



SUPPORTING YOUTH AS POSITIVE CHANGE AGENTS IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY TUNISIA

Children & Youth Case Study Series

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Introduction

On the street outside the governor's office in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, 26 year old Mohamad Bouazizi douses himself in gasoline. He has been beaten, abused by police, and stripped of the wares from his vegetable cart—his only livelihood and means of supporting his family. He tries to get his wares back, but the police demand bribes he can't afford. He seeks justice, but the governor refuses an audience with him. He snaps. "How do you expect me to make a living?" he screams at the governor's office as he lights a match. Within seconds, he burns. Within days, Tunisia burns with him. The Arab Spring begins.

Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation and subsequent death sparked the Tunisian Revolution. Long frustrated by a devastating unemployment rate, corruption, and no voice in government, masses of Tunisia's 4.2 million youthⁱ took to the streets. As protests raged on despite opposition, the original youth protesters found new allies; from laborers to lawyers, Tunisians from all walks of life made themselves heard. Together through burning clouds of tear gas, they chanted, "The people want to bring down the regime!"ⁱⁱ And against the force and the might of a government that fought to quiet them, the people succeeded. In January 2011, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fledⁱⁱⁱ and left Tunisia to the fate of a new generation. Democratic reforms swept the country, and after an unstable transition, Tunisia established a new government and elected new leaders. The actions of youth changed Tunisia forever. In the aftermath, they hoped their lives would improve and their futures would brighten.

But the revolution did not bring the sweeping transformation it had promised. Youth sought participation and voice in the new government, but an entrenched political culture of exclusivity and lack of dialogue lingered. The older generation of leaders rarely involved youth in the discussion or decision-making surrounding the transition^{iv}, and the process became tainted with an elitism that tasted bitterly familiar. Now, three years after the revolution, youth are left jaded and frustrated. According to a July 2013 *Al Jazeera* poll, less than two years after the president resigned, only 14% of the youth surveyed believed the revolution achieved its objectives.^v The conditions that drove Mohamed Bouazizi to self-immolation – high unemployment, corruption, a government culture that does not value dialogue with youth – still plague Tunisia today. An unemployment rate of 30%^{vi} among youth casts shadows on their futures. Driven out of official reforms, youth seek other platforms for their world-changing voices. An increasing number now channel their energy into participation through civil society organizations,^{vii} but, they often lack political action or advocacy experience and a minority of young Tunisians has used disruptive, polarizing, and occasionally violent means to express their political views. The youth-driven social movements and protests were successful at overthrowing the regime, but the youth of Tunisia realize that that systematic transformation takes time and requires more than a change in leadership. The young activists must now struggle to translate their expression of political grievance from protests into a broader political agenda.

As the country becomes increasingly polarized and as hardship conditions remain unabated, youth need to develop the skills and connections that will empower them to act as leaders, build their own capacities, solve problems without violence, and connect in reciprocal relationships with their local governments and adult counterparts. How can youth become the leaders who will solve problems

of today and tomorrow? How can youth pour their creative energy into building a better future for Tunisia if they have to work with a government that doesn't know how to listen? The long-term success of Tunisia's democratic and social transition depends on youth buying into a political process which represents their interests. The key question is: how can young people in Tunisia play an active role in politics and governance - beyond street protests - and how can they create and sustain new spaces in the political sphere where they themselves contribute to shaping the discourse?

Search for Common Ground's Approach

Search for Common Ground, the world's leading conflict transformation organization, maintains offices and relationships throughout the Middle East – North Africa region. SFCG established an office in Tunisia in 2011, in the wake of the revolution. Since its creation, SFCG's Tunis-based office has implemented programming to promote dialogue and cooperative solutions to Tunisia's problems as a viable alternative to violence and polarization. Since the revolution failed to bring the dramatic life changes youth wanted, cynics believe that youth in Tunisia can follow only one of two possible futures: they can fade away as victims, ignored by the new government and left to suffer the status quo; or they can take up arms and transform themselves into the violent villains their old government believed them to be.

But SFCG believes in a third option for Tunisia's youth, and youth everywhere. SFCG, with its experience over the past 32 years of supporting young people as partners in peacebuilding, knows that youth can be partners, leaders, and peacebuilders. Following an approach that proposed change on three levels, SFCG-Tunisia designed and implemented a youth leadership program to transform young Tunisians' relationships with their government, their communities, and themselves.

INDIVIDUAL CHANGE THEORY



HEALTH RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS THEORY



THE POLITICAL ELITES THEORY



The **goal** of the Youth Leaders' Councils Initiative was a new political culture in Tunisia, in which young people constructively contribute to peacebuilding and affect positive change through activism, advocacy, and reciprocal engagement with their communities and their governments.

Implementing a Strategy for Youth Leaders' Councils in Tunisia

SFCG-Tunisia designed and implemented the creation of Youth Leaders Councils (YLC) in fourteen of Tunisia's twenty-four governorates. The Youth Leaders' Councils, made-up of and managed by youth, became hubs for training, outreach, and activism. Through the YLC program, youth in Tunisia have participated in dialogues, mediations, and other events with each other, with community members, and with their leaders. Youth participants and the YLCs achieved these successes through a series of thoughtful activities designed and moderated by SFCG.

Forming the Councils

To empower the next generation of youth leaders, SFCG first had to find the individuals who best represented Tunisian youth. Participants had to be from all backgrounds to capture the diversity and complexity of Tunisian society, so the program coordinators put out calls to each targeted governorate. Man or woman, rich or poor, urban or rural, religious or secular, the project reached out to as many youth as possible and invited young people of all backgrounds to apply for a spot in their local council. The fresh, new approach proved enticing and appealing, as many youth applied for consideration. SFCG selected participants based on their potential, and with consideration for forming diverse and representative councils. After much deliberation, SFCG identified about fifteen youth, ages eighteen to thirty, from each governorate for a total of about 210 young participants. These young people formed the core group, the heartbeat of the project.

But it wasn't enough to bring these young people together and dive into trainings. If they were going to work together and gain traction within their communities and with their governments, they would first have to build healthy group relationships and reputations. SFCG worked with certain YLCs to build trust between members before activities began. SFCG also carefully considered the branding of the YLCs. Half of the field coordinators worked in remote home areas – a circumstance that had both positive and negative implications. The remoteness of the field coordinators made communication a challenge, but their locality proved helpful in solidifying local ownership of the councils and ensuring that each council was grounded in a local context. To further enhance a sense of local ownership and to assuage any fears of foreign interference, the YLCs operated under their own names. Instead of relying on the SFCG name and logo, the YLCs named themselves after their regions: and so the Ariana Youth Leaders' Council, the Jendouba Youth Leaders' Council, and a dozen other local youth groups were born.

"If we develop these techniques well and apply them, it will help us maintain good relations and promote social dialogue."

Training reflection of a Ben Arous youth leader

Trainings

With the councils formed, it was time to train the youth. After an intensive search, SFCG was able to hire competent trainers to teach the youth conflict resolution, leadership, and other

skills. All trainings followed the Common Ground model, which combines traditional leadership skills with the ability to resolve conflicts collaboratively by understanding differences and acting on commonalities. SFCG scheduled trainings all upfront at the beginning of the project in order to give youth a solid footing for the next phases. This strategy proved to have unintended negative consequences that became apparent as the project went on, since youth participation rates declined after the initial training phase. But the trainings were able to teach all of the core youth valuable skills that many of them carried on beyond the classroom to lead change in their communities. A series of more than 90 different trainings taught youth about media production, conflict analysis, group facilitation, leadership skills, and creating CSOs. The youth participants made good use of these lessons during the next stages of the project, whether it was through producing local radio segments or registering their YLC as an official organization.



YLC MEMBERS PARTICIPATE IN A LEADERSHIP TRAINING ACTIVITY.

Building Connections between Youth, Their Communities, & Their Governments^{viii}

After each YLC completed training, the young participants went to work in their communities. Each group had the freedom to identify and address the problems that were relevant to them, so while all YLC activities promoted common values of dialogue and youth partnership, the approaches varied from place to place. With each event, YLCs reached beyond the scope of their own circles in an attempt to strengthen bonds with the entire community. Some councils hosted roundtable discussions and invited other

community members to come take part in a conversation on how to solve a shared problem, while others organized dialogue efforts to help community members find common ground in their conflicts.

Through surveys, consultations, and social media campaigns, the YLCs made an effort to reach out to other youth and leverage their organizations as an opportunity for other youth to get inspired and involved in constructive activism.





THE YOUTH LEADERS' COUNCIL OF BIZERTE MAKES AN APPEARANCE ON A LOCAL RADIO STATION.

The stories of the YLCs demonstrate the positive impacts of the project and suggest space for improvement in future work.

Stories from the Youth Leaders' Councils^{ix}

SOUSSE

In *Sousse*, the local government refused to work with the YLC and maintained a general policy of isolation from CSOs. But the young people of Sousse were not content to let their government ignore civic voices. The Sousse YLC organized a series of public platforms to encourage interaction between citizens and government officials. These forums slowly thawed the icy relationship between the local government and its people and transformed the government's attitude towards working with CSOs. Members of the Sousse YLC were invited to participate in strategic planning processes, and the YLC was granted a seat on a number of local committees. Youth voices now speak as partners in the local Cultural Committee, Sports Committee, Youth Committee, and Heritage Preservation Committee.

"We are delighted to work with youth who have such a spirit of dialogue. We have already supported activities of the youth council and we will continue to work towards a sustainable partnership."

Sousse local government official

ARIANA

The YLC in *Ariana* hosted a roundtable to discuss issues facing the community. During the discussion, one of the attendees shared an idea that inspired the YLC to action. The community member suggested that the YLC should address the looming problem of unemployment in their governorate by teaching job skills to youth. Inspired by their community, the YLC brought the idea to life by partnering with various agencies, organizations, businesses, and citizens, who together organized a series of workshops. Sixty-five local youth were invited to get training on job search and entrepreneurship skills. The local government was so impressed with the initiative that they invited the Ariana YLC's young leaders to sit on the Ministry of Employment's

Advisory Committee.^x This event perfectly embodied the model of how the YLC project was intended to work: empowered and competent youth created opportunities for the community to come together; different actors shared their ideas in a dialogue; youth leaders implemented those ideas through careful management, strategizing and partnerships; and finally, local government saw the effectiveness of youth leaders and decided to open the door for youth to participate officially.

“[YLC] members started to work hand-in-hand with local officials to achieve the strategic objectives of each governorate and turn them into tangible actions.”

A local official

SIDI BOUZID

Some YLCs were even able to work as community mediators. In Sidi Bouzid, the birthplace of the revolution, tensions between CSOs and security officials smoldered with mistrust and tension. Sparks of violent outburst wounded the relationship further, and made the governorate an unstable and unhealthy environment for civic action. If they were ever going to truly engage with their government and community, the Sidi Bouzid YLC knew that they first had to do something to heal the relationship between police and CSOs. The YLC organized a roundtable and put their new common ground leadership skills to the test by mediating a dialogue between CSOs and police forces. The meeting could have been a violent disaster, but instead the YLC members were able to help both sides find common ground. Over 70 community members attended, including representatives from CSOs, the police, the National

Guard, the army, and the labor union of public security workers. The CSOs expressed their sympathy for the hardship and stress police had to face in their mission to keep order within the community. The YLC then proposed a code of ethics to improve the relationship between security forces and citizens, and the attending police supported this idea. After the event, the attendees nurtured the progress born during the initial roundtable. Community members hosted their own workshops to promote the new code of ethics while YLC members themselves engaged in dialogues with the governor’s representatives. CSO leaders now make fewer negative comments about the security sector, and the code of ethics gives interactions between citizens and police a new framework based on respect. Because of the YLC’s efforts, the relationship between CSOs and security forces is slowly taking a positive turn towards a more collaborative future.^{xi}

BEJA

After the YLC in *Beja* hosted a forum to discuss local economic development plans, a business investor approached the council. This investor had plans to build a new eco-hotel in Beja, but he explained to the YLC that local authorities had effectively blocked his efforts to initiate the project. He asked the YLC to please intervene. The Beja YLC mediated a meeting between the businessman and local officials, where both sides agreed to visit the proposed construction site, as well as consult with residents who would be impacted by the hotel construction. Finally, after much discussion, the hotel was approved. Due to the YLC’s successful intervention, local decision makers and the hotel investor found a mutually acceptable way forward for the proposed project, and Beja will gain a new tourist destination.

Transforming Attitudes and Relationships

Community actions by all fourteen of the YLCs laid the groundwork for communication and collaboration between youth, their communities, and their local governments. During the preliminary mid-term evaluation, SFCG interviewed 13 local officials to gauge whether or not their attitudes towards youth leadership and youth participation had changed. A majority of the responding officials reported positive views of the YLCs, and they saw YLCs as effective communication platforms for citizens and government officials.^{xii} In several provinces beyond those highlighted here, local authorities welcomed youth as partners, voluntarily approaching the councils. In three instances, the officials actively requested to meet or collaborate with YLCs. Many YLCs continue to have strong partnerships with local officials and regional agencies, including several ministries: Environment, Interior, Defense, Culture, Tourism, and Employment.



MEMBERS OF THE YLCs PARTICIPATE IN A GROUP ACTIVITY DURING THE CLOSING SESSION OF A NATIONAL MEETING.

Additional activities built relationships between the youth leaders themselves, and helped them on the path to becoming officially-recognized CSOs. SFCG – Tunisia organized national meetings to bring together youth from across the country. These meetings gave YLCs a chance to share their experiences, talk about their projects, and learn from one another. The meetings also encouraged networking and gave youth a sense of belonging to a national movement towards youth participation. SFCG facilitated the national meetings towards greater collaboration between the YLCs. After the national meetings, local YLCs followed one another’s Facebook pages to discuss national issues and to gain support and advice for their projects.

As the YLCs grew and strengthened their impacts, they also contributed to a strengthening of local civil society. By two years into the project, eight of the fourteen YLCs were operating as fully independent and officially registered youth-led CSOs.^{xiii} In some areas, the YLC is one of the few CSOs working on democracy, youth participation, and local governance. The YLCs also demonstrate through action the awareness that they are connected to a larger system of civil society. The Zaghouan YLC, for example, strengthened cooperation in their region by forming a network of local civil society groups. They organized an event, Non-profit Association Day, to increase CSO recruitment opportunities. One event participant described the day as “playing a vital role in strengthening the capacity of organizations in the region.” Zaghouan YLC continued to play a key role in the formal CSO network.^{xiv}

Challenges and Conflicts

Despite many successes, the project was not without its problems. Challenges ranged from limitations of the youth participants themselves, to sobering reminders of the polarized and unstable post-revolutionary tension in the country.

Youth participation in some of the YLCs waned and slumped as the project went on. This happened for a number of reasons, all of them issues that could have been addressed in the project's design. The activities failed to take participants' school schedules, religious holidays, and other youth obligations into account. Consequently, some youth lessened their involvement with the YLC during the height of the school year. Others participated in the YLC during the school year but then left the region once the school year ended. Additionally, there were some youth who joined the program only because they were interested in the trainings and they had no intention of engaging with the community activities. The project hosted all of the trainings up-front, so youth were easily able to get the training and then drop out of the project. A more strategic approach might have been to stagger the trainings and use them as an incentive to engage more youth into the project for the long-term.



THE TUNIS YLC HOSTS A COMMUNITY ROUNDTABLE ON CHILD LABOR.

Toxic suspicion of civic actions also hampered the program's operations. Many in Tunisia feel an instinctive mistrust of projects that use foreign funding. SFCG took steps to avoid this issue by enhancing local ownership of the project, but conflicts still arose nevertheless. During one event in Jendouba (a historically disenfranchised province) a group of attendees distributed prepared information that accused SFCG of maliciously targeting youth through US government funded programs. This tore holes in SFCG's fragile success in establishing local legitimacy and trust, and limited the activities the Jendouba YLC could safely organize. SFCG was temporarily forced to hold only closed meetings

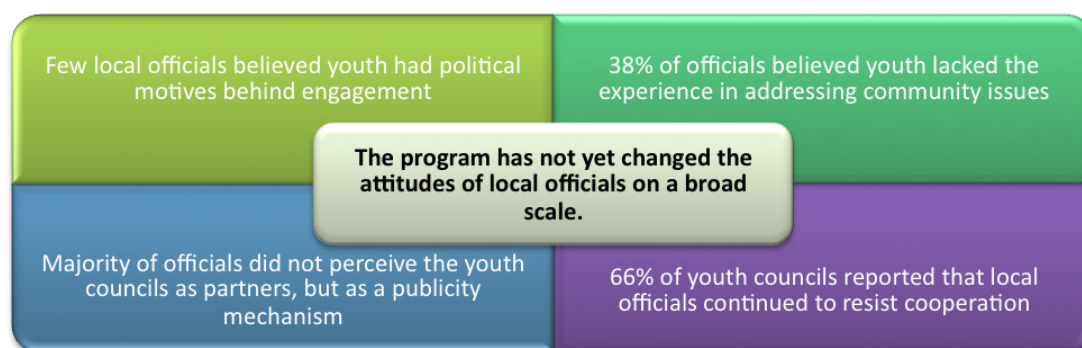
with YLC youth and local stakeholders. Despite the setback, the Jendouba YLC was able to build its reputation and continue activities. In December 2012, the Jendouba YLC became the first YLC to legally register as a CSO, and they continue to partner with SFCG.^{xv}

Conflicts sometimes came from within the YLCs themselves. In Tunis, the YLC had to stop activities for a full month after one YLC member expressed concerns over SFCG's foreign funding. This led to controversy and suspicion from within the YLC itself. SFCG could have addressed this early and mitigated the negative effects, but the field coordinator waited too long to address the issue with the group and the window of opportunity to stem the problem passed. As a result, SFCG had to invest more time and more resources into reviving the council and re-training its members, which could have been avoided by a timely response to the initial issue.^{xvi}

This project occurred against a backdrop of disruptive demonstrations, historical civil society

repression, and regional disparities. Though the achievements of the YLCs make it tempting to view the project through rose-colored lenses, multiple disruptions drove home the reality of the situation and the true need for better dialogue and constructive youth leadership. Strikes, protests, and political violence occasionally interrupted the program, such as when the Siliana YLC missed the first national meeting due to massive protests. Due to recent political unrest, these challenges have become a reality of working in Tunisia and the MENA region. Such disruptions should be handled carefully, and projects should only hold activities when it's safe for participants.

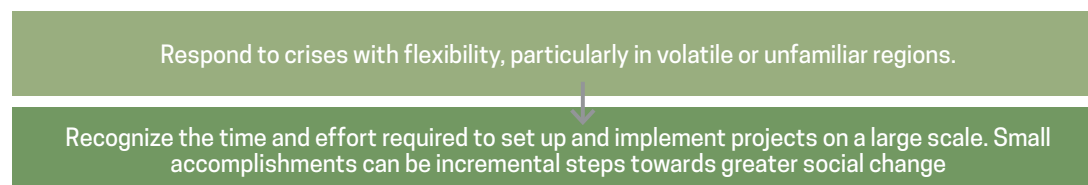
Finally, during midterm evaluation focus groups, youth participants highlighted that some local leaders were still unwilling to collaborate with youth. The statistics in the graphic below show that, despite several successful examples, some officials are still skeptical.



This result does not indicate failure of the project, but rather the need to commit long-term. Transformational change of entrenched behaviors and attitudes cannot happen overnight. The progress and achievements of the YLCs thus far demonstrates that youth can be positive leaders, local governments can open up to youth voices, communities can engage through youth-led initiatives, and change can happen. These changes take time and long-term intentional commitment, and the achievements of the YLCs highlight the worth and value of committing to youth.

Looking Forward: Conclusions and Lessons for Future Projects

Based on lessons accumulated throughout two and a half years of implementing the Tunisian Youth Leadership Program, the project yielded recommendations from both its successes and its shortcomings. These recommendations could improve future youth programs operating within similar contexts.





YLCs demonstrated that, when youth are supported they can accomplish extraordinary things, especially in places where their voices were previously marginalized and ignored. Youth leaders in Tunisia proved that they can effectively work with local officials and other citizens to accomplish meaningful change. YLC members have been recognized by peers, family members, elders, and local leaders as innovative problem solvers, strong partners, and skilled leaders. Youth Leadership Project participants made concrete, positive impacts on their own communities, showcasing the value of investing in youth nationally and internationally.

Endnotes

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