



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

Workshop 7

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Title: Saudi Youth ‘Policy Relevance’: Dilemmas, Challenges, Opportunities

Workshop Directors

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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, specifically post the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Whilst the workshop looks at the Kingdom explicitly, analysis, insights and recommendations linked to the topic are also relevant to youth policy formulation across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and indeed, the wider world. Certainly, 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 twentyfirst century Kingdom in their own image. However, similar to elsewhere in the world, the 2020 pandemic stalled and/or altered many government and institutional plans. Hence, post-pandemic, it is imperative that ‘official’ youth policies (whether governmental or institutional) align with the changed expectations and requirements of young Saudis. Indeed, we should also recognize that youth attitudes to social change and related government initiatives such as Saudi

Vision 2030 remain fluid due to the impact of the pandemic on the changing nature of domestic politicoeconomic and socio-cultural environments. Finally, 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 in a fast changing and unpredictable world.

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 analyze 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

Background

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.

Workshop Goals

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

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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’ (or similar)?
- How has the pandemic changed the perceptions of young Saudis? Post-pandemic what are their priorities?
- 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 a need for further national or regional institutions to perform such a role?

Workshop Scope and Proposed Topics

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 do 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;

- Global governance issues as highlighted by the pandemic;
- Domestic regional issues;
- Employment, unemployment, and underemployment;

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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’.

Edited Book

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.

Potential Solutions and Recommendations

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 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 topdown 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.

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, coauthored, 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.

Workshop Director Profiles

Dr. Mark C. Thompson is Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Socioeconomics Unit at King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS) in Riyadh. He was previously Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM), Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, (2012-2019) where he taught undergraduate courses in International Relations and Globalization. Mark has lived and worked intermittently 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, where he also taught a course on Political Reform in the Gulf. Mark also runs his own consultancy business that offers an objective perspective of contemporary Saudi socio-political issues. 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 British Journal of Middle East Studies,

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Journal of Arabian Studies, Asian Affairs, Middle Eastern Studies, Middle East Policy; POMPE 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 October 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" based on their 2019 GRM workshop.

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.

Selected Readings

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

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- Dresch, P. and Piscatori, J. (eds.) (2013) Monarchies and Nations: Globalization and Identity in the Arab Gulf States, London: I.B. Tauris.

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- Sultan, N et al (eds.) (2011) *The New Post-Oil Arab Gulf: Managing People and Wealth*, London: Saqi Books.
- Thompson, M.C., (2020) “The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on the Socioeconomic Future of Young Saudis”, *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, August 2020, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2020.1808375>
- Thompson, M.C., (2020) “Inherent contradictions in the Saudi rentier state: distributive capacity, youth employment preferences, and attitudes to education”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 47, 2020, Issue 1: *Revisiting Rentierism: The Changing Political Economy of Resource-Dependent States in the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula*, January 2020.

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