to be very low, possibly indicating ill mental health.
Another young man from Jerusalem said “Upbringing is the foundation, the first point”. The family environment was considered to be one of the most important determinants of wellbeing by youth. For youth, having a good relationship and trust with parents and other family members were key to wellbeing in addition to having a high degree of freedom, independence and appreciation. The extended family was also reported to have a strong influence: either positive influence through positive relationships, trust and support, or negative influence through direct interfering, negative comments or pressure on the youth or their close family, which could lead to restrictions, pressures and stress for youth especially women. While this finding is not surprising, the impact of having a negative home environment could be immense on the wellbeing according to youth, especially since the home is supposed to be a ‘haven’ that supports youth and builds their personality and capacity to deal with the broader challenges and stressors.

Community traditions as a source of control, restrictions and demands have negative effect on wellbeing

As one young woman from a village in the north stated: “everything you hear from the community affects you whether positive or negative”. Indeed, many youth reported the importance of social support and positive relationships with the community. However, pressures from traditions could have an important negative influence on the youth wellbeing. Especially in conservative communities, characterized as judgmental, demanding, gossiping and controlling communities that produce a considerable amount of pressure on youth and reduces their space of freedom and consequently their wellbeing.

What we want to highlight here for both the family and community contexts, the key for youth is an open and supportive environment that provides them with a reasonable degree of freedom.
Youth who report high levels of personal freedom, trust in their communities, and whose opinions their families take seriously have high levels of wellbeing

The findings from the focus group discussions confirmed our findings from the survey. If we compare youth with the same characteristics except for the social domain, we find that higher scores on the social domain is associated with a considerable increase in wellbeing. Youth with the lowest scores on the social domain questions have an average wellbeing score of about 38, placing them well below the WHO cut-off point (50), for low wellbeing. In contrast, youth with the highest possible scores in this domain have an average wellbeing score of around 74, which is considered to be a relatively moderate to high wellbeing score. This is a very big difference in scores, and highlights the importance of positive social relations for good wellbeing.

POLITICAL FACTORS:

Ongoing Israeli occupation, mobility restrictions, humiliation, feelings of insecurity and instability, siege and closure have negative effect on youth wellbeing.

From the quotes above it is clear that participants of the focus group revealed several aspects related to the Israeli occupation and its direct effect on their wellbeing and their lives in general; they focused on the Israeli mobility restrictions, humiliation and marginalization, and they also manifested the feelings of insecurity and instability. The restrictions imposed on the Palestinian population by the Israeli occupation further limits the space for youth to participate and actualize their potential.

Gazan youth in particular reported the great effect of the blockade and closure on their lives and also on the shrinking opportunities for their future. The conditions also increase the sense of insecurity and uncertainty among youth, which have also been shown to have negative effects on health, including mental health. These results were not surprising, but they made the link between occupation and youth wellbeing more clear, either directly or through its interaction with other determinants of wellbeing.
Internal political repression, youth exclusion and marginalization, lack of freedom, wasta (nepotism) and corruption have negative effect on youth wellbeing

“The reality we live in is one where politics can lead you to get imprisoned, meaning it can cause problems, for example, if you are in a party or said anything that is different from the others (the mainstream). This might expose you to a problem even if you do not participate actively in the party, even a speech can cause problems. For example, I am a caricature artist but because I was arrested, I do not draw any political caricatures (anymore).”~ young man from Northwest Jerusalem village

“We have a problem here, whether in health, education or anything, there is something called wasta.”~ young woman from North West Bank village

Political confidence was also an important determinant of wellbeing as reflected in the above quotes. As figure 1 shows, having no political confidence decreases youth wellbeing score by 13.4 points compared to youth with high political confidence (all other factors are equal for both categories). Figure 2 illustrates the effect of internal political confidence\(^5\) on youth wellbeing.

Political confidence consists of three measures: satisfaction with government efforts to provide employment opportunities for youth, confidence in institutions\(^6\), and youth perceptions of the importance/significance of youth in various institutions\(^7\).

The focus group discussions confirmed the statistical results. Many participants reflected their frustration about the lack of available space to participate politically, and restrictions on political freedoms and increasing political oppression. This was true for youth in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip.

Focus group participants extensively mentioned disappointment with public institutions. This included the perceived presence of wasta or nepotism and corruption in public institutions, which also affected work opportunities for youth. Many participants also mentioned their disappointment with the education system that seems to lack life skills teaching such as problem solving, self-confidence and critical thinking. This is in line with the statistical finding about the lack of confidence in government and political institutions.

\(^5\)Unfortunately, the survey did not include any questions on the Israeli occupation, which the qualitative findings indicate is an important dimension of the political domain

\(^6\)scale includes 8 institutions: security forces, police, courts, government, local councils/municipalities, political parties, parliament, and public civil services

\(^7\)voluntary organizations, political parties, local community, and whether political leaders took youth into consideration
ECONOMIC FACTORS:

Difficult economic conditions, unemployment, social inequality, inability to meet basic needs, insufficient incomes and inflated prices have negative effect on youth wellbeing

Broader difficult economic conditions, and especially unemployment, were considered to have a negative impact on youth wellbeing. Wasta, corruption and Israeli occupation strains on economy are main factors leading to unemployment. Here, the link between economic and political conditions was considered to be important. A young man from Hebron explained:

“We want to talk about youth, why is it that youth finish university and there are no jobs? It’s known, in Hebron there are about 3000[8] people and they employ about 40 so that leaves 2960 people unemployed, where will they go? They’ll go get married so they can get a permit and they go to Israel and find themselves in debt for 10 years into the future. This is not just. Right. Measure this on society as a whole.”

Inability to meet basic needs even if youth were employed was also seen as a factor contributing negatively to their wellbeing, as incomes in general were not proportionate with increasing prices. Youth also noted that social inequalities are also increasing and people who have money are usually treated better, and they have a greater access to their needs.

A young man from a village northwest of Jerusalem said:

PERSONAL FACTORS:

Personal resources are important for wellbeing

In the above, we outlined the key determinants of wellbeing among youth. During the focus group discussions, participants also highlighted key important personal attributes that they believed enhanced a person’s capacity to endure and overcome contextual adversities. These attributes are affected by all the above mentioned factors and contexts. They give youth a sense of control and agency in dealing with the environment, relieve the stress of daily life and the surrounding problematic or unsupportive circumstances, and can be built upon with the development of life skills and stress management techniques. This will eventually produce high wellbeing. What is also different here from the other domains is that unlike other determinants, personal traits and resources were seen to affect and be affected by wellbeing. So, while having high personal resources can help improve wellbeing, having good wellbeing was also seen to be protective of youth and helpful to preventing poor health.

8This was a number used by the participant to illustrate his point.
This policy brief emphasizes factors that the research team finds important to be addressed and that are reported by youth to be very important for improving wellbeing. These factors either affect youth wellbeing or are considered as important protective factor such as assets or resources that play an important role in youth's abilities to cope with contextual adversities that are difficult to be addressed.

There are four major contexts or levels of actions, which this policy brief recommends for all policy makers and civic leaders, based on the findings from the study.

### Neighborhood and Community
- Collaboration of all policy makers in all sectors, including universities, to raise awareness and secure resources to educate people and decision makers about wellbeing and its importance, and its socio-political determinants, through workshops, advertisements, public events and campaigns;
- The government, in collaboration with communities and municipalities, should create more safe and well-managed spaces for youth such as parks, sport clubs, museums, theaters, cultural centers etc. to practice recreational, physical and cultural activities and productive leisure time and positive emotions; an active and engaged life style and to also learn skills and improve talents, to interact and make friends and to release negative energy;
- Local governments should encourage and increase social and political participation of youth to ensure better representation, and advocacy for youths’ interests and needs;
- Civil society and the media organizations should facilitate social platforms for youth that target social problems and misconceptions that inversely affect the wellbeing of youth and contest entrenched patriarchy, social control, restrictions, and inequitable gender relations by promoting openness, acceptance, freedom and respect.

### Family
- Governmental and non-governmental organizations should establish programs that increase awareness about the needs of youth, and how to create more supportive home environments;
- Awareness campaigns should also work to target parents and the community more broadly in order to create a more supportive and encouraging environment for youth.

### Institutions
- The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with local organizations and experts, should further develop and reform the educational system to include life skills such as problem solving, self-efficacy, self-confidence and critical thinking;
- Conduct training activities for school teachers and counselors focusing on extracurricular activities for students and in how to provide a more innovative and supportive environment for youth;
- Strengthen the collaboration and the information system between the educational system and other sectors such as the labor market, agricultural and industrial sectors. This includes joint programs to communicate the needs, resources and the opportunities between all sectors to better manage and reduce unemployment and create more economic opportunities;
- Expand vocational training programs and work to increase the acceptability of these programs as an alternative to traditional education for some youth;
Expand psychosocial services within the Ministry of Health to better address psychosocial health needs;

The government should introduce programs that strengthen youth social and financial capital such as employment and social security and welfare policies to reduce inequality and ensure fair and equal access to resources and opportunities for youth and their families;

The government should also fight nepotism (wasta) and corruption and make jobs available based on qualifications and competition;

Increase programs for youth with disabilities focusing on integration into public and private associations;

Create and support local and international advocacy organizations that defend youth from the violations of the Israeli military occupation.

**References**