

# The Voice of Akkari Youth

## Calling for a Better Tomorrow



Mada Association - March 2012

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## **Calling for a Better Tomorrow**

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Canada



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## **Note**

The challenges and recommendations in this study are the opinions expressed by youth and adults in the Akkari community. They do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of Association Mada, the Canadian International Development Agency or the Regional Human Rights Peacebuilding Fund.

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**TABLE OF CONTENT**

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Youth and the Economy.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Youth and Education.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Youth and Health.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Youth in Politics and Decision Making.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Youth in Social Life.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Concluding Remarks.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Endnotes.....</b>	<b>24</b>





## Introduction

The youth are a powerful force that can build or destroy a nation. The Arab Spring has manifested the powerful role youth can play in shaping their country, bringing down decades-long ruling regimes. Young people possess boundless energy, fresh perspective and vitality. If this energy is rightly guided and made use of, it can be a great source for economic and social development.

Akkar is a densely populated and relatively isolated rural region in North Lebanon. With the highest dependency rate in the country, it houses a large quantity of young people. It is among the most disadvantaged regions in the country, suffering from poverty, unemployment, poor basic infrastructure and limited support from the public sector and civil society. Youth in this economically depressed region suffer from a lack of support, having a limited horizon of opportunities. They are neglected and marginalized, often seen by society as burden rather than as a great potential for growth. Their energy and abilities remain untapped.

“The voice of Akkari youth” aims to provide an insight into the reality of young man and women living in this marginalized region, the challenges they face in their daily life and what they need to be able to reach their full potential.

### Methodology

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This study is a collaborative effort by the Akkari Youth Platform and Association Mada. It is the result of a 1-year process, bringing together youth and adults from diverse socio-economic and political and sectarian backgrounds in the community of Upper Akkar, to identify the problems and needs facing youth in their region. This report meant as advocacy document to voice the concerns of youth in Akkar and mobilize the biggest number of actors to work on improving the living conditions of youth in this region and supporting them in moving towards the actualisation of their rights.

The report consists of demographic, socio-economic, educational and health status information that can be used to identify areas where targeted interventions and policy changes can have the greatest impact. The study addresses 5 key areas of intervention for young people’s development: health, education, the economy, the political sphere and the social sphere. Situational analyses are given for each priority area, followed by clear recommendations based on the expressed needs of youth and adults in Akkar. The report hopes to provide a helpful tool for any donors, development or governmental actors, who wish to work on youth issues in Akkar.

### Methods of Data Collection

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A desk review was undertaken to enrich the study with data and statistics concerning youth in Akkar. The challenges, recommendations and proposed interventions are based on the opinions of the youth and stakeholders, extracted from a comprehensive community-based assessment, which included the following components:

- Four field assessment on youth problems and needs, undertaken with youth in four villages in Akkar (Hrar, Qaba’it, Rahbe, Tikrit)
- Problems and needs analysis drafted by the 4 youth groups
- Youth advocacy and future action plan developed by the Akkari Youth Platform
- Workshop on youth problems and needs held with 4 youth support committees
- A series of focus groups held with various stakeholders in the community of Upper Akkar,

including parents, teachers, parents' committees

- A series of interviews with school directors, municipalities, women's committees and local NGOs

### Background Information

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This study is part of the project: "From the peripheries to the centre: Setting the path for youth participation in local development, human rights and peace building efforts", funded by Canadian International Development Agency through the Regional Human Rights Peace building Fund and implemented by Mada. The project aimed at empowering and uniting youth from different religious and political backgrounds to become agents of change in their community, advocating for their rights and actively participating in local development and peace building efforts.

Under this projects, 4 youth groups were established in the villages of Hrar, Qaba'it, Rahbe and Tikrit (in Upper Akkar), including a total of 125 young men and women in the aged 15 to 24 years. Each group followed a capacity-building program; designed and implemented a micro project in their village; assessed the problems and needs of youth in their community; and lobbied with their municipality for improvement. The 4 youth groups were united around their common problems and needs; drafted a joint advocacy action plan; and established a youth platform, inviting other youth groups in Akkar to join and make the voice of Akkari youth heard. In addition, the project activated communities' support for the youth through establishing 4 youth support committees in the villages, consisting of key stakeholders (municipality, teachers, directors, parents' council, NGOs). A workshop on youth rights was organised to brainstorm about problems and needs of youth.



# Youth and the Economy



## Facts and Figures

- Akkar has the highest poverty rates on national level: 63% of the families in this region live in poverty.
- Akkar accounts for 12.5% of the total number of deprived individuals in Lebanon.
- Individual average income in Akkar is the lowest in Lebanon.
- 73.1% of individuals in Akkar live on less than US\$107 per month versus (Lebanon 38.9%)
- The economic activity rate is low (26.2%) compared to national average (34.1%).<sup>1</sup>
- Female participation in economic life is very low (5.2%).<sup>2</sup>
- The age-dependency rate is the highest in the country (86.6%).
- 41% of the population is under 15 years old.<sup>3</sup>
- Males join the labour force at very young age: 3.8% in the 10-14 age group and 28.4% in the 15-19 age group).<sup>4</sup>
- Unemployment is estimated at 13.5% in Akkar, primarily affecting young adults.<sup>5</sup>
- Youth unemployment reaches 40% in Akkar (Lebanon 20%).<sup>6</sup>
- Outward migration rates are as high as 25%, compared to the registered population.
- Akkar is an agricultural district with an estimated 80% rural population.

## Challenges facing Youth

- 🌀 Living in the most deprived region of Lebanon, Akkari youth are tortured by **chronic poverty** with little hope for the future. The financial situation of many families is affecting the youth's access to education and health care, and the gradual increase in prices over the past years further declined the living conditions, making it hard for many families to secure their basic needs. **Female contribution to the family income** is very low, due to ruling traditions that are limiting women's participation in economic life.
- 🌀 Many young men in Akkar are forced to drop out of school to financially support their families. With little or no marketable skills, they end up as daily workers in exploitative and unskilled jobs in the big cities. Without social security and with no laws to protect them, they often end up being unemployed. Youth declared **high dropout rates** and the hopeless situation facing many of these **unskilled young men** as a major problem in their community. They said that many youth around them have left school before developing any competencies that will allow them to make a living and build a future. And in Akkar, educational institutions that help dropouts and working youth develop their potentials are missing.
- 🌀 Another major problem facing youth is the **lack of job opportunities** in Akkar. They attribute this mainly to the centralized administrative system and governmental neglect of peripheries such as Akkar, resulting in regional disparities and very **low economic activity in Akkar**. In addition, weak public investment has led to poor basic infrastructure (bad roads), making this region not very inviting for

investors and economic enterprises. There are hardly any industrial or commercial establishments in Akkar and most villages have no economic activity whatsoever. Agriculture, previously the main economic sector in Akkar, has seen a decline in the past years and farmers find it hard to market their produce and compete with imports from modernized agricultural communities.

- ④ **Work opportunities available for youth** in Akkar are generally limited to farming, fishing, teaching and some unskilled labour. Enrolment in the Lebanese army or General Security is also an option.
- ④ In the absence of job opportunities in Akkar, many youth (mainly males) leave their villages in search of work in the big cities. The ones that succeed in finding employment have to commute to their work every day, travelling long distances and spending hours on the road. Others, who can afford to pay rent, **migrate towards the cities** and only come back on the weekends or holidays.
- ④ The tremendous increase in fuel prices over the past years has made **transportation** from the village to the cities almost **unaffordable**, further decreasing youth's access to work opportunities.
- ④ The lack of job opportunities in Akkar is especially an **obstacle for young women**. This affects their **financial independence**, since many families find it inappropriate for girls to leave the parental house.
- ④ Youth also mentioned the scarcity of jobs in Lebanon and the low salaries available as an obstacle, pushing especially **educated and skilled youth** to **emigrate** towards the Gulf States or the West. However, a considerable amount of youth cannot afford to leave, either to the cities or abroad; they remain at home, unable to find a job. They feel useless and a burden to their families.
- ④ **Unemployment** was, however, categorized as the biggest problem youth have in Akkar, not only tormenting the unskilled dropout youth, but also the educated ones. Many educated youth have chosen their field of study without taking into consideration the demands of the job market. Their specializations are often overrepresented in Lebanon. Another obstacle to entry in the labour market is the **lack of practical work experience**. Their foreign language and IT skills are often weak and they lack knowledge on recruitment processes and job interviews.
- ④ **Sectarianism and clientelism** were mentioned by youth as a major obstacle hindering equal access to the job market, especially for the most deprived population. **Employment positions** are often ruled and **distributed based on clientelism and confessionalism** instead of competencies, while sectarian discrimination often exists at the workplace.
- ④ **Administrative corruption** and the abuse of positions to steal public money were also stated by the youth as a challenge in society and as a factor affecting the economy.
- ④ **Poverty and unemployment are leading to great economic and social problems**. Many youth cannot even dream of getting married and starting a family, because due to increases in prices of real estate and raw construction material, they can no longer buy or build a house. Low-interest housing loans are missing and the rise in rents has made it almost impossible for youth to rent a house in the big cities.
- ④ **Depression among youth is increasing** tremendously due to economic pressures and a lack of chances and opportunities. Many youth, especially the unemployed, feel frustrated about the present state of inequality, making them vulnerable to fall into the hands of extremist groups that often offer financial incentives.



## Needs and Recommendations

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- ✦ Guarantee employment on the basis of merit and work on **abolishing corruption, clientelism and confessionism** from the Lebanese society and government by **increasing the transparency and accountability of public institutions**. Put in place laws that make corruption and clientelism punishable, while establishing an effective mechanism to monitor and report perpetrators.
- ✦ Apply decentralization of the administrative system, giving greater autonomy to local authorities to achieve balanced regional development and guaranteeing equal growth.
- ✦ To solve Akkar's problems from the roots, youth are calling for a serious governmental commitment and a **comprehensive development program** that will work on **boosting economic activity** in the region, **creating job opportunities** and **improving the livelihoods** of Akkari families. This program should include the following elements:
  - **Allocate the necessary financial resources**, both governmental and private sector investments, for boosting the local economy.
  - **Improve basic infrastructure** related to roads, water, electricity and Internet to create a more attractive environment for investors and businesses.
  - Expand and **activate Qlai'at Airport** to become an international airport.
  - **Revive Akkar's agricultural sector**, including: rehabilitation of rural physical infrastructure; providing loans; technical trainings; improving agricultural practices and techniques; marketing development to open up markets to sell agricultural goods; developing agricultural processing and nutritional industry; and increase the efficiency of existing cooperatives.
  - Encourage the **establishment of industrial and commercial enterprises** in Akkar.
  - **Develop the tourism sector** by promoting Akkar's environmental and archaeological richness.
  - **Open up banks and governmental branches** in Akkar.
  - **Create a loan program** for small and medium enterprises in Akkar.
- ✦ **Create job opportunities** for youth in Akkar by boosting the local economy and encouraging employers to hire youth.
- ✦ Organize job fairs and open up an **employment office in Akkar** specialized in helping youth to find jobs.
- ✦ Provide **alternative educational facilities for dropouts and working youth** to enable them to continue their education and develop marketable skills.
  - Teach youth about entrepreneurship and provide unskilled youth with practical vocational training in required career fields, to help them find jobs, in combination with internships to make them more attractive candidates for employment.
  - Provide youth with micro-credits to establish enterprises.
- ✦ Develop links between the education system and the labour market to **match the educational curriculum to the labour market's skill demands** and make internships obligatory.
- ✦ Establish youth centres providing youth with **occupational guidance services** and professional programs that prepare them with the needed skills to enter into the job market, including ICT and foreign language trainings and workshops on recruitment processes (job interviews, CVs).
- ✦ Improve the youth's mobility and access to jobs and education by establishing an organized and **affordable transportation system**, improving roads and reducing the price of fuel.
- ✦ Provide youth with **subsidized housing facilities** in the cities and low interest loans to allow them to build a house in their village.
- ✦ Increase minimum wages and institute laws to protect consumers from unacceptable increases in prices.
- ✦ **Enhance women's participation in economic activities** through organizing vocational training for women that will help them secure an income, and in parallel establish awareness raising sessions for the community on women's rights.

# Youth and Education



## Facts and Figures

- Akkar has the highest illiteracy rates in the country, reaching 30.5% (Lebanon 13.6%).<sup>7</sup>
- Akkar records low enrolment rates at most educational levels: 83.5% for age group 6-12; 39.3% for 15-19; and 11.1% for 20-24.<sup>8</sup>
- Akkar has the lowest share of students enrolled at university level (Akkar 3%, Lebanon 9.4%).
- Rates of grade repetition are very high, especially in the fourth grade (Akkar 33.3%, Lebanon 9.3%).
- Akkar has the highest rate of schooling delay: 14.1% of the students aged 15-19 are enrolled at the primary level (Lebanon 3.5%).<sup>9</sup>
- Dropout rates are double the national average from the fourth grade up.
- The female to male ratio is 102% for primary level, 123.7% for intermediate level and 143.6% for secondary level.<sup>10</sup>

## Challenges facing Youth

- 🌀 The first challenge brought up by youth was the **high dropout rate** in their region. Poverty is a major factor in denying youth the opportunity to develop to their full potential. With low income levels and a high number of children per household, educational expenses (even for public schools) are often unbearable for parents. Educational enrolment at all levels is low compared to national average and a considerable proportion of young males drop out of school, before completing intermediate level, often to join the labour force and support their families. Villages offer no alternative educational facilities for overage students, illiterates and dropouts who wish to continue their education.
- 🌀 Youth also complained about the **bad quality of educational services** in their region, especially in public institutions. School buildings and playgrounds are in bad condition and classrooms are poorly equipped, cold, humid and often overcrowded with students. Schools also lack educational facilities, equipment and materials necessary to make learning attractive to students (i.e. computers, audiovisual equipment, laboratories, libraries). Moreover, extracurricular activities, such as art and sports are missing in most schools.
- 🌀 The **low qualifications of the teaching and administrative staff** in schools were mentioned by youth as a factor affecting the quality of education. The under-qualified teachers, lack knowledge in interactive teaching methods and classroom management, and many had no specialized degree in the subject taught. The curriculum is taught in an old-fashioned, boring way, making learning of little appeal to students. Part of the teachers are not motivated and invest little effort to ensure students understand the subject. They also lack awareness of the specific difficulties facing adolescents and the special needs of students with learning disabilities.
- 🌀 Public school students' and teachers' **low level of competence in French** was seen as a major obstacle, causing difficulties in properly understanding the textbooks and leading students to fail at school. **Teaching of English language and computer classes** is also missing in many schools in Akkar, putting

students at a disadvantage when entering university or the job market. Most villages **lack libraries or any form of educational, cultural or research centre**, and to attend language and computer courses youth have to travel to the district centre or Tripoli.

☉ Akkar suffers from **poor availability of secondary, technical and vocational schools** and the **absence of higher education services**. The existing vocational and technical schools are often poorly equipped and offer a limited variety of specializations.<sup>11</sup> Despite the fact that Akkar is home to an enormous number of young people, there is **no university** in this region. Many students are forced to seek specialized and higher education services outside the region, thus incurring the additional costs of transportation. The ones who cannot afford this are being denied their right to reach their full potential. This unavailability particularly affects girls, as many parents consider it culturally inappropriate for their daughters to leave the region to attend higher educational institutions. The Lebanese University in Tripoli is the nearest one available, but it has limited capacity in certain faculties, not corresponding with the number of students who need admission, and thus forces students to delay their university education for one year or choose another specialization.

☉ **Bad treatment and the use of violence**, both physical and mental, by teachers and administration was a major problem facing youth in school, leading to de-motivation, school failure and dropout. They also mentioned violation of student rights; insufficient time during exams; discrimination against students from certain social or political backgrounds; and the lack of respect between teachers and students as problems. At home, many youth suffer from violence and a **lack of educational support from their parents**, who are often illiterate or have limited awareness of the importance of education.

☉ Some youth mentioned being hindered by the administration in choosing the specialization they wanted in secondary schools. Parental interference and pressure in the **choice of study** is also a common problem. Youth in Akkar have hardly any access to educational and occupational guidance services to help them choose a field of study or work that corresponds with their personal qualities and abilities and with the demands of the economy. Moreover, a general **mismatch between educational curricula and the labour market's skill demands** is making it difficult for fresh graduates from this region to enter the job market.

☉ In this poor educational setting, **psychological problems among students** are aggravated and many youth feel neglected, frustrated or depressed, but most schools are missing any form of educational and psychosocial support for students. And in the absence of student councils in the majority of schools, students have no structure to meaningfully participate in their schools or voice their concerns.

### Needs and Recommendations

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☛ There is a need for a strong political decision by the Ministry of Education to play an active role in fighting the high dropout rates and **improving the quality of and access to education services** in Akkar.

☛ **Increase the age of compulsory education** to 16 and see to its implementation, guaranteeing that each student at least completes intermediate level education.



- ✚ Provide **financial support and scholarships** to students from less fortunate backgrounds.
- ✚ Make transportation easy and affordable for students (subsidize buses to transport students to university).
- ✚ Increase the **availability of educational services** to youth in Akkar by:
  - Building more secondary schools in remote areas.
  - Increasing the number of technical and vocational schools, equipping the existing ones and expanding the range of specializations offered.
  - Building higher education institutions and opening up a Lebanese University in Akkar that includes all faculties and offers all specializations.
  - Adjusting the admittance laws and regulations and making public university equally accessible to all without favouritism.
  - Establishing libraries including online research facilities and cultural centres in remote villages.
- ✚ Improve the **quality of existing educational services** (especially public schools) by:
  - Rehabilitating school buildings and playgrounds, and securing access to electricity, water, Internet connections and proper heating facilities, including a budget for fuel.
  - Supplying schools with properly equipped classrooms, libraries and science and computer labs.
- ✚ Guarantee high quality educational human resources by:
  - Providing schools with specialized and qualified teachers.
  - Organizing trainings for school administration and building the capacities of teachers in their subject taught as well as in interactive teaching methods, classroom management, student friendly pedagogy and disability issues, to enable them to teach using a student centered and more appealing approach.
  - Developing an effective monitoring system and evaluating the performance of the teaching staff and school administration to guarantee quality education and good treatment of students.
- ✚ Work on **building a friendly and stimulating learning environment** for students by:
  - Prohibiting the use of violence in schools and establishing, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, a mechanism to monitor and report the use of violence and punish violators.
  - Guaranteeing equal treatment of students regardless of their social and political background.
  - Organizing extracurricular activities carried out by teachers to improve the relationship between teachers and students and spread a culture of mutual respect and collaboration.
  - Providing schools with a psycho-social counsellor to offer educational and psychological assistance to students facing difficulties and raise the awareness of school staff and parents on specific characteristics and needs of teenagers.
  - Building the capacity of parents and teachers to improve teaching and parenting skills to allow them to build a stimulating learning environment for youth, while establishing a good partnership between home and school based on a common pedagogic approach.
  - Establishing student councils and empowering them to be able to advocate for student rights and needs.
- ✚ Provide schools with teachers and equipment to integrate **extra-curricular activities** into the school curriculum (sport, art, music) and integrate awareness sessions and **religious education** into the official curriculum.
- ✚ Improve **foreign language and computer skills** of teachers and students and provide schools with specialized teachers and computers, while integrating the subjects of English language and IT into the official educational curriculum.
- ✚ Offer **remedial classes** for weak students and **support classes** for students in the exam years.
- ✚ Provide students with **educational and occupational guidance services** and organize orientation fairs to help youth in choosing the right field of study or work in correspondence with their qualities and abilities.
- ✚ Provide **alternative educational facilities** for overage students, illiterates, dropouts and working youth to enable them to continue their education.



## Youth and Health



### Facts and Figures

- 65% of residents in Akkar lack any form of health insurance (Lebanon 58%).
- This remote and densely populated region has the lowest number of hospitals and beds in Lebanon with 5 hospitals (426 beds) serving 255,000 inhabitants.<sup>12</sup>
- Akkar ranks last in Lebanon with only 53.8% of houses connected to the public water supply.
- Environmental pollution is contaminating drinking water sources and affecting general health.
- The highest number of water born diseases in the country is registered in Akkar.
- Akkar has the lowest levels of pre- and post-natal care<sup>13</sup> in Lebanon at 74%.
- Infant and child mortality rates are the second highest in the country. Infant mortality rate is 37 per 1,000 (Lebanon 27). The under-five mortality rate is 51 per 1,000 (Lebanon 35).<sup>14</sup>
- People with disabilities in Akkar have hardly any access to specialized services, thus being denied the chance to adequately participate in educational and economic life.
- Medical assistants are missing in most public schools in Akkar.

### Challenges facing Youth

- 🌀 Youth mentioned the high level of **environmental pollution** in their region. In the absence of awareness and a proper waste management system, solid waste is being openly dumped into nature. The **quality of drinking water** is doubtful and most houses have no connection to the public water network. Kidney diseases and operations for the removal of kidney stones are common among most families in Akkar.
- 🌀 A considerable proportion of Akkari youth and their family members are not covered by any form of **health insurance** and cannot afford primary or preventive health care. Good health is something they pray for every day, since becoming sick can lead to an enormous financial burden on the already deprived households.
- 🌀 **Access to affordable and quality health care** is a great challenge mentioned by youth living in the remote and under-privileged area of Akkar. This is especially true for **youth with disabilities**. Many villages have no ambulances and lack any form of basic health services. Getting to the nearest hospital is often a challenge, involving long travel distances on roads that are in bad conditions, especially during wintertime.
- 🌀 Another concern pointed out by youth was the **availability of health care services** and the **poor quality** of the existing ones. Hospitals and health dispensaries in Akkar suffer from a shortage of equipment and specialized physicians, forcing the poor residents of Akkar, in need of specialized medical services and better hospitals to travel outside the region, incurring extra expenses.
- 🌀 Access to **health information**, particularly on **reproductive and sexual health** is a challenge for youth in Akkar. Many youth enter marriage without proper knowledge about sex and reproduction, and

only a few have knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases. These subjects remain a taboo in the social culture. Sexual and reproductive health awareness is excluded from the education curriculum and most parents are reluctant to discuss such issues openly. Youth obtain their information from the media or through their peers, often resulting in misinformation and further ignorance on sexual and reproductive health related matters, putting them at a higher risk for reproductive health diseases. Youth furthermore mentioned the lack of awareness on the risks of **marriage between relatives and early marriage** as a problem.

- 🌀 The rate of **smoking** among youth is increasing tremendously. Bored, young males are especially vulnerable to risky behaviour. They visit coffee houses to smoke water pipe and slowly become addicted to cigarettes and sometimes more grave stuff.
- 🌀 Another issue of serious concern is substance abuse. **Drug use and irresponsible alcohol consumption** are gradually growing among youth in Akkar. The state of depression facing youth and the lack of awareness among adults to deal with these matters, in combination with a sense secrecy and denial, makes this problem at risk of spreading further in Akkar.

## Needs and Recommendations

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- 🌀 **Improve access to safe water and sanitation** through establishing public water and sewage networks and recycling plants.
- 🌀 **Prevent environmental pollution** by providing villages with an adequate solid waste management system, while raising the awareness of the population to **improve environmental and hygiene practices**, through village events, including theatre and art activities.
- 🌀 **Ensure the youth's access to quality health facilities** and services by including all youth in the public health insurance plan and making quality health care available for the less fortunate people who cannot afford it.
- 🌀 **Improve the quantity and quality of health care services** in Akkar, while taking into account the special needs of youth with disabilities. This means building hospitals; improving health dispensaries; encouraging specialized physicians to open a clinic in Akkar, providing remote villages with fully equipped ambulances, etc.
- 🌀 Provide youth with **sexual and reproductive health care** services and information, namely by the development and implementation of an information and education strategy to increase youth's and adults' awareness of mental, sexual and reproductive health issues and risky behaviours.
- 🌀 **Organize awareness sessions** and activities for parents and youth on the **risks of early marriage and marriage between relatives**.
- 🌀 Increase youth's **access to mental health services**, by providing them with youth-sensitive and confidential counselling services.
- 🌀 Implement a **prevention and intervention strategy on substance abuse and smoking**, targeting youth, parents, school staff, NGOs and active stakeholders in community. This strategy includes:
  - Increasing the prices of cigarettes and enforcing a law to prohibit smoking in public spaces.
  - Reducing and controlling advertisement boards and TV spots on cigarettes and alcoholic drinks.
  - Organizing awareness activities (campaigns, theatre, movies, lectures) for youth and adults on the dangers of smoking, drug use and irresponsible alcohol consumption.
  - Organizing sport and entertaining activities at the village level to provide alternative leisure opportunities for bored or depressed youth.
  - Providing schools with a psycho-social counsellor, who can build the capacity of teachers to better support the youth, offer counselling services for students at risk and their parents, encouraging empathy and open communication, while improving parental skills to monitor and follow-up.

# Youth in Politics and Decision Making

## Facts and Figures

- The voting age in Lebanon is 21 years.
- The age of becoming eligible for election to parliament and municipality is 25.
- Youth can join an association at the age of 18.
- Youth are able to form associations at the age of 20.

## Challenges facing Youth

- ☉ Youth mentioned the **centralized administrative system** in Lebanon as the first challenge facing Akkar on the political level, with decisions being taken in Beirut while solutions are to be found in the region itself. **Many municipalities in their region are unable to be effective**, due to the lack of entitlement and the absence of the needed financial resources and qualified human resources. The marginalization and political neglect of Akkar was identified as the main reason for the present state of deprivation. According to youth, politicians only remember Akkar at election times.
- ☉ Youth also stated that they have been significantly impacted by the political and economic turbulence since 2005, made worse by the war in 2006, and further aggravated by **unstable political dynamics and rising social tensions in community**. The existence of armed groups and political parties in society was furthermore mentioned as stress factor among the youth.
- ☉ A worrying fact highlighted was the **lack of awareness of youth on democratic governance** and the way they were sometimes misled and mobilized by the political media (sometimes towards violent rebellion) and **used for political aims**, initially by the family and later by political parties.
- ☉ Youth projects and **youth clubs are often politicized** by families and political parties. Likewise **student councils at universities** are politicized and hardly deal with educational issues.
- ☉ Youth are worried about **the increasing sectarianism and intolerance among youth**, which sometimes results in violence and discrimination against people from other political and religious backgrounds.
- ☉ Another challenge is the very nature of the **sectarian political system** in Lebanon, which is, according to youth nourishing sectarian division and social tensions. **Regional differences and familial rivalries** at the village level are also common, dividing villages and hindering young people's ability to interact with their peers.
- ☉ Political representatives are often chosen based on familial and political criteria instead of competencies. People at large support political leaders blindly, sometimes to the point of violence, without questioning their performance, while it is not uncommon that **some representatives use their positions as a tool to increase their wealth** and to exact privileges for themselves, their relatives and their clients, instead of protecting the interests of their community.
- ☉ **Corruption and bribery in politics, especially during elections**, was another concern, with politicians buying people's votes. They furthermore mentioned the familial pressure and **lack of freedom in choosing their representatives** during elections.
- ☉ As a result, part of the youth population in Akkar feels a **deep distrust and aversion towards politics**. For them this word is considered an insult synonymous to "manipulation, abuse, lying and stealing". Another part of the youth eagerly wants to participate in political life and bring about positive change in the status quo, but feels frustrated for not having the power to do something.

- ☉ **Young people in Akkar are excluded from political and decision-making processes.** They have no political representation, cannot vote until the age of 21 or even belong to political parties. Youth also lack democratic structures in which they can voice their concerns and influence others. There are no youth committees in municipalities, student councils are missing in most schools, and there are hardly any active youth centres or clubs in the villages.
- ☉ **Social traditions and public attitudes in Akkar hinder youth participation,** as engaging in discussion with an adult is considered by many as a sign of disrespect and disobedience. **The opinions, problems and needs of the youth remain unheard.** Youth political participation is not believed to be important by many adults; some think that the youth don't have the mental capacity to take decisions. They have a negative image of adolescents, often considering them immature or troublemakers.
- ☉ Youth stated that they **feel marginalized and neglected,** not only by the Lebanese government and society in general, but even within their own communities. This feeling of under-representation, coupled with frustrations and a **low sense of belonging,** leads some young people to become involved in criminal behaviour and sectarian violence, and also increases their **risk of falling into the hands of extremist groups** that provide them with a sense of belonging and power.
- ☉ The last challenge in the political field mentioned by youth was the **low female participation in political life** and women's poor representation in parliament and municipal councils.



## Needs and Recommendations

- ⚡ The need for a strong political decision to **lift Akkar up from its present state of deprivation:**
  - **Proclaim Akkar as governorate and apply decentralization,** giving greater autonomy to local authorities.
  - **Build the capacity of municipalities** and provide them with financial resources.
  - Organize media campaigns to introduce Akkar to the world. Establish a webpage to **present the needs of Akkar** and mobilize celebrities and political figures to support Akkar and **lobby for improvements.**
- ⚡ The need for **good governance,** putting in place an effective monitoring system, especially before and during the elections, to **increase transparency and accountability** and **fight corruption and clientelism.**
- ⚡ The **abolition of the sectarian political system** and the adaption of laws that make sectarian discrimination punishable.
- ⚡ Work on **building social cohesion and encourage tolerance,** by promoting an “all inclusive” approach, through:
  - Organizing awareness sessions for youth and adults on the dangers of political sectarianism and the negative effects of the political struggle on the economy of the region.

- Implementing of **joint development projects** between villages from different political and sectarian backgrounds.
- Establishing **heterogeneous student councils**, representing all sectarian and political affiliations and dealing with student's concerns instead of politics.
- Integrating **democracy and human rights education into the school curriculum** to promote freedom of speech and tolerance.

🚩 **Build the capacity of youth** to be able to fulfil their right to participation:

- **Organize trainings for youth** on democratic practices, election processes, municipal work, leadership, negotiation, critical thinking, lobbying and advocacy, allowing them to become informed and proactive citizens who have the skills to partner with local governments and properly choose their representatives.
- **Hold awareness raising sessions on the risks of political corruption and clientelism**, which deny people their freedom of speech.

🚩 **Improve youth access to political and decision-making processes, by:**

- Lowering the age of voting to 18 and allow youth to run for election at 21.
- **Establishing youth committees in the municipality** and include youth in all other specialized municipal committees.
- Increasing youth participation in decision-making processes at all levels by **raising the awareness of the state, municipalities, parents and school staff on youth rights** and stimulating them to listen to youth and integrate their opinions, problems and needs into decisions, actions and policies that affect them.
- **Establishing student councils** in schools and **youth committees** in villages to advocate for youth rights and mobilize their peers.
- **Involving youth in group and community activities**, through committees and NGOs, giving them leadership roles, responsibilities and a chance to prove their abilities and earn respect, to improve the way society looks at youth and decrease age discrimination.

🚩 **Raise the awareness of women and the community on the importance of women's participation in political life, and work on eliminating discrimination against women. Adopt a law that guarantees a quota of 50% for women in political positions.**





## Youth in Social Life



### Facts and Figures

- The population of Akkar was estimated to be over 255,000 inhabitants in 1997, accounting for 6.4 percent of the total population of Lebanon.<sup>15</sup>
- Akkar has the largest average family size in the country, with 6.1 members per family (Lebanon 4.8). Families tend to have a large number of children.
- The population of Akkar is mixed, consisting primarily of Sunni Muslims mixed with Christians and a minority of Alawite and Shi'ite villages.
- Many villages are homogeneous in terms of population composition.

### Challenges facing Youth

- ☉ One of the biggest challenges, according to the youth, not only in Akkar, but in the whole of Lebanese society, is **sectarianism in all aspects of life** (in politics, at the workplace and in school, in the social spheres and even in love life). Many youth in Akkar live isolated in their often-homogeneous villages, having little contact with people from other sects and other villages. The existence of religious schools further increases segregation. There is little knowledge of the “other” and **many prejudices and stereotypes prevail**, that were ones born in the civil war and fed on a daily basis by the political arena.
- ☉ Moreover, the **sectarian political conflict** in Lebanon ever since 2005 has divided the country into 2 camps (March 8 and March 14). This split is manifest in most villages, dividing even people from the same sect or family. Tensions have steadily been increasing over the past years, especially after the unrest in Syria. In tandem, the occurrence of incidents of sectarian violence in the region has risen. Young people have been inevitably affected and an **increase in sectarianism and intolerance** among them is noticed.
- ☉ **Conflicts between neighbouring villages and family rivalries** are also a challenge in Akkar, dividing society and hindering youth in interacting with their peers. They also mentioned the arrogance of certain families and the **discrimination against people from lower social classes** as problems in society. Gossiping and jealousies between people in the village and in families were in addition mentioned as a source of misery, leading to conflict.
- ☉ Another challenge was the **dominating patriarchal society**, which causes poor representation of women rights in community and **gender discrimination** at home, work and in people's love lives. Some girls are still being married against their will.
- ☉ The biggest challenge for youth was, however, on the home front. The youth said they suffer from the **traditional and authoritarian methods** which many parents use in raising their children. The parents practice too much influence and authority over the youth, restricting their freedom, prohibiting them from interacting with certain people and denying them participation in activities or clubs. Youth also complained about too strict implementation of customs and traditions by some parents. **Parental pressure in decisions related to study and marriage** was also common. Youth said their views were not sought and parents were often ignorant of the problems and needs of their children, and therefore irresponsive to youth capacities and potentials.
- ☉ The **absence of dialogue** is also causing frustration among youth. They said they felt that parents don't understand them, and that they missed emotional support and a place to talk about their feelings and

thoughts. Others suffered from **parental neglect** and a total **lack of guidance** or interest from their parents' side. Their parents don't take responsibility and hardly give any love and care. The economic pressures of many families in their region, in addition to a high number of children and often-illiterate parents, were highlighted as a main cause for this **weak support and encouragement** for youth **on the home front**. Parents are often stressed and tired and unable to give attention. Added to that, the political tensions and threat of deterioration of safety conditions due to the unrest in Syria are causing a negative home environment, creating stress on youth and adults.

- ☉ Another phenomenon, among families, is the spoiling of youth on a materialistic level, resulting in them becoming materialistic and irresponsible adults, unable to be financially responsible.
- ☉ **Domestic violence**, both physical and mental, was also a problem facing youth in this deprived region. Although common in many homes, domestic abuse is in general under-reported because of social and religious taboo and dependence on the family and fear. Taboos also surrounded important subjects such as love, reproductive health and substance abuse. Many parents **lack knowledge on adolescents' characteristics** and special needs. They don't know how to deal with them. Some parents treat youth as children; others expect them to be adults too early and put too much responsibility on their shoulders.
- ☉ Youth also found little support at school and in their villages. **They feel marginalized in their community** with hardly any opportunities to participate. Their problems and needs were often unknown and their opinions unheard. They suffer from **communities' negative image of youth** and a lack of trust in their abilities. These inefficiency of parental and community support, and lack of opportunities and chances for youth to participate and feel productive, has resulted in **passive citizenship and a low sense of belonging among youth in Akkar**. Many have no motivation, lack self-confidence and are afraid to take responsibility, depending instead on others. They feel empty and lost with no mission or goal in life.
- ☉ Some youth expressed the wish to be actively involved in their community, but adults' attitudes towards youth participation and a lack sufficient experience discourages them from doing so. They also **lack the skills to attract funds to implement activities and projects**. A public place to hold meetings and organise activities is missing in most villages, and there are hardly any active organisations and associations at the village level. The existing ones lack human the capacity, experience and financial means to be active.
- ☉ Akkari youth also addressed the **lack of facilities and activities** in their community **to develop their cultural and creative abilities** or to entertain themselves. There are **no sports activities**, sports fields or clubs where they can be active.
- ☉ As a result, many **youth feel bored** and the only available option for leisure is the Internet cafe, playing cards or smoking water pipe, leading to an **increase in smoking among youth**. Others hang out on the streets, becoming vulnerable for negative influences from bad boys and increasing the **risk of lapse into bad behaviour** (i.e. vandalism, violence, harassment of girls) or becoming involved in criminal behaviour and sectarian violence. Youth cited the **regression in the moral standards** of the youth and the **lack of religious values** as growing challenge in their community. They referred to the bad influence of some television programs and the Internet on the youth (visiting unethical sites).
- ☉ Youth also point out the growth of **psychological problems and depression** among their peers, caused by family problems, socio-economic pressures and a lack of future prospects, leading some to seek relief in using **alcohol and drugs**, or even in the extreme cases committing **suicide**.

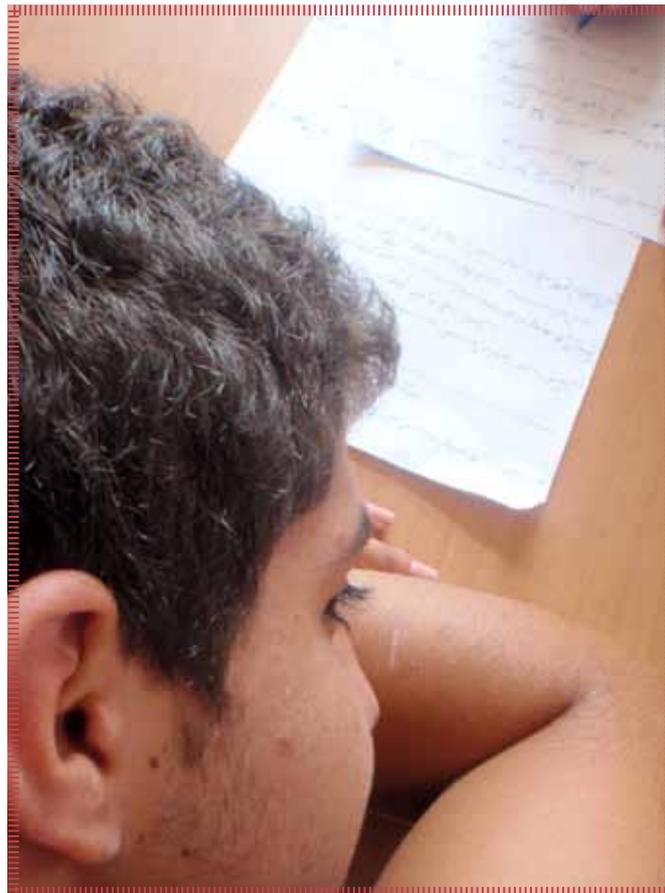


## Needs and Recommendations

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- ✦ Work on building social cohesion and trust in society and **eliminating discrimination** on basis of religious, politics, social class or familial background by **promoting a culture of tolerance, dialogue, mutual understanding and respect for others**.
  - Raise the awareness of youth and adults on the dangers of extremism and discrimination through seminars, lectures, campaigns, movies and plays.
  - Create opportunities for interaction and integration of the different factions in society through providing **public spaces** (public gardens, clubs, cultural centres) and organising **events** (festivals, fairs, markets) where people from different sects meet and interact
  - **Bring together youth from different sects and regions** in entertaining activities (trips, summer camps, sports events) to help in building a positive, long-lasting relation between them, and organise **workshops** for youth on the following topics: open communication, conflict management, human rights and the culture of forgiveness and peace.
  - Encourage inter-sectarian dialogue, respect and understanding through organising **inter-sectarian discussions** and lectures on different religions and ideologies.
  - Implement **joint community projects**, encouraging youth to work together for a common goal to serve their community and stimulate the development of joint development projects between villages from different political and sectarian backgrounds.
  - **Create non-sectarian non-political organisations and centres** that promote openness, tolerance and integration, while working on preventing segregation and extremism, convincing youth to stay away from family rivalries and sectarian violence.
- ✦ **Promote women rights and gender equality**, through awareness-raising sessions.
- ✦ Work on **building a supportive and stimulating environment for youth**, by:
  - Raising the **awareness of adults** on youth problems and needs, and the **difficulties of the adolescent's phase**, through lectures, seminars, movies and theatre plays highlighting the danger of violence and neglect and displaying the psychological pressure and sufferings of youth, to increase adults' empathy and understanding toward youth.
  - Building the capacity of parents and teachers to **strengthen parenting and teaching skills**, focusing on non-violent pedagogical methods, enabling them to better guide and support youth, while encouraging open communication, dialogue and understanding between youth and adults.
  - Providing schools and communities with **psycho-social counsellors** to offer assistance to youth facing difficulties and youth at risk, including **family counselling services** to connect parents with their children.
- ✦ **Building the capacities of existing NGOs** and stimulating cooperation and exchange of experience between associations to enable them to play an active role in supporting and guiding youth and organising activities at the village level.
- ✦ Implement a **prevention and early intervention strategy on substance abuse and smoking**, targeting youth and adults, and including: psychosocial support for addicted youth; capacity building for parents and teachers to enable them to better monitor and support youth; and awareness activities (campaigns, theatre shows, movies, lectures) for youth and adults on the dangers of smoking, drug use and irresponsible alcohol consumption.
- ✦ **Enhance social and moral values**, through **integrating social and religious education into the school curriculum**, focusing on tolerance and respect for others, avoiding extremism. Raise the awareness of parents on the risks of the extremely strict implementation of culture and traditions in raising children and its adverse effects on youth.
- ✦ **Protect youth from the bad influence of TV and Internet**, through putting in place a monitoring device by the Ministry of Information to monitor and control timing of television programs and protect youth from abusive and immoral programs. Also, encourage close monitoring in Internet cafes and by parents at home.

- **Provide youth with constructive leisure activities**, by:
  - Developing **recreational and cultural facilities** and activities at the village level.
  - Demanding support from the Ministry of Youth and Sports to **activate the sports sector** in Akkar, establishing sports clubs and sports fields, and reviving the existing ones to instil in youth a sporting spirit and encourage positive competition.
- **Foster active citizenship amongst the youth** and increase their sense of belonging, by:
  - Raising the awareness of adults on youth rights and needs and moving them to **encourage youth participation in community activities**.
  - Encouraging youth to volunteer in associations and **establish youth committees** and clubs.
  - Stimulating youth to **participate in the protection of the environment** by helping them in organising environmental activities.
- **Empower youth with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence** to be actively involved in their community, contributing to local development, through:
  - **Capacity-building trainings for youth** in active citizenship, life skills, negotiation, networking, lobbying, advocacy, proposal writing, project management and fundraising.
  - **Funding youth driven micro-projects**, allowing youth to actively work on improving their reality and granting them the chance to prove their abilities and earn respect, to **improve the way society looks at youth** and decrease age discrimination.





## Concluding Remarks

It is hoped that the needs and priorities expressed by youth in this document will translate into concrete actions and projects on the ground and trigger investments for programming that targets this population group. The hope is also, that it will encourage the adoption of national youth policies and action plans, aimed not only at fostering youth human capital development, but also at providing youth with opportunities to reach their full potentials in education, employment, health and to participate in public and political life, expanding their choices and freedoms, and allowing them to enjoy a decent standard of living.

If nothing is done, there is a high risk that the situation of youth in Akkar will further deteriorate, with all the consequences that would follow in terms of increased unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. Greater social and economic inequality between regions can create more frustrations and feelings of injustice, increasing the tensions between the different groups in society and causing further segregation within the Lebanese society. It will also enhance migration rates, leading to a further loss of the country's human resource capital. Moreover, a high number of impoverished, frustrated youth with no future prospects and no opportunities for advancement can destabilize the country's context, increasing the risk of criminality, extremism and the incidence of political violence.

On the other hand, investing in youth can foster economic growth, social inclusion and political stability in the country. Employing this boundless source of energy and vitality that youth possess and making use of their potentials and innovative ideas, can help in building a stronger nation.

Throughout its work in Akkar, Mada experienced that investing in youth is the most lucrative action of all, given the catalysis effect they have on their peers and community. Youth in this deprived region are eager to put in all their efforts to improve their reality. The youth groups created under Mada's project have demonstrated that with a little financial support and a great portion of trust in their abilities, they were able to realise great results, much like a short rainfall in a desert can create a sea of flowers. To conclude, the voice of Akkari youth is not only one of deprivation and despair. It is also a voice of hope and determination to build a better future and a country to be proud of.



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Source: "Akkar: a Story of Deprivation", UNDP and MoSA, February 2000.
- 2 Source: "Akkar: a Story of Deprivation", UNDP and MoSA, February 2000.
- 3 Source: "Population and Housing Survey", MoSA and UNFPA, 1996.
- 4 Source: "Akkar: a Story of Deprivation", UNDP and MoSA, February 2000.
- 5 Source: "Akkar: a Story of Deprivation", UNDP and MoSA, February 2000.
- 6 Source: UNICEF 2011.
- 7 Source: "Population and Housing Survey", MoSA and UNFPA, 1996. 23.1% of males and 37.8% of females 10 years of age and above in Akkar are illiterate.
- 8 Sources: "Population and Housing Survey", MoSA and UN Population Fund, 1996 and "Akkar: a Story of Deprivation", UNDP – MoSA, February 2000.
- 9 Source: Central Administration for Statistics.
- 10 Source: "Conference Paper for the Seminar on the Development of Akkar Region – Lebanese Parliament", Ministry of Education and Higher Education CERD, 2006. Dropout rates for the 4th grade are 5.5% in Akkar (Lebanon 1.5%) and 6.7% for the 6th grade (Lebanon 3.7%).
- 11 Source: Ministry of Education and Higher Education, in the year 2004-2005.
- 12 Source: "Formulation of a Strategy for Social Development in Lebanon; Community Development Component", ESFD-CDR, 2005.
- 13 Source: National Progress Report for Lebanon, submitted at the UN World Summit for Children, 2001.
- 14 Source: "Millennium Development Goals Lebanon Report", Lebanese Republic, September 2003.
- 15 Source: Central Administration for Statistics.



