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*Youth Inclusion in Public Policy*

*Youth Engagement: a case study of the Youth Circles Initiative in the*

*UAE*

*Fatima Alowais, Dubai Public Policy Research Center(B'huth)©,*

*United Arab Emirates, fatima@bhuth.ae*

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# Acknowledgments

# Abstract

This paper studies the UAE youth policy perspective on youth engagement by examining relevant Emirates Youth Council initiatives, focusing on the Youth Circles initiative which was launched in April 2017 as a sustainable platform for discussing youth challenges. The paper considers the UAE youth policy development against the backdrop of the increasing emphasis on youth engagement as an answer to many regional challenges relevant to youth and the recalibration of GCC economies towards further independence from oil revenues.

Keywords: youth engagement, youth policy, youth participation, Youth Circles, degrees of youth participation, crowdsourcing, initiative.

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## Introduction

The youth bulge in the Middle East and North Africa has been a subject of discussion among researchers for nearly two decades, predating the Arab uprisings of 2011. Roudi (2001, p.1) suggested that the region's centrality to the rest of the world has increased interest in the implications of its fast paced demographic growth. The population growth trend in the region has started in the 20th century and reached its height within the 1950-2000 period, to become the highest growth rate among world regions, peaking at 3% during the eighties. The population has added an extra 280 million within those 50 years to reach 380 million in 2000, although it had stood at 100 million in 1950. One third of the Middle East population was under 15 (Roudi, 2001). In 2011, more than half of the Arab states' population is under 24 (UNESCWA, 2011).

The fast-paced demographic growth brought many issues to the fore, including employment challenges, with the region's unemployment rate being the highest in the world, reaching 14% in 1990. It also brought attention to the factors that could disable or enable the MENA countries to gain advantages from this growth, specifically by integrating these young citizens into the economy through continuous development.  The brain drain phenomenon that had dominated discussion on Arab youth employment in the past few decades was a result of some countries' inability to create sufficient and diverse opportunities for their young talents(ibid). The region's youth unemployment rate continues to be the highest internationally; it has reached 30% in 2016 though the world unemployment rate stood at 13% (ILO, 2016).

Dhillon (2008) considered youth to be the most central challenge for Arab economic development in the 21$^{st}$ century. Dhillon argued that the region's stability will rely on creating opportunities for its young population. This will require that the region's governments help youth in their main struggles for education, jobs and housing.  If governments meet this challenge, this generation can make up the future middle class that would catalyze openness and would be a major component in any policy that would fight radicalism (Dhillon, 2008)  Thus Dhillon (2008) has suggested that for the Middle East countries to benefit from the simultaneous demographic and economic growth that they were experiencing, they needed to carry out urgent reform within this decade to avoid growing disruption resulting from youth exclusion.

Recent events and developments have become emblematic of the consequences of overlooking youth issues. One such event was the Arab uprisings that began in 2011 with a young Tunisian street vendor setting fire to himself in protest to confiscation of his goods, provoking demonstrations in Tunisia and a few other Arab countries. The violence that erupted in Syria and the rise of militant groups following the uprisings has also raised question marks about the susceptibility of youth in the MENA region and worldwide to violent extremism because many curiously chose to join militant groups in Iraq and Syria.

The discussion of youth radicalization gained wider ground following these events. Recent international reports have looked at such events as results of youth "estrangement" and dissatisfaction with the status quo. Such reports are the Arab Human Development report

(United Nations Development Program, 2016) and the United States' National Intelligence

Council Global Trends report (US National Intelligence Council, 2017).

 "Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality" was the theme of the

2016 Arab Human Development Report. Recent uprisings were a result of a sense of exclusion

among youth, which were becoming more vulnerable to appeals to violence and militancy.  The

report argued for adopting development models that create opportunities for youth and

embrace them as main partners in building the future of the Arab region. It suggested that the

youth bulge in the Arab countries was an inextricable part of the region's political, economic,

social, and cultural reality and emphasized youth empowerment and inclusion as a crucial

requirement for stability and progress in their region. It suggested that the youth act as

catalysts for change in their societies and challenge traditional political and social structures.  It

cited increased connectivity, urbanization, inequality, and lack of opportunity as key elements

that increase youth expectations and necessitate their inclusion in policy. It suggested that a

new development model that takes youth into consideration would both tackle improving

services and sectors affecting young people and allow room for youth to express their opinions

meaningfully (United Nations Development Program, 2016).

The discussion of youth policy in the region has increasingly promoted investment in youth

engagement and economic opportunity to capitalize on the "demographic bonus" that the

youth bulge represented.  The NIC report (2017) suggested that radical movements will have

increasing capabilities and use arguments that would appeal to some segments and highlighted

quality of government management of these threats as a significant game-changer. De-escalatory measures the report listed included youth engagement and employment initiatives that would drastically reduce extremist groups appeal.

## Significance of youth engagement in the Middle East

The Arab Human Development report (2016) argued a few reasons for its call for greater emphasis on youth: 1. Experiencing difficult situations during formative years can have negative consequences on young people; 2. Neglecting youth at this stage can lead on the long term to undermining their capabilities as adult work force, which could lead to decreased productivity and weak commitment to positive values; 3. The rapid global changes and rising issues can be overwhelming to them, growing political will and understanding to improve youth policies. (United Nations Development Program, 2016).

The United States National Intelligence Council "Global Trends" report expected the main challenge for the Middle East and North Africa region would be "to boost and create political conditions and economic opportunities to engage its young working age residents"(p.109). The report suggested that the lack of such development would create "a sense of discontent" and that it could, in turn -- along with continued implications of increased secularization, globalization and increased connectivity -- contribute to an increased susceptibility to radicalization. The report suggested that the economic strain resulting from low oil revenue, refugee hosting costs, and civil conflict could weaken governance efficacy (US National

Intelligence Council, 2017).  The report listed key drivers of terrorism in the MENA region, which included:

> *"Disenfranchisement, repression and humiliation...arising from disconnection from the socio-political mainstream, inability to participate in the political process, coping with diminished opportunity for marriage, or inability to attain one's perceived "deserved" economic benefits or status" (p.224)*

The literature on handling the Middle East youth bulge may on the surface emphasize the political aspect of youth engagement.  However, it also highlights the challenges facing youth transitions and points to deeper flaws within the socio-economic systems as well as external factors that are complicating youth engagement.  Economic and social systems' reforms have been recommended to help integrate youth and reap the benefits of helping them achieve their well-being and prosperity.

## Youth engagement approach in the UAE

At the beginning of 2016, the United Arab Emirates announced a cabinet restructuring that involved a shift in focus from sectors to policy issues.  This has allowed the appointment of ministers for climate change, tolerance, happiness, and a young 22 year-old minister for youth. The mission of the young minister is to represent youth at the cabinet and to assist in developing plans that help youth reach their full potential. A youth council was appointed next to support youth policy planning and create channels of communication between youth and the government. The Emirates Youth Council launched several initiatives to achieve these

objectives. The Youth Circles initiative has stood out as an  example of engaging youth in policy planning through crowdsourcing. Other initiatives have reflected several levels of engagement the Youth Office attempted to address.

This paper will study the approach adopted in 2016 by the United Arab Emirates government for youth engagement. The paper will explore drivers of increased youth engagement efforts in the UAE. It will also consider the youth portfolio history in the UAE prior to 2016 and preexisting policies that may have contributed to the current structure of the youth office.  The general aim of the present case study will be to describe the degree and type of youth engagement reflected in the processes and initiatives developed by the Youth Office to stimulate youth to contribute to policy formulation.  More specifically, the paper will study the Emirates Youth Council's  structure and functions as well as at the Youth Circles initiative to consider how the degree and type of engagement they reflect.

## literature review

There is some flexibility in defining youth as a demographic group in each region. The group extends to include up to 30 year-olds in the Middle East region to reflect the delayed transition to complete independence. The terms youth "engagement" and "participation" are used interchangeably in the literature to describe youth connections or ability to make a difference. Previous research on child and youth participation viewed participation as a right, a result of a child's ability to form opinions and contribute to community, or a "practice phase" that builds

competence for future participation.  A majority of typologies developed to measure participation focused on the "degree" of participation rather than quality. Few typologies introduced new elements to the analysis.

## Youth

The definition of youth as a demographic group varies among academicians and national and international NGOs.  The United Nations defined youth as "persons between the ages of 15 to 24 years old" for the purpose of its statistical work (The United Nations, 2017); however, the definition varies among its programs based on purpose. It is suggested, also, that socio-economic factors influence the definition of this group in each country.

For example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) partly explained this variation in its description of youth as a period that spans transition from childhood dependency to adulthood independency (UNESCO, 2017).  A recent United Nations report entitled Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality defined this phase broadly to encompass the age group from 15-29 to reflect the long transition process that youth generally experience in the region (United Nations Development Program, 2016).

Dhillon (2008) dubbed this delay in starting adult life as "waithood," a situation that the age groups 15-24 and 25-30 go through as a result of major challenges in the sectors of education, employment, housing, marriage, and credit that delay their independence. These challenges originate in widely held conceptions in the Middle East about education and employment that

influence youth choices. International experts have also dubbed this generation as a "generation-in-waiting" (United Nations Development Program, 2016)

## Youth engagement and participation

The terms youth engagement and youth participation have been used interchangeably to mean concepts that are interrelated. A number of youth engagement definitions in the literature emphasized its participatory and change-causing element. Checkoway (2011) defined youth engagement as meaningful and sustainable youth involvement in making decisions affecting them. Forms of youth engagement that reflect its participatory element include volunteerism, participation in community projects visioning and execution, representation in boards and councils, and suggestion of policy options (Valley Youth Partnership for Engagement and Respect). International organizations and reports reviewed by the author also emphasized this definition.

The World Youth Report (2016) looks at youth engagement from a wider perspective, designating three sectors for youth engagement: economic, political, and social. Economic engagement for youth involved employment, internship, and entrepreneurship opportunities as well as chances to take part in trade unions. Examples of political engagement included traditional election and voting, power transition, negative participation, digital activism, and extremism and radicalism.  Community engagement examples included peacebuilding, volunteering, and sports. (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016).

Other definitions emphasize connections as youth engagement. Fletcher (2013) defined youth engagement as the result of youth having "sustained connections" at any point in their lives "within themselves, in the immediate world around them, throughout society in general, and across the entirety of the world". These connections can happen at the "emotional, psychological, or cognitive levels" (p. 3). Fletcher (2013) argued that engagement was not limited to youth contribution to social change.

The Center of Excellence for Youth Engagement defined it as the "meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity, with a focus outside of him or herself. Youth engagement is possible is different settings as sports, music, and volunteer work (the Center of Excellence for Youth Engagement, 2012).

Maynard (2008) tried to make a distinction between the terms engagement, participation, empowerment, and voice. "Youth voice is giving youth the opportunity to communicate and validating what they say. Youth empowerment is adults relinquishing power to youth. Youth participation is the act of what youth do when they are able to exercise the

power given to them. Youth engagement is the culminating feeling youth have about being involved with an organization." Voice, empowerment, and participation are thus elements that lead to youth engagement (Maynard, 2008, p. 35)

## Models

### Degrees of participation

The Ladder of Children/Youth Participation model was developed to classify child participation, based on the "Ladder of Citizen Participation" developed by Sherry Arnstein in 1969 (Hart, 1992). It responds to the notion that: 1. citizens need to acquire competence for community involvement through increased opportunities to practice involvement as children. 2. Children participation happens at varying degrees in spite of recognition of children's ability to represent themselves. The ladder of child participation was developed as a resource for child participation design that also takes into consideration child abilities, preferences, and development, rather than an assessment tool. A program design should aim to give children the opportunity to perform at their maximum ability.

The Ladder of children participation consists of three levels of non-participation; manipulation, decoration, and tokenism, and five degrees of participation in projects:

1. **"assigned but informed,**
2. **consulted and informed,**
3. **Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children**
4. **Child initiated and directed**
5. **Child initiated, decisions are shared with adults." (p. 8)**

The first degree of participation requires that "1.children understand the intentions of the project; 2. They know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why; 3. They have a meaningful (rather than 'decorative') role; 4. They volunteer for the project after the

project was made clear to them" (p.11). These elements constitute the basic requirements for a project to be "participatory." The second degree of participation is seen when children are consulted in an adult-initiated project and their opinions have true weight through feedback or continued involvement. The third degree of participation is still adult initiated, however youth move from the role of consultants to making shared decision with adults. The fourth degree of participation can be seen in projects initiated and directed by children where the role of adults is reduced to respect and support of the children's plans. Hart (1992) explains that lack of adult support of children's initiatives can be a challenge for projects at this degree of participation. The utmost degree of child participation on this ladder is when adults join in and support with ideas or decision making (Hart, 1992).

More recently, other researchers have placed shared decision making at the top of their models. Examples of these models include Degrees of Participation (Treseder, 1997), Driskell's Dimensions of Youth Participation (2002), and Pathways to Participation (Shier, 2001). Driskell (2002) added interaction with the community as a second dimension for understanding youth participation, while Shier (2001) reformed the ladder into a process (Karsten, 2012). Fletcher's models for youth voice and volunteer participation are also based on Hart's work. An addition that Fletcher introduced was the Spheres of Youth Engagement and the Systems of Youth Engagement (Fletcher, 2013).

Maynard (2008) suggested that the interconnections between voice, empowerment, and participation determine the degree of engagement. The first level of this model is the lack of

engagement. At the second level, there are three primary degrees of engagement that occur when one of these elements occur. There are four secondary degrees that occur when two or more of these elements combine (Maynard, 2008). This model departed from the degrees described on Hart's ladder, but still aimed to describe degrees of engagement.

Wong et al (2010) have continued the trend to place emphasis on adult-youth partnership, arguing that youth-driven participation may not be applicable or ideal in some cases. TYPE, the typology presented in their work identified five levels of youth-adult partnership, with equally shared partnership, or the "pluralistic" type, is at the center of this model. Adult controlled types include "vessel" participation, where adults have total control, and "symbolic" participation, where youth have voice while adults are in control. Youth controlled types include "autonomous" participation, where youth have voice, participate actively and have full control, and "independent" participation, where they have voice and participate actively and enjoy most control (Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010).

## Rights' fulfillment

Article XII of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates the child's right to express views in matters affecting them and the party-state's responsibility to "give due weight" to these views depending on child age and maturity and to provide them the opportunity to be heard "either directly, or through a representative body" (Convention of the Rights of Child, 1989). Several studies in the literature on youth engagement considered promoting participation a component of national policies that respond to this commitment.

Lundy's model of Child Participation attempted to conceptualize Article XII of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child(2007).  The model emphasized the elements of voice and space in fulfilling a child's right to express views, and the elements of audience and influence to ensure that children's views are given due weight (Lundy, 2007).

## Community and participation

While a majority of participation typologies focused on describing the level of youth involvement, few researchers studied the conditions that determine  the probability of youth engagement. Jans and De Backer (De Backer, 2002) argued that the existence of a challenge that attracts young people to participate, young people's belief in their capacity to make a difference, and sense of community support and connection result in active youth participation in society. This happens when there is balance between the three dimensions of the Triangle of Youth Participation.

Youniss et al (2002) discussed youth-adult cooperation in social transformation and called for further sensitivity to the influence of some conditions on youth civic competence development. Globalization, communication technology advancements and immigration affect youth perceptions of the community. Recognition of youth strengths and increased engagement efforts on different community levels can build a two-way relationship that empowers youth to contribute to the continuation and development of their community (Youniss, 2002).

Child and youth engagement models reviewed in this paper share the view that the degree of participation is connected to child and youth abilities, development stage or preferences.

Shared adult-child decision making is emphasized as the utmost level of participation in more recent work.  The literature reviewed in this paper has recognized the role of adult "scaffolding" or strategic support for youth-led projects.  A major limitation in these typographies is that they overlook responsibility as a driver for child and youth participation.  The literature was rife with theories that aimed to define levels of participation, however, impact-centered typologies were sparse.

## Methods

This paper was written to contribute to addressing the lack of academic literature on the UAE's policy development. The recent cabinet restructuring received wide international coverage and attracted the interest of many commentators. This paper aims to study the youth policy developments following the cabinet restructuring from an academic perspective. One of the main questions the paper will attempt to address is the extent to which regional youth issues as the youth bulge have contributed to foregrounding youth as a policy issue in the UAE and whether there were other justifications that were more relevant to the UAE. In its description of the objectives and responsibilities of the Youth Office and the Emirates Youth Council, the paper will attempt to answer questions about the entities' role in youth policy planning. Analysis of the youth initiatives will attempt to reveal more about the level and type of engagement they represent by considering how they can be classified according to academic models of youth engagement levels and types, to determine the overall engagement strategy that the Emirates Youth Council aims to fulfill.

## Definitions

This paper accepts the definition of youth as an age group adopted by the Arab Human Development Report, which goes well with the target age group of UAE Youth Council initiatives. The paper also accepts an inclusive definition of youth engagement, which, beyond political and civic engagement, emphasizes the connections between youth and society as a

whole. The paper will follow a mixed method of description and analysis in presenting findings on youth policy in the UAE.

## Data collection method

The paper will rely on official websites and documents shared publicly by the office of the Minister of Youth or Youth Councils about the initiatives that they are leading, their structure, scope, and objectives, and expected output. It will also look at news media coverage of relevant youth policy milestones if information on official website is found insufficient.

## Analytical Approach

The paper will study information on the UAE youth policy before and after 2016 and look at possible justifications for the increased youth emphasis.  For analysis of youth initiatives, the paper will choose only those with relevance to stimulating youth to make an impact on public policy as well as the community. The paper will examine the selected youth initiatives and consider their relevance to the components of the wider definition of youth engagement, the degree of participation they reflect based on models reviewed in this report, and their impact. The paper will attempt eventually to infer features of the current youth policy the UAE follows. Youth Circles conducted within the first 11 months of the initiative's launch will also be examined for elements as topics, locations, outcomes, adult support.

## Limitations

One of the main limitations of this study is the difficulty of tracing the youth initiatives' impact through published material on them and the short period of time that they have been carried out before the date of this paper's publication, as most youth initiatives were launched within 2016 and it would be too early to trace impact.  This was compensated for at this stage by placing extra emphasis on processes rather than impact. Another limitation was the inaccessibility of authoritative information on UAE youth demographics.

## Background and Setting

This section of the paper will briefly present relevant population facts about the UAE, describe

youth policies prior to 2016 and the government reshuffle in 2016 that has increased emphasis

on youth-and possible justifications for this shift.  The paper will describe the youth office, the

Emirates Youth Council, and four of the Council's initiatives that reflect the element of

engagement and making a difference in society and policy making, focusing on objectives,

scope, and structure of each of these initiatives. The Youth Circles initiative will be described in

detail, with a number of its sessions analyzed.

## UAE Population

The population of the United Arab Emirates has reached 9.157 million in 2015 (The World Bank,

2017). The 15-24 age group stood at 13.53%, with 476,813 males and  324,982 females. The 25-

54 age group constituted the largest demographic group representing 61% of the population

(Index Mundi, 2016).  The UAE's median age was 30. It should be noted that the youth

percentage here represents all youth residing in the UAE; No data was found on the number of

Emirati youth compared to expatriate youth.  It  is worth noting though that according to one

estimation, the UAE population in 2015 stood at one million, while the expatriates population

reached 7.50 million (Gulf News, 2016). No information was found on the demographic data

that the ministry relies on in its planning.

## Youth Policy before 2016

### Youth Portfolio

The youth portfolio in the UAE has seen various shifts in its management since 1971. It was part of the work of the Ministry for Sports and Youth at the start of the federation. It merged with the Ministry of Education in 1967, but in 1980, it was separated as a Youth Council. From 1990 until 1996 it was a ministry, but then was merged with the Ministry of Education. In 1999, the General Authority of Youth and Sports Welfare emerged from under the Minister of Education and moved to the jurisdiction of the Minister of Culture, Youth and Community Development (General Authority of Youth and Sports Welfare, 2017). There it continued to function, though with a different scope of work, after the structural changes that were introduced to the UAE government in 2016.

The general Authority for Youth and Sports Welfare is currently responsible for overseeing youth entities, as youth centers, youth associations, and clubs and for implementing sport sector policy through encouraging participation and competitiveness (General Authority of Youth and Sports welfare, 2017).

### Youth Empowerment Strategy (YES)

In 2015, the Authority of Youth and Sports Welfare initiated the National Youth Empowerment Strategy (YES) that encompassed engagement and opinion surveys (General Authority of Youth and Sports Welfare, 2016). The objectives of the initiatives were largely linked to the UAE Vision 2021 requirements to enable youth to contribute to building the future, reinforcing

cooperation among youth development stakeholders, and monitoring youth empowerment progress through observing key performance indicators (The official Portal of the UAE government, 2017). A Youth Opinion Survey on the attitudes and opinions of Emirati youth was conducted as part of this strategy (Emirates New Agency, 2015).

## Government of the Future (2016)

In February 2016 and during the 2016 Global Government Summit, the United Arab Emirates announced the "Government of the Future," a cabinet reshuffle that entailed major structural changes that shifted focus from main sectors to main policy issues. This change came as part of the provisions for the post oil era and planning for the achievement of Vision 2021 objectives. The Prime minister's speech announcing the restructuring suggested that

> *We[the UAE] can't lead the future with tools from the past, and we can't accomplish quantum leaps in growth without conceptualizing a new way of governance. Change creates great opportunities, renews ideas and forces everyone to think in a different way. And we will implement all that is good for our people.*

> *Governments must be flexible. We do not need more ministries, but more capable ministers dealing with change. We want a government that thinks not only in terms of provision of services, but also in building the skills of its people and provide an environment conducive for achievement. The government should*

> *be far-sighted, be willing to explore the future and be ready to face the future*
>
> *(the UAE government official web portal, 2017)*

The policy issues that constituted the main focus areas of the new government were innovation, youth, climate change, tolerance, and happiness.

Within this government, the role of the Minister of Youth was reintroduced to be taken over by a young person to represent youth issues in the cabinet and contribute to developing policies for improving youth opportunities. It has also set up the Emirates Youth Council to engage the youth in policy planning.

## Justifications

An article published by the Prime Minister explaining the rationale behind appointing a 22 year old Minister of Youth suggested that

> *The changes reflect what we have learned from events in our region over the past five years. In particular, we have learned that failure to respond effectively to the aspirations of young people, who represent more than half of the population in Arab countries, is like swimming against the tide. Without the energy and optimism of youth, societies cannot develop and grow; indeed, such societies are doomed.*
>
> *When governments spurn their youth and block their path to a better life, they slam the door in the face of the entire society. We do not forget that the genesis*

> *of the tension in our region, the events dubbed the "Arab Spring," was squarely rooted in the lack of opportunities for young people to achieve their dreams and ambitions.*
>
> *We are proud that the UAE is a young country. And we are proud of our youth. We invest in them and empower them precisely because they are our future. We believe that they are faster than us in acquiring and processing knowledge, because they have grown up with tools and techniques that we lacked at their age. We entrust them with driving our country to new levels of growth and development, which is why we have now appointed a cabinet minister of their age and created a special council of youth. (Maktoum)*

Consciousness of geopolitical risks and the MENA youth bulge discussed earlier is reflected in these paragraphs, which also touch upon rationales that are more relevant and perhaps unique to the UAE development process. The UAE government's justification of its youth policy primarily links it to the UAE vision 2021 National agenda goals, which emphasize innovation and human skills as main drivers of the 2021 economy (the UAE government official web portal, 2017).

The UAE vision 2021 was launched in 2010 with the aim of making the UAE one of the highest performing countries in the world on all levels by creating plans to overcome challenges and growing awareness of the implications of future trends on the UAE. The vision also aims to support the economic shift into knowledge economy. This vision has been translated into the

National Agenda, which consists of 6 main focus areas that constitute a national priority for the government (UAE Vision 2021, 2010).  These areas are:

1. Cohesive Society and Preserved Identity

2. Safe Public and Fair Judiciary

3. Competitive Knowledge Economy

4. First-Rate Education System

5. World-Class Healthcare

6. Sustainable Environment and Infrastructure (ibid.)

## Minister selection

Prior to the announcement of the government of the future, that is the new cabinet restructuring, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Rashid Al Maktoum announced through his twitter account a call for nominations for a minister of youth who is under 25 years old from universities and other entities.  H.E. Shamma Al Mazrui was subsequently announced Minister of State for Youth Affairs. Her office functions within the Ministry for Cabinet Affairs and the Future.  The minister's proposed 100 day program aimed to develop an integrated system that would enable youth to engage with and contribute to their community. This program included many of the initiatives that have materialized, including the Youth Circles (the UAE government official web portal, 2017).

## Youth office

The main purpose of the Youth Office is to create channels to connect the UAE government and youth and to represent youth in the government. It also seeks to homogenize youth policy across government sectors and align youth policies with Vision 2021 objectives (Youth Gov, 2017). Other youth office objectives include listening and responding to youth opinions and ambitions and empowering youth to make achievements in all fields.

## Emirates Youth Council

The Emirates Youth Council was set up in 2016, shortly after the appointment of minister Al Mazrui, who is also the head of the Youth Council. The aim of the council was to develop youth policies through direct interaction with youth. Following that, youth councils were similarly developed on local level in all emirates (Emirates Youth Council, 2017). An example of youth representation present prior to that is the Youth Shura Consultative Council, which was launched in 2005 (Emirates News Agency, 2005). The members of the youth councils also work in teams to manage youth initiatives.

The Emirates Youth Council responsibility is twofold: it has the responsibility to develop policies and initiatives that are in harmony with overall UAE policies to deal with youth challenges and to ensure youth engagement in society through seeking out their opinion on major issues.

While supporting government policies is a priority for the council, it engages with youth to identify their opinion and propose appropriate solutions and studies. Means of engagement include surveys, studies, and youth circles. It  works in coordination with various government

entities to monitor and measure the impact of the policies and initiatives on youth (Emirates Youth Council, 2017).

The Council has launched several initiatives to engage with youth in different ways and to tackle challenges facing youth. The aim of initiatives such as 100 Mentors and Youth Circles-described below- is to nurture connections between youth and decision makers.

### *National Youth Agenda*

In September 2016, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, UAE Vice President, Prime Minister, and Ruler of Dubai announced the "National Youth Dialogue," a national youth retreat, and initiated a hashtag on twitter calling youth to contribute opinions and ideas on youth challenges and aspirations. The tweets were crowdsourced to prepare for brainstorming sessions during the retreat (the National Staff, 2016). The discussions between youth and government officials covered topics that included education, entrepreneurship, and cultural values. At the end of this retreat, the National Youth Agenda was launched (Emirate News Agency, 2016). The agenda aimed to enhance the youth's role in local economy development and boost their ability to play leadership roles. It included the establishment of a youth Data center, a national business leadership plan, and specialized youth centers.

The agenda included a youth engagement policy that was launched by the Prime Minister following the youth retreat to further enhance the role of youth in the community (Gulf News, 2016). The policy included:

1.  emirates youth council review of youth related policies;

2.  youth inclusion in official media policies and surveys and studies;

3.  Provision of open data on youth through the Youth Data Hub to support research and policy making;

4.  government-youth interaction development through different platforms for participation;

5.  establishment of local and ministerial councils to ensure the inclusiveness of engagement efforts;

6.  establishment of global youth councils establishment to exchange knowledge and share best practices;

7.  establishment of corporate youth councils in public and private enterprises to connect them with sector leaders and share their views.

## Emirates Youth Council initiatives

### *100 Mentors*

Launched by Emirates Youth Council, the 100 Mentors initiative aims to deliver one hundred sessions of mentoring by public and private sector leaders, bringing attention to them as national role models in different fields to inspire youth. The structure of these sessions includes a 15-minute "story-telling" section where the mentors introduce themselves and establishe the theme of the session, a 30-minute question and answer section led by a moderator, and a 15-

minute recap (100 Mentors, 2017). The number of attendees varies depending on selected venue capacity and sessions are held based on mentor availability.

Mentors are well-regarded public figures who have experiences to share with youth. Examples of personalities this program has hosted so far included H.E. Noura Al Kaabi, currently Minister of State for the Federal National Council, who has spearheaded efforts to establish media free-zone in Abu Dhabi and is currently chairwoman of the media zone. Another mentor was H.E. Khaldoon Al Mubarak, managing director and group chief executive officer at Mubadalah, a state-owned investment company.

While this initiative serves as a platform for experience sharing, it nonetheless has resulted in at least one outcome. The Emirates Youth Council and Mubadala Development Company, the Abu Dhabi-based investment and development company, signed a memorandum of understanding (Mubadala, 2017). This MoU included a series of leadership talks by young Emirati executives at Mubadala.

### *Done by Youth*

Done by youth initiative constitutes an example of youth community engagement. The initiative relies on crowdsourcing skills and talents to support diverse projects and activities. The project webpage reveals that since the launch of the project, 728 hours have been volunteered, more than 1450 content pages developed, and 520 media artwork published. These volunteer hours that have gone towards supporting Emirates Youth Council Initiatives have contributed to a value of more than 10 million AED (Emirates Youth Council, 2017). For example, Youth Office

and Youth Council websites have been entirely by Youth Council members or youth-owned companies.  The Youth Retreat is another example of projects organized under the Done by Youth initiative. The outcomes of the projects planned by the program may benefit youth, or the entire community. The initiative runs its own projects, but it may receive requests for youth assistance, in which case the executive team connect them to council members.

## Youth Data Hub

Another Emirates Youth Council initiative, the  "Youth Data Hub" came to bridge a gap in the public sphere, specifically data on youth. The hub intends to create strategic partnerships with public and private sector entities with the aim of creating a tangible data that could guide youth policy. The data hub work depends on youth volunteer efforts, led by a team of Emirates Youth Council members. Entities interested in collaboration and youth volunteers have the chance to apply through the initiatives website (Emirates Youth Council, 2017). The initiative has so far collaborated with LinkedIn, Mohamed bin Rashid Space Center, and Emirates Youth Foundation to produce three publications based on data obtained through these entities.

## Youth Circles as a form of engagement

Youth Circles initiative was launched in April, 2016, under the patronage of H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-president, Prime Minister, and Ruler of Dubai, to provide a platform for discussion of major challenges facing youth, with the aim of establishing "sustainable engagement with Youth" and encourage them to come up with ideas and solutions that reflect their perspective on major challenges.  The Youth Circles initiative conducted more

than 30 sessions within a year of its launch.  The program is managed by an executive team that

is made up of 3-4 members of the Emirates Youth Council. (Emirates Youth Council, 2017).

### Initiation

A youth circle can be held by the Emirates Youth Council or hosted by other entities in

cooperation with the Emirates Youth Council. Circles can be proposed on any topic by public

and private entities locally and worldwide through submitting a request online or through

direct contact with the initiative team.  The form requires entities to propose topic, timing and

location. The hosting entities must apply to the Emirates Youth Council to be able to use the

Circles format and are expected to abide by a manual and a set of standards developed by the

Emirates Youth Council.

### Structure and Format

The discussions are held in a circle format, as it is expected that such a format would allow each

attendee equal chance to express views. The application form does not include any conditions

or requirements, with the exception of the applicant's being under thirty years old.

The circle is held over a two-hour period and discusses a single topic at a time. The first 15

minutes are dedicated to presenting a problem and policies towards it worldwide by a

presenter with background in the field, followed by a 45-minute discussion led by a moderator.

The second hour is dedicated to discussion of solutions and policy recommendations. The

number of attendees can vary between 30 and 70 youth depending on the hosting entity's

choice and they would conventionally register online through the Youth Circle website.

Summaries published do not normally include details of attendees and media coverage; however, the summery of the first session included such information; attendees were 60, the circles hashtag reached 1st place among hashtags trending in the UAE on twitter with 42 million tweets and media coverage of the session.

## Objectives

The objectives listed on the Youth Circles website for conducting Youth Circles include:1. To engage with youth to know their aspirations, opinions and answers about a topic; 2. Test the waters with youth and receive feedback on upcoming projects or policies; 3. Gather data and recommendations from youth; 4. Crowdsource ideas, skills, and talents to shape solutions or develop policies; 5. Broadcast a message to the youth." (Emirates Youth Council, 2017).  Entities that request to host Youth Circles may aim to achieve one or more of the aforementioned objectives.

## Description of Youth Circles

The list below includes all youth circles held since their launch on 27 April 2016 until 22 March 2017.  The Youth Circles website is used as the main source of this list. The table below lists Youth circle themes, host entities, and locations where possible.

|  | Logistics | Title | Host | Location |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | 27 April 2016 | Youth and Future Skills | Youth Circles | City Walk, Dubai. |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2. | 22 May 2016 | Youth and Sustainability | Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA) | Dubai. |
| 3. | 13 June 2016 | Youth and Entrepreneurship | Unknown | Al Zoura, Ajman. |
| 4. | 21 June 2016 | Youth and Finance | H.H. Sheikha Shamma bint Sultan bin Khalifa Al Nahyan | Abu Dhabi. |
| 5. | 25 June 2016 | Youth and Sports | Unknown | Nad Al Sheba Sports, Dubai. |
| 6. | 28 June 2016 | Youth and Housing | Sheikh Zayed Housing Program | Fujairah. |
| 7. | 30 June 2016 | Beyond High School | Ministry of Community Development | Um Al Qaiwain. |
| 8. | 2 July 2016 | Emirates Youth Strategy | Unknown | Four Seasons Hotel, Dubai |
| 9. | 11 August 2016 | Climate Change | Unknown | Mleiha Archeological Center, Sharjah |
| 10 | 27 August 2016 | Youth and Global Entrepreneurship | Youth Circles | Saint Peterburg, |

| | | | | Russia |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11 | 22 September 2016 | Youth and Global Climate Challenges | Youth Circles | New York, USA |
| 12 | 28 September 2016 | Emirati Women in the Workforce | Youth Circles | Dubai Women's Club, Dubai |
| 13 | 14 October 2016 | My Solution to Climate Change | Unknown | Marrakesh, Morocco |
| 14 | 17 October 2016 | The Integration between the Government and the Federal National Council | Unknown | Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Center (ADNEC) |
| 15 | 22 October 2016 | Participation in the Positive Impact | Misk Foundation | Al Faisalyah resort, Riyadh |
| 16 | 25 October 2016 | Youth and Project Management | Unknown | Madinat Jumeira, Dubai |
| 17 | 26 October | Youth and | Youth Circles | Emirates |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2016 | Tolerance | | Reading club, Ras Al Khaima Cultural Club and Public Library |
| 18 | 7 October 2016 | Engaging and Empowering Youth For a Sustainable Future | Youth Circles | Masdar city, Abu Dhabi |
| 19 | 26 November 2016 | The Way Forward for Higher Education in the UAE, | Unknown | Washington DC, USA |
| 20 | 13 December 2016 | Disruptor iIdeas in the Global Knowledge Economy | Youth Circles | Emirates Towers, Dubai |
| 21 | 25 January 2017 | Youth's Role in Implementing | Unknown | Noor Island, Sharjah |

| | | UAE'S 2021 Vision | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 22 | 28 February 2017 | Participation Rights for Children and Young People with Disabilities | Youth Circles | Um Al Emarat park, Abu Dhabi |
| 23 | 7 February 2017 | Discussing 2017 Plans | Youth Circles | Emirates Towers, Dubai |
| 24 | 12 February 2017 | Skill-based Education for Social Impact | Youth Circles | World Government Summit, Dubai |
| 25 | 14 February 2017` | Technology for Entrepreneurship and Innovation in the Arab World | Youth Circles | World Government Summit, Dubai |
| 26 | 24 February 2017 | Social Inclusion Youth and Sports | Unknown | IPIC Arena, Abu Dhabi |
| 27 | 22 March 2017 | Government Communication with Young People: challenges | Sharjah Media Center | Expo Center, Sharjah |

| | | and prospects | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|

## Hosts

Youth Circles program hosted at least 10 of the 27 sessions that were held within the period that this study covers. The paper considered that any session held in Emirates Towers, the Youth Offices' headquarters, or during the government summit was organized by the Youth Circles entity, even if that was not mentioned in the summery on the Youth Circles official website. The hosts of 9 sessions were unknown as they have not been mentioned in the session summery. Two sessions were held by local public entities.  The sessions, "Government Communication with Young People: challenges and prospects" and "Youth and Sustainability" were held by Sharjah Media Center and Dubai Electricity and Water Authority consecutively. Federal entities that hosted youth circles are the Ministry of Community Development and Sheikh Zayed Housing Program. "Youth and Finance" was the only session to be hosted by an independent person, Sheikha Shamma bint Sultan bin Khalifa Al Nahyan, in an effort to raise financial awareness in the UAE.  A few of the youth circles were held as part of larger events. These include Sharjah Government Communication Forum, Conference of the Parties in Marrakesh, World Government Summit, and Dubai International Forum on Project Management.

## Locations

Within this period, around 30 sessions were held locally in all emirates, with more sessions happening in Dubai and Abu Dhabi.  Two sessions were held in the Arab region, specifically in Riyadh and Marrakesh and two were held in the United States, while the first youth circle to be held abroad was in Saint Petersburg, Russia, only four months after the launch of the program.

| Location | Number of sessions |
|---|---|
| **Within UAE** | |
| Abu Dhabi | 5 |
| Dubai | 10 |
| Sharjah | 3 |
| Ajman | 3 |
| Ras Al Khaimah | 1 |
| Um Al Quwain | 1 |
| Fujairah | 1 |
| **International** | |
| USA | 2 |
| Russia | 1 |
| KSA | 1 |
| Morocco | 1 |

**Table 2 Youth Circles by location**

*Themes*

The themes of the circles held within this period varied according to host entity field and objectives.  For example, Dubai Electricity and Water Authority hosted a session on Youth and Sustainability. It seems that public entities would choose to host youth circles as part of larger conventions to bring youth perspectives to attention and to create awareness of their subject matter. Sharjah Media Center hosted a session under the theme of "Government Communication with Young People: challenges and prospects" on the sideline of its annual Government Communication Forum.

Youth circles initiated by the Youth Circles reflected themes relevant to public policy issues and youth policy priorities.  Examples of these include the first youth circle held on 27 April 2016 "Youth and Future Skills," and "Disruptor Ideas in the Global Knowledge Economy" held on 13 December 2017.

The table below shows the distribution of these sessions by field. It is noticed that a majority of sessions tackled government and youth engagement related topics as "Youth's role in implementing UAE'S 2021 vision" and "Participation in the positive impact."

| Field | Number of relevant sessions |
|---|---|
| Government and Engagement | 5 |
| Economy | 5 |
| Environment and Sustainability | 5 |

| Education | 4 |
|---|---|
| Technology | 2 |
| Society | 2 |
| Sports | 2 |
| Women | 1 |
| People with Disability | 1 |

Table 3 Youth Circles by field(see Appendix)

## Guests

In addition to the speaker and moderators, Youth Circles may host high profile guests to take part in the discussions. Guests are often members of the hosting entity, but they can also be honorary guests. The role of the guest during the session would be to listen to youth ideas and adopt or sponsor relevant recommendations. Emirati guest speakers that have attended the Youth Circles include:

1. **H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, United Arab Emirates Vice President, Prime Minister, and Ruler of Dubai.**

2. **Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohamed Al Maktoum, Chairman of the Executive Council of Dubai and Dubai Crown Prince.**

3. **Sheikh Ahmed bin Saud bin Saqr Al Qassimi.**

4. **H.H. Sheikh Sultan bin Mohamed Al Qassimi, ruler of Sharjah.**

5. **H.H. Sheikh Mansour bin Mohamed Al Maktoum.**

6. **H.E. Sheikha Lubna bint Khalid Al Qassimi, Minister of State for Tolerance.**

7. **H.E. Thani Ahmed al Zeyodi, Minister of Environment and Climate Change.**

8. **H.E. Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, Minister of State.**

9. **H.E Saeed Mohamed al Tayer, MD and CEO, Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA).**

10. **H.E. Ahmed bin Abdulla bin Humaid Belhoul, Minister of State for Higher Education.**

11. **H.E. Mohamed bin Abdulla Al Gergawi, Minister of Cabinet Affairs and the Future.**

12. **Sultan Ahmed Sulayem, CEO of Dubai Ports World.**

13. **H.E. Noura bint Mohamed Al Kaabi, Minister for Federal National Council Affairs.**

International Guests have included:

1. **H.R.H. Prince Charles of Wales**

2. **Reid Hoffman, Executive Chairman of Linkedin**

3. **Catherine McKenna, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Canada.**

4. **Dr. Jim Yong Kim, 12th President of the World Bank group**

5. **Salahudine Mezawar, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Morocco.**

6. **Timothy Shriver, chairman of Special Olympics.**

## Outcomes

One of the two hours of a youth circle is dedicated for discussing solutions for the topic.  The

youth circle organizers have accumulated such discussions since the launch of the circles in

April 2016. The process of developing these discussions into policy recommendation and the

method through which Youth Circles team conveys them to the Youth Council to be considered

in policy planning are unclear to the author at this stage.

Youth Circles publish on their website summaries of all sessions.  These summaries include

basic session information such as host entity, location,  presentation topic, outcomes,  images,

videos, and discussion questions or points, and brief list of recommendations.

It is mentioned in the Youth Circles manual that hosting entities are responsible for developing

reports based on the discussions. Youth circles may have immediate outcomes, as the launch of

programs that tackle the discussion subject.  More than 6 projects where adopted following

these circles.  These projects include:

1.  **The opening of the first business incubator for Ajman youth.**

2.  **The launch of 100 mentors program.**

3.  **Announcement of Waqf for youth in sports. Mohamed Bin Rashid Global Center for**

    **Endowment Consultancy.**

4.  **Announcement of grants and support for youth projects. Dubai Ports World.**

5.  **Announcement of H.R.H Mohamed Bin Salman foundation "Misk Charity Foundation"**

    **for youth workshops in Saudi Arabia.**

6. **Internship Program in cooperation with the World Bank.**

## Discussion and Findings

This paper has briefly reviewed youth policy in the UAE and described major youth-oriented initiatives that were launched in 2016; it focuses on the youth circles as an example of the UAE youth engagement. The paper analyzed 27 youth circles that were held within the first 11 months of the program.

## Government Youth Approach

The transfer of youth engagement strategy from the General Authority of Youth and Sports to function at the ministerial level reflects the increased emphasis on youth issues. The UAE's rationale for this is not limited to the youth bulge challenge that is associated with the Middle East region. The official justifications for the new youth approach the government adopted in 2016 include recognition of the importance of positive engagement with youth aspirations and the role youth can play in community development. These reflect the influence of two issues; youth challenges in the wider Middle East region and the shift towards a knowledge economy. To a lesser extent, varying levels of youth engagement efforts on the local level may have further stressed the need for an inclusive national approach. Existing initiatives were mostly in the three larger emirates, as the Abu Dhabi Emirates Youth Foundation, Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry Tejar Youth Council, and Sharjah Shura Consultative Council.

While the percentage of youth in the UAE cannot be considered very high, the median age

reveals that even the older working-age group included more of the younger range. That the

median age of the UAE is 30, which makes it rank as 113th oldest in terms of median age in a list

made up of 230 countries, means that it falls within the average range internationally (CIA

World Fact Book, 2016). The percentage of youth would have been higher if age division

included the 25-30 age group as the stage is considered an extension of the process of gaining

independence in the region by recent international reports. The difference may still be too low

to make youth a challenge for the UAE public policy as is the case in some other Arab states.

This indicates that awareness of the risks that come with disengagement and lack of

opportunity that have been evident in other Arab states may have been a stronger driver than

responding to a youth bulge. This comes in line with the attitude that prevailed in international

reports such as the Arab Human Development Report in 2016 and the United States National

Intelligence Council Global Trends report in 2017.

The influence of the plans for the transition to a knowledge economy and the emphasis on

innovation and entrepreneurship can be seen in the youth initiatives mission statements and

projects. An example of this is previous Youth Circles relevant to this topic, which included

"Disruptor Ideas in the Global Knowledge Economy" and "Technology for Entrepreneurship and

Innovation in the Arab World."

## Youth Engagement

The initiatives reviewed in this paper as an example of the Youth Office projects fit within the wider youth engagement division that is outlined in the World Youth Report(2016).

- **The Emirates Youth Council, all other councils including local, ministerial, and corporate councils, and youth circles reflects "civic engagement," however, it does not fall under any of the subcategories defined by the report.**

-  **The Done By Youth program falls under volunteerism under community development.**

- **The Youth Data Hub does not fall under any of these categories, although it was initiated to fill a gap in data on youth for policy making and future planning. The type of projects it has run so far reflect the objectives of this initiative. LinkedIn collaboration for example indicates an interest in bridging the education-job market schism.**

The council's scope did not seem to be limited to civic engagement and the initiatives that the council has been executing have different focus areas that serve the purpose of enriching both youth policy making and youth connections, i.e., engagement in the more general sense.

Attempts to involve youth in policy planning through soliciting opinions have been seen in different countries; see the 2012 survey of Malaysian Youth Opinion (Asia Foundation, 2012). The difference is that, instead of opting for a one-off project, the Youth Council established a process for gaining youth input continuously.

The council seems to follow a youth-led youth engagement principle, evident in the youth councils' young members initiation and execution of all youth policy initiatives. This can also be seen in the formulation of the National Youth Agenda that was put together following a national youth retreat that involved young people sitting together with decision makers from various backgrounds to discuss their perspectives and aspirations.

Strategic support from government officials or entities was present in the Prime Minister's sponsoring of the Youth Circles and overall official interaction with youth initiatives; however, no data were available on the level of support.

The level of participation that these initiatives reflect according to Hart's Ladder (1992) is between the top two tiers. Done By Youth shows $7^{th}$ degree participation element because it is youth initiated and directed. 100 Mentors, Youth Data Hub, and Youth Circles show $8^{th}$ degree participation elements as they also enjoy adult buy-in in the form of sponsorship or actual participation. It is not surprising to see that the initiative ranks high in terms of participation degree, given the correlation between age group (or child development) and level of engagement and given the wider age range the initiatives target.  It would be interesting to see whether future initiatives targeting the younger range of the youth age group would be at a lower level of participation. The ladder model however does not allow describing the complexity of the initiatives or assessing their impact.

The Youth Data Hub may be a good example where the Triangle of Participation (De Backer, 2002) is fulfilled. The youth grasp the significance of the youth data gap challenge, believe in

their capacity to make a difference by contributing to information collection and analysis, and enjoy the support of entities that accept to cooperate with them.

## Youth Circles

The paper findings on youth circles are as follows:

- **The Youth Circles initiative fulfills Lundy's Child Participation model (2007), in that it ensures voice and space for expressing ideas, and provides audience in the form of adult guests and influence i.e. near term impact to ensure that these ideas are given weight.**

- **Youth circles function as an engagement tool that enables organizations to have direct access to youth for gauging opinion. This in turn gives them the opportunity to pick topics that are of interest to them and take near-term action based on the circle recommendations.**

- **That participation in youth circles is open to all Emirati youth ensures that voice is not only given to members of the Emirates Youth Council, but also gives an opportunity for youth to select sessions that they attend based on their interest. The opinions that are considered are not limited to those of the youth council members, but they include the voices of all attendees on subject matters that are of interest to them.**

- **Major themes tackled in youth circles revolved around main sectors that influence youth transitions and outcomes according to Dhillon (2008). These include education and employment.**

- **It may be early to detect impact; for now, the set-up of the youth circles and youth councils can demonstrate how Youth Circle recommendations reach policy makers.**

- **Location does not seem to take priority in youth circle planning so far, which is evident in the relatively high number of sessions held in the emirate of Dubai, which is also the headquarters of the Youth Circles initiative, as compared to other emirates. This could be explained by the ease of movement between emirates and geographic proximity. Location may not have been a priority for the organizers in the first year of the initiative, since location is dependent on host entity preference.**

- **Being heard and able to participate through Youth Circles helps youth feel respected, promotes their identification with their society and raises feelings of efficacy.**

Youth Circles constitute a flexible tool for gauging youth opinion and they create an opportunity to listen to youth outside the youth councils. Youth initiatives together can be seen as an indicator that engagement is planned on different levels, not only to allow youth to make a difference, but  to help them build connections and make contributions to their community. The UAE youth policy cannot be described as a reaction to youth related challenges in other states in the region, as it also comes as part of the planning for an economic transition within the next few years.

Further research could look again at youth circles within the next few years to cover a longer period of time.  A paper could assess the impact of youth office initiatives on the overall engagement policy.

## Conclusion

The answer to whether youth are a challenge or opportunity for the Middle East region will no doubt be influenced by the policies that leaderships and communities choose to adopt and the long-term vision and planning for maximizing on the demographic advantage that the youth bulge constitutes. Factors believed to play a role in forming today's youth perception of their communities include increased connectivity and socio-economic challenges. Political participation and economic opportunity have been emphasized in the international literature as the ultimate strategies for engaging youth and enriching their connections within their communities. A youth population that is faced with lack of economic opportunities and sense of political efficacy is seen as more susceptible to political unrest, violence, and radicalization.

In the case of the United Arab Emirates, the subject of this case study, the recent move towards prioritizing youth engagement may be seen as a reaction to such concerns, or a development of the national youth strategy that has been launched in 2015. Different national challenges have played a role in foregrounding the youth question. The planned economic transition emphasized the need to galvanize youth as major players in the move towards a more diverse economy.

The Emirates Youth Council carried out initiatives that address different forms of youth engagement. However, the emphasis on increasing youth input into policy planning is reflected in the number and scope of initiatives serving this purpose. Youth circles allow the youth the opportunity to voice thoughts and opinions that are subsequently channeled into policy

planning.  The sessions' Influence on public policy may not become clearly visible in the short term,  however, their immediate result can be seen in the ideas that hosting entities adopted as an outcome of these sessions.

The literature on youth in the Middle East generally perpetuates generalizations that may not apply to all Middle East countries. Innovation in UAE policies attracts national media interest; however, academic data on it are sparse.  This paper aimed to contribute to building academic analysis on youth policy in the UAE to help tackle this gap. External analysis of youth initiatives provides new perspectives for policy makers to consider when assessing policy outcomes.

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## Appendices

1. Table.3 Youth Circles by field (details).

| Government and engagement | Environment and Sustainability | Economy | Education |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. "Government Communication with Young People: challenges and prospects" 2. Discussing 2017 plans 3. Youth's role in implementing UAE'S 2021 vision 4. The integration between the Government and | 1. Engaging and Empowering Youth For a Sustainable Future 2. My solution to climate change 3. Youth and global climate challenges 4. Climate Change 5. Youth and Sustainability | 1. Youth and project management 2. Youth and global enterpreneurship 3. Youth and Housing 4. Youth and finance 5. Youth and entrepreneurship | 1. Skill-based education for Social Impact 2. The way forward for higher education in the UAE 3. Beyond high school 4. Youth and future skills |

| the Federal National Council | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **5.** Emirates youth Strategy **6.** | | | |
| **Sports** | **People with disabilities** | **Women** | **Technology** |
| 1. Social Inclusion youth and sports 2. Youth and sports | 1. Participation rights for children with young people with disabilities | 1. Emirati women in the workforce | 1. Technology for entrepreneurs hip and innovation in the Arab World 2. Disruptor ideas in the |

|  |  |  | Global Knowledge Economy |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Society** |  |  |  |
| 1. Youth and Tolerance<br><br>2. Participation in the positive impact |  |  |  |