Marginalized Empowering the Marginalized: Egyptian Youths’ Voices on Civic Engagement

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Egypt: Demographics

– Population:
  • 82,999,000 (2009)
    – 99.6% Egyptian Nationals
    – 0.4% other nationalities
– Distribution of Religions:
  • 90% Muslim
  • 9% Coptic Christian
  • 1% Other [other sects of Christianity-other]

Source: The World Factbook, 2009 & 2010
Egyptian Youth

- “Youth Bulge:” 60% of population between age of 16-35 (El Rouby, 2007)
- Trends of marginalization:
  - Poor quality of public education & high illiteracy rates
  - 28.6% of population age 15+ is illiterate
  - Highest unemployment rates (compared to other age groups)
  - Low paying jobs (compared to other age groups)
  - Low job security and stability (compared to other age groups)
  - Delays in marriage and family formation
    - A significant means of transitioning into adulthood
  - Scarce opportunities for civic participation

Sources:
“Mapping organizations working with and for youth of Egypt”
“Youth exclusion in Egypt”

The American University in Cairo (AUC)

- Private Liberal Arts University
- English is the primary language of instruction
- 6 schools offering 30+ undergraduate major and 40+ minor specializations
- Attended by an estimated 5,500 students
  - majority upper-middle class Egyptian nationals
  - Fees amount to $7,119.97 USD/semester [15 credits]
  - more than what an average Egyptian can afford
  - limited scholarships are offered to public school students
  - An average of 500 int’l students from 70 different countries around the world

Source: www.aucegypt.edu

AUC Contd.

- Recently relocated to a $400 m state-of-the-art campus in New Cairo
  - new Cairo is an isolated Cairo district designed to be a predominantly middle-to-high-income residential community
- AUCian Youth
  - Experience social ‘marginalization’ as they are
    - predominantly English speaking
    - often perceived as snobby, westernized
    - sheltered or unexposed
    - Represent a small % of the population
Community Service at AUC

- 3,287 (52.9%) students are engaged in extra-curricular activities
- 520 (8.3%) students are engaged in community service activities
- 14 student-run community service organizations and projects addressing a wide range of social issues
- Community service at AUC dates back to 1995
- Activities include working with
  - Poor Cairo districts/communities
  - The elderly
  - Cancer patients
  - Orphans

Source: Office of Student Development End of Year Report, AY 09-10

Data

- Research Group formulated in Spring ’07
  - Looking at different modes of community engagement on campus
  - Based at AUC’s SAPE Department
  - Constituted of an inter-disciplinary group of students and faculty
- Modes of Data Collection:
  - 1 year of participant observation
  - 4 Focus Groups
    - Average of 6 members/group

Sample: 4 Focus Groups

- 20 participants from 4 community service clubs
  - Undergraduate AUC students
    - Leaders and members of student-run community service clubs
- Average participants/group = 5
- Mean age = 21
- Gender
  - 11 females
  - 9 males
- Nationalities:
  - 19 Egyptian participants
  - 1 Norwegian participant
Data Analysis

• Audio-recording the focus groups
• Transcribing focus groups into written manuscripts
• Grounded theory qualitative analysis

Club Activities

• 3 clubs working with poor Cairo communities
• 1 club working with Egypt based refugees
• All student groups are
  – teaching their target communities English and computer
  – Aiming for sustainable development of target communities
• 3 out of 4 groups are
  – Investing in children and youth
    • as the “next generation of change makers”

The Cycle

Joining clubs

Including themselves in Cairo

Creating an empowered sub-culture

Developing ownership

Including themselves in Cairo
Joining Clubs

• Encouraged by friends and family members
• Wanting to join any on-campus activity
• Wanting to do something useful

The “Community” of Community Service

• Students are creating their own sub-culture of community engagers which they perceive as
  – Unique
  – Distinct from the rest of AUC and the larger Cairo community
• They have a high sense of their sub-culture’s community as they express
  – A high sense of belongingness
  – A high “spirit”
  – A sense of unity and cohesion
  – Strong social ties

Themes of Empowerment

Unity & Circles of Support

• Working together for a vision
  “we know the clear vision, not only that but we also believe and are passionate about it, this vision, we believe that this is what we want to do, that this is what we want to achieve, this is what we dream about”
  Club B, Participant 5

• Supporting each other
  “we want to help each other get developed, we all help each other to benefit on all levels not just in the activities side”
  Club A, Participant 5

“as much as its professional is friendly, we can have a balance between the both, we travel together, we go out together, basically, its like a family in AUC”
  Club A, Participant 5
Themes of Empowerment

Responsibility and Ownership

• Feeling responsible for and having strong ownership of their work
  “Then it turns out to become like our responsibility, you can not leave the cases that you are working with and you become more in a relationship with them”
  Club D, Participant 2

  “I felt more responsible about, about [club name] itself and about my members. I felt like I have to be there for them, ask about them. I felt I am more responsible of the family”
  Club D, Participant 1

• Feeling responsible for spreading the message to other students
  “I really want to widen our circle, to get people, to involve more people in the community service, it is a big challenge”
  Club A, Participant 4

Themes of Empowerment

Personal Growth & Development

• Getting exposed to the real world
  “you have a better understanding of what Cairo is, it’s not just where we live...there are people there in the same city where you live, who have nothing”
  Club A, Participant 1

• Developing various skills
  “Communication skills, leadership skills, teamwork, time management. You get to learn about real life, you get to understand people more, whether your members or your peers, or people in Masr El A’dem you get to understand different lives, different people, you get to learn a lot...more than the theoretical studies, this is more practical, this is more real”
  Club A, Participant 2

Conclusion

• As students engage in community service they
  – create their own ways of integration within the larger Cairo community
  – create their own channels for civic engagement
Implications

- Looking at the community’s side of the story
- Carrying out 2 focus groups over the next academic year
- Sharing results with student clubs

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