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SUCCESS STORY

Youth and Government Officials Debate Openly



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A participant passes the microphone after sharing her thoughts on improving Lebanon's educational system at a debate in the southern village of Marjayoun.

“Youth are a major and key component of the Lebanese society and public affairs. They are showing up in huge numbers, using media and journalism as an outlet to shed light upon their creative ideas.”

***—Minister of State for Administrative Reform
Ibrahim Shamseddine at a dialogue in Beirut on the effect of media on youth***

August 2009 – Hundreds of young people had a unique opportunity to voice their opinions on national issues at a series of high-profile debates that involved key political figures and focused on issues of concern to youth, such as lowering the voting age, youth unemployment, and the effect of media on youth.

Local nongovernmental organization (NGO) Shu'on Janoubiya (or Southern Affairs), with support from USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives, organized the series of seven debates in south Lebanon and Beirut's southern suburbs, a region of closed political environments where democratic discourse is rare.

“Youth are not used to having open dialogue about high-level issues,” said Mazen, 19, at the debate in the southern city of Nabatieh. “It's the first time we have such a great opportunity to discuss important topics with our mayor and other representatives.”

Before each of the debates, Shu'on Janoubiya held preparatory workshops where participants could sharpen their communication skills. And despite the tense electoral season, independents and politically affiliated youth engaged peacefully. When contentious topics like how to choose a candidate based on a platform as opposed to a political party came up, the participants were more interested in discussing their role in changing the current situation.

At the final event, youth affiliated with rival political parties and civic organizations participated in a debate on the role of young people in addressing educational challenges. In their speeches, student representatives stressed the need for reconciliation and more nonpartisan activities. Participant Ibrahim Younis said, “We should organize more civic workshops to gather political parties and student organizations for dialogue.”

As a follow-on activity, Shu'on Janoubiya will produce a booklet to be used as an advocacy tool. The publication will summarize the dialogues as well as participant recommendations and be disseminated to Members of Parliament, ministers, NGOs, and youth groups. In addition, acting on the idea of using media to advocate for social change, educator and publisher Dr. Maha Zara'et is providing youth with an opportunity to promote their causes in her magazine.