Workshop 8

Saudi Youth 'Policy Relevance': Dilemmas, Challenges, Opportunities

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Abstract

The following workshop tries to reach a better and more balanced understanding of dilemmas, challenges and opportunities associated with youth policy formulation and implementation in Saudi Arabia. Whilst the workshop looks specifically at the Kingdom, analysis, insights and recommendations linked to the topic are also relevant to youth policy formulation across the Gulf Cooperation Council states (GCC)—and indeed, the wider world. In fact, policy makers want to be able to prioritize the most important issues. Therefore, policy makers need 'direction' in terms of policy formulation, policy recommendations and policy implementation, i.e. they are searching for 'policy relevance'. Another aim of the workshop is to learn from past policy implementation whether successful or not because we believe that lessons can be learnt from previous youth policy initiatives: why was this policy successful? If this policy failed, what were the reasons? Did this policy resonate with young nationals? Indeed, in Saudi Arabia, 'policy relevance' is particularly important for youth policy.

For many young nationals the 2017-19 socio-economic and cultural reforms opened a door of opportunity, a chance to participate in national decision-making processes and create a twenty-first century Kingdom in their own image. Hence, it is imperative that 'official' youth policy aligns with the expectations and requirements of young Saudis. That said we should also recognize that youth attitudes to social change and related government initiatives such as Saudi Vision 2030 are fluid due to the rapidly changing nature of the domestic politico-economic and socio-cultural environments. Certainly, it is important to remember that Saudi Arabia is in the midst of a transition that impacts and affects all aspects of life in the Kingdom—one that many young Saudis find simultaneously exciting, but sometimes causes apprehension. In consequence, policy relevance needs to address Saudi youth aspirations and concerns.

Drawing on the comparative experience of academics, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners with knowledge and experience of youth policy making and formulation in a) Saudi Arabia, b) the region c) relevant expertise in policy formulation and implementation and d) from a theoretical perspective, the workshop will analyse the factors that either currently facilitate or constrain effective and viable youth policy making. We envisage that academics and practitioners would be drawn from a wide-range of backgrounds and institutions (Saudi and non-Saudi) with the aim of not only comparing and capturing experiences, but also seeking ways in which to comprehend 'policy relevance' as related to effective youth policy formulation and implementation in Saudi Arabia.

Description and Rationale

Objectives and Scope
All too often in the past, Saudi Arabia has been perceived as a 'monolithic' homogeneous society with 'Saudi youth' also treated as a 'one size fits all'. Yet, clearly this erroneous perception disregards the diversity of Saudi society, communities and culture. This is especially significant as in recent years the Kingdom's diverse societies and communities have undergone significant change. Nevertheless, the Kingdom's demographics are vital to understanding challenges facing Saudi Arabia. At least 60 per cent of the total population is less than 30 years old. Moreover, improved educational standards, the impact of online public opinion and demands for greater government transparency via increased social media usage have raised expectations of more government accountability as well as increased participation in decision-making processes.

Yet, change is challenging—so, not surprisingly, there is a degree of anxiety amongst some young nationals about the socio-economic and socio-cultural transitions occurring in Saudi Arabia that are impacting on Saudi norms. What is also salient is that the concerns of young Saudis are often remarkably similar to those of their peers in other parts of the world: worrying about finding a suitable job, being able to get on the housing ladder and coping with the rising cost of living.

The overall goal of the workshop is to encourage scholars and practitioners to better understand the complexity of Saudi youth issues in a globalized and transforming Kingdom. The workshop focusses on dilemmas, challenges and opportunities present in the contemporary socio-economic, socio-political and cultural spheres as well as

ways and means by which these can be addressed. Underpinning this is the necessity of understanding 'policy relevance' as related to youth policy formulation and implementation. Therefore, some of the questions animating this workshop could include, but are not limited to the following:

- Is there a need for a Saudi 'Ministry of Youth'?
- How can young Saudis be equipped with appropriate skills for the 21ˢᵗ Century labour market?
- To what extent does the Saudi education system address the needs, concerns and aspirations of young nationals?
- What approaches and strategies can be utilized to minimize the manager (مدير) mentality linked to a sense of entitlement amongst some young Saudis?
- What approaches and strategies can be promoted to decrease preference for public sector employment and simultaneously increase desirability in private sector employment?
- What approaches and strategies can be adopted to make blue collar work more acceptable to young Saudis?
- What mechanisms can be put in place to ensure that all Saudi youth—irrespective of family, educational or regional background—can share, feed into or contribute towards youth policy?
- What role can the public and private sectors play—separately or in complement to one another—to support the mechanisms mentioned above?
- Are the current institutions tasked with mediating between policymakers and youth fit for purpose and able to deliver on policy? Is there are a need for further national or regional institutions to perform such a role?

The following are some proposed themes for the papers, but other relevant topics will also be welcomed. As previously mentioned, it is hoped that the workshop will attract a wide variety of papers from both academic and practitioners with an interest in youth policy formulation and implementation. This interest and experience does not need to be limited to Saudi Arabia alone, as knowledge and familiarity with the theoretical background of youth studies as well as comparative perspectives from the Gulf and beyond could inform analysis and discussion of Saudi Arabia's youth policy relevance. Indeed, papers presented at the workshop will permit discussion and analysis of ideas, approaches and methods that can help facilitate an enhanced comprehension of youth policy relevance in Saudi Arabia.

This topic remains an extremely under-researched area; hence, the workshop's scope will be necessarily broad in order to include contemporary political, economic, social and cultural issues as well as their impact on Saudi youth policy. Therefore, a variety of perspectives from academics, researchers, policy makers and practitioners alike are invited. These could include (but are not limited to) the following areas:

- Policy making at national/macro level for context;
- Domestic regional issues;
- Employment, unemployment and underemployment;
- The impact of globalization/Westernization on young nationals;
- Generational divides (not only between 'twentysomethings' and older generations, but also younger siblings;

- Youth and the entertainment sector;
- Youth and the arts;
- Youth and climate action;
- Nationalism including whether national identity can or should be 'engineered';
- Identity narratives such as family, tribe and religion
- Gender disparities;
- 'Liberal' versus 'conservative' youth;
- The rise of the individual versus 'collective' identity;
- Youth and the informal sector;
- Youth and social mobility;
- Youth roles in civil society;
- Youth roles in entrepreneurship: business and social;
- Volunteering: 'giving back';
- Youth and urbanization;
- Failed youth policies—what lessons can be learnt?
- Fault lines: substance abuse, mental health issues, problematic relationships;
- Overcoming silos;
- Potential 'brain drains'.

Another aim of this workshop is to publish an edited book based on the individual papers presented. It is hoped that this volume will fill a gap in the relatively thin literature on Saudi youth policy issues.

Contribution to the Gulf Studies

We believe this proposed multi-disciplinary workshop will attract new research that can help policy makers address youth related issues in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the workshop will contribute to the expansion of Saudi/Gulf Studies and beyond by first bringing together scholars and practitioners with first-hand knowledge and experience from a range of social, political, economic and cultural experiences with knowledge of youth policy relevance. We hope that the workshop and subsequent edited volume and/or academic/policy journal papers provide an important and relevant resource for academics and policy makers as well as those involved in youth policy issues.

Anticipated Participants

We encourage papers from socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural academics, researchers and practitioners with Saudi/Gulf experience (both native and non-native) as well as academics, researchers and practitioners with a strong knowledge of the theoretical background of youth policy making and governance. In addition, the workshop is also open to policy makers and representatives of NGOs, governments, and think tanks. The papers could be individual, co-authored or small group contributions depending on the topic and/or institution. In sum, the aim of the workshop is to facilitate the sharing of ideas and to contribute to building a body of knowledge on this topic, based on real-life experiences in order to represent the broadest range of perspectives possible.

Anticipated Papers
These could include (but are not limited to) the following areas:
- Case studies, including analysis of inputs, processes and outputs;
- From theory to practice, analyzing the factors that determine the difference between policy formulation and implementation in Saudi Arabia;
- Comparative analysis of youth policy formulation and implementation amongst GCC states;
- Methods, approaches and examples of youth policy making with an emphasis on top-down and bottom-up approaches to policymaking;
- Review of theory and praxis;
- Comparative analysis of institutions tasked with formulating and implementing youth policy both within Saudi Arabia and across the states of the GCC;
- The role of nationalism (and agents of socialization) in mobilizing youth to deepen their engagement in transformational change;
- The role of self-starters in mobilizing youth to deepen their engagement in shaping transformational change within the Kingdom

Workshop Director Profiles

Dr. Mark C. Thompson is Senior Associate Fellow at King Faisal Center for Research & Islamic Studies in Riyadh. Mark has lived and worked in Saudi Arabia since 2001 for diverse institutions such as Saudi Arabian Airlines, the Saudi Arabian National Guard, and Prince Sultan University. Mark holds a Ph.D. from the Institute of Arab & Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, UK. His principal research areas are Saudi socio-political development and societal transformation and he has published on topics such as Saudi youth issues and challenges facing Saudi women leaders in publications such as the Journal of Arabian Studies; Asian Affairs; Middle Eastern Studies; Middle East Policy; POMPES Studies, Chatham House, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies and Gulf Affairs. In addition, he published a book with I.B. Tauris "Saudi Arabia and the Path to Political Change: National Dialogue and Civil Society" (2014). Mark is also the co-editor of the IB Tauris book entitled "Policy-Making in the GCC: State, Citizens and Institutions" (2017) with Dr. Neil Quilliam from Chatham House based on their Gulf Research Meeting workshop in 2015 as well as providing chapters on Saudi Arabia for edited books such as "Public Brain Power: Civil Society and Resource Management" Palgrave Macmillan (2017). In September 2019 Mark published his Cambridge University Press book "Being Young Male and Saudi: Identity and Politics in a Globalized Kingdom" about societal issues and change from the perspective of young Saudi men. He also has another forthcoming co-edited book with Dr. Neil Quilliam "Domestic Policy Making and Governance in Saudi Arabia". Additionally, Mark collaborates with different Saudi institutions such as the Misk Foundation and makes numerous presentations at international conferences, workshops and seminars every year.

Dr. Neil Quilliam is an Associate Fellow with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Programme at Chatham House. He was Director of Chatham House's Future Dynamics in the Gulf project (2017-2019), previously directed its Syria and Its Neighbours policy initiative (2015-2017); he is also CEO of Castlereagh Associates. Before joining Chatham House 2014, Neil served as Senior MENA Energy Adviser at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Senior Analyst at Control Risks, London, and Senior Programme Officer at the United Nations University, Amman. Neil has lived in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, and has travelled extensively around the MENA region, working on a variety of development, education and research projects. He has published a number of books and articles on international relations and political economy of Syria, Jordan, Iraq and the Gulf Cooperation Council states. Neil was the first recipient of the Prince of Wales and King Faisal Foundation Scholarship in 1998. He received his PhD in International Relations from the University of Durham in 1997.

Dr. Sara Althari is a Senior Research Manager at the Misk Foundation. She holds a PhD in Medical Sciences (functional genomics) from the University of Oxford, where she was a Radcliffe Department of Medicine Scholar. Sara has conducted biomedical research at Harvard Medical School & Brigham and Women's Hospital as a clinical research assistant, and at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard as a visiting graduate student. Sara earned her BA from Wellesley College in Biology and Anthropology, where she graduated magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa. She is also an alumna of INSEAD via their Management Acceleration Program.

Selected Readings

Publications examining Saudi youth policy issues are fairly limited, but the following list provides some background to the topic:

ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller (2018) Arab Youth Survey 2018 [Online] Available at: http://arabyouthsurvey.com
Bouziane, M. Harders, C. and Hoffmann, A. (eds.) (2013) Local Politics and Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World: Governance Beyond the Center (Governance and Limited Statehood), 2013th Edition, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Chaudhary, S., "The Role of Social Media as a Decisive Actor in Saudi Arabia", in Gunter et al (eds.) Social Media in the Arab World: Communication and Public Opinion in the Gulf States, I.B. Tauris, London, UK.
Dresch, P. and Piscatori, J. (eds.) (2013) Monarchies and Nations: Globalization and Identity in the Arab Gulf States, London: I.B. Tauris.
Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2017) GEM Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Report, available at: www.gemconsortium.org/country-profile/141
Government of Saudi Arabia (2016), Saudi Vision 2030 available to download at: vision2030.gov.sa/download/file/fid/417
Hertog, S., "Back to the Seventies? Saudi youth and the Kingdom's political economy after the Arab uprisings", in Selvik, K. and Utvik, B.O. (eds.) Oil States in the New Middle East: Uprisings and Stability, Routledge, Abingdon, 2016, pp. 70-92.
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Niblock, T. & Malik, M. (2007) The Political Economy of Saudi Arabia, Abingdon: Routledge.

Ramady, M.A. (2013) Political, Economic and Financial Country Risk: Analysis of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Switzerland: Springer.

Ramady, M.A. (ed.) (2012) The GCC Economies: Stepping Up to Future Challenges, Switzerland: Springer.

Ramady, M.A., The Saudi Arabian Economy: Policies, Achievements and Challenges, 2nd Edition (2010), New York: Springer.

Sultan, N et al (eds.) (2011) The New Post-Oil Arab Gulf: Managing People and Wealth, London: Saqi Books.

Thompson, M.C., (2019) Being Young, Male and Saudi: Identity and Politics in a Globalized Kingdom, UK: Cambridge University Press

Thompson, M.C. and Quilliam, N. (2017) Policy Making in the GCC: State, Citizens and Institutions, London: I.B. Tauris.

Thompson, M.C., "Societal transformation, public opinion and Saudi youth: views from an academic elite", Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 53, Issue 5, 2017, pp. 834-857.

Thompson, M.C., (2014) Saudi Arabia and the Path to Political Change: National Dialogue and Civil Society, London: I.B. Tauris.

UNDP (2016) Arab Human Development Report 2016 Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality, New York: UNDP.