Over the past two years, the Arab world has experienced a series of popular uprisings demanding change. Spearheaded mostly by youth, these protests drew attention to the power of peaceful engagement for change. People exercised their civil rights to express their views and called for social justice and democratic governance. In several countries, attitudes towards youth and state governance changed, providing opportunities and creating expectations for greater participation of all.

The wave of youth-led transformational change processes in the Arab region has highlighted youth as a positive asset for peace and development. To address the challenges and aspirations of youth, volunteering provides a viable sustainable mechanism that can turn their grievances and frustrations into positive energy and a social asset. Youth volunteering can engage young men and women in a range of activities that can improve their participation and positively harness their energy to contribute to the achievement of local, national and global development goals, while enhancing their life, citizenship and work-related skills.

“The Arab Youth Volunteering for a Better Future Programme” is an initiative led by the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme and is in line with regional strategies of the United Nations (UN) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This regional initiative aims to harness the power and energy of youth through volunteerism, drawing on the inherent core values of self-help, solidarity and social cohesion. The programme will strengthen the infrastructure necessary to build the skills and capacities of youth in the region. It will thereby enhance their social inclusion and active participation in the socio-economic development of their countries. The programme will be implemented in five countries: Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen.
Local volunteers remove stones from an aqueduct which helps protect the village Douar El Moudaa in Morocco from spring floods and erosion. With UNV support, volunteers built a water tower, reservoirs, 11 dams and irrigation canals to bring water to the village and the fields. (Bruno Deceukelier/UNDP-GEF CBA, 2011)

The Arab Youth Volunteering for a Better Future Programme (launched in May 2011) is in the initiation phase and on the brink of developing a full-fledged programme. The programme’s specific activities are developed in a youth-led participatory approach. To date, five national consultations have taken place in the pilot countries with the objectives of:

- Bringing youth, civil society actors, government representatives and leading partners together, and facilitating constructive participatory dialogue around youth issues;
- Creating an enabling environment for youth-led engagement in programme design and implementation;
- Defining the main priorities of relevance to youth, and identifying potential activities as inputs for the programme document; and
- Identifying main stakeholders for future implementation of planned activities.

UNV took on the role of facilitator, providing guidance and technical assistance. UNV also contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of trust aimed at empowering the voiceless and ensuring equal power sharing. In addition, gender diversity and inclusiveness were stressed to ensure better participation of women and minority groups.

“The values of volunteerism are extremely relevant in strengthening the capacity of the most vulnerable to achieve secure livelihoods and to enhance their physical, economic, spiritual and social well-being. Volunteerism is one path to inclusion among population groups that are often excluded such as women, young and older people, people with disabilities, migrants and people living with HIV/AIDS.”

MAJOR CHALLENGES FACED BY YOUTH

During the consultations, participants discussed major challenges faced by youth. Common findings included:

- Exclusion from political and civic processes
- High unemployment and underemployment
- Education is considered of low quality and frequently has a weak infrastructure
- Changes in the meaning of adulthood and delays in family formation
- Gender inequality
- Lack of information and services related to health, particularly sexual and reproductive health, sexual violence and drugs
- Lack of intergenerational communication
- Barriers to accessing existing youth programmes

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON SOLUTIONS

A general concept identified as a prerequisite for change was to directly engage youth and include them in the decision-making process and implementation of plans. Ideas proposed included:

- Greater opportunity in civic and political processes – Creating opportunities for youth in governance and politics (Egypt, Morocco), offering new avenues for participation through youth units, youth-led media and youth assemblies (Tunisia, Yemen), developing regionally-integrated youth networks (Tunisia) and combating corruption (Yemen).

- Educational reform – Including curriculum revision (Egypt), improved focus on quality, targeted education and linkages to the labour market (Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen), alternative models (Morocco), increased teacher training and exchanges (Tunisia) and the provision of free education (Yemen).

- Increased employment opportunities for youth – Fostering youth employment (Egypt, Yemen), involving the government, civil society, private sector and media (Morocco) and creating concrete employment assistance services (Tunisia).

- Improved access to health information and services – Monitoring youth well-being (Egypt), providing more information on sexuality and violence (Morocco, Tunisia) and better healthcare (Yemen).

Despite the long list of issues, the “three Es” of employment, exclusion and education are seen as the most important in all five pilot countries.
PROPOSED SOLUTIONS AND ACTIVITIES THROUGH VOLUNTEERISM

The five national consultations yielded a rich variety of tangible solutions and possible steps to address these issues through youth volunteerism. The proposed solutions can be divided into five categories:

- Creating opportunities for social/political/civic/economic inclusion
- Strengthening links between volunteerism and educational systems
- Supporting a “culture of volunteerism”
- Developing infrastructures supportive of volunteerism and capacity development
- Creating policies and legislations to support volunteerism

The proposed activities will be used to enact immediate reforms that would pave the way for long-term development and volunteerism infrastructure in the Arab region. Following the national consultations, UNV will work with partners and youth on finalizing a programme document and implementation of proposed activities in the five pilot countries will follow accordingly.

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme is the UN organization that contributes to peace and development through volunteerism worldwide. Volunteerism is a powerful means of engaging people in tackling development challenges, and it can transform the pace and nature of development. Volunteerism benefits both society at large and the individual volunteer by strengthening trust, solidarity and reciprocity among citizens, and by purposefully creating opportunities for participation.

UNV contributes to peace and development by advocating for recognition of volunteers, working with partners to integrate volunteerism into development programming, and mobilizing an increasing number and diversity of volunteers, including experienced UNV volunteers, throughout the world. UNV embraces volunteerism as universal and inclusive, and recognizes volunteerism in its diversity, as well as the values that sustain it: free will, commitment, engagement and solidarity.

For more information about UNV, please visit [www.unv.org](http://www.unv.org)