Youth as a Seismograph for Societal Problems

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Over the course of the last two years, 2011 and 2012, youths around the world have protested in a variety of contexts and forms. More than the various manifestations of their protests – from political upheaval in Tunisia or Chile to violence in Syria – it is youths' worries about their own place in society that unify them.

Analysis

Even in the most divergent societies, youth are perceived as a problem group, despite the fact that a consistent definition of what constitutes youth has been absent to date. To base such a definition exclusively on age would be misleading: other factors, for example, social position, would remain unconsidered. No longer children but not yet part of the circle of adults, youths find themselves both physically and socially in a phase of transition. For very different reasons, they rebel against established orders and authorities and question existing boundaries and conventions. However, even under very difficult political and economic conditions, youths only head onto the streets *en masse* when they see no prospects for the transition into adult life. The forms their protests take reveal fundamental societal processes and problems.

■ Young people grow up with expectations about the transition into adult life that, because of rapid social change, can now scarcely be realized.

■ The lifeworlds of youths and their problems with the entry into adult life are, despite all the differences, comparable worldwide.

■ The mobilization of youths and the nature of their protests are closely connected with the socialization processes and types of cohesion within a society.

■ Whether and how youth are able to complete central transitions into adult life can serve as an early warning indicator of key societal problems.

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The Years 2011 and 2012 – A Time of Worldwide Youth Protests

In the last two years, 2011 and 2012, predominantly young people have protested worldwide against authoritarian regimes; social grievances; and, most recently, the power of banks and rating agencies. Some media outlets have compared these youth protests with those of 1968, when youths in many cities around the world also took to the streets. Now as then, the question of which attributes are common to the protest movements in the various regions has arisen. For one thing, the proportion of young men and women among the protestors is relatively high; for another, the protests are about central questions regarding the future of society. This applies, regardless of the concrete reason, to the protests of the Arab Spring as much as to the Occupy movement in the financial centers.

Transitions into Adulthood

The term "youth" generally denotes a life stage that involves the transition from life in the private environment of primary networks (family, clan, community) into the public sphere of society. While the transition from child to youth is closely connected with puberty and the reaching of sexual maturity, the transition from youth to adulthood is tied to the completion of central rites of passage. Through the associated processes, and sometimes in connection with rituals, youth become an active part of the society; responsibility for their own lives, as well as for the respective community, is handed over to them. The concrete possibilities and conditions for the completion of these transitions are historically and culturally defined and thus very different. However, there are three central rites of passage into adult life that apply worldwide:
1) Marriage and the starting of a family: In most societies, particularly in the countries of the Global South, this was and is the most important milestone for achieving adulthood.
2) Entry into the labor market: The resulting economic independence from parents or other family networks is in many cases simultaneously a central condition for starting a family.
3) Acquisition and exercise of civil rights: This is dependent to a large degree on the particular political system and the specific possibilities for participation and entails, for example, active and passive voting rights once one has reached a particular age or participation in other societal decisions in various contexts (local, national, state, civil society, etc.).

Despite historical changes and the different weight assigned to them, these rites of passage remain important markers along the path into adult life worldwide. Due to extended formal schooling and vocational training, the life phase "youth" has become longer in almost all regions. In those places where youths' transition into adult life is blocked as a result of economic, social or political developments, the length of the "youth" phase has been extended against the will of these youths. It is for this reason that in some societies in Africa, the Middle East and even Europe 30-year-olds are still considered youths; without their own income, they are economically dependent on their parents or families and thus unable to start a family. In the Middle East, one can speak of a "generation in waiting" (Dhillon and Yousef 2010). This situation is most certainly an important reason for the strong mobilization of youth as part of the Arab Spring. However, in other contexts as well, the process of becoming an adult resembles an obstacle course with an uncertain outcome – for instance, where access to appropriate training and education, which is key to economic independence, is absent. The protests of university students in Chile in 2011 and Mexico in 2012 exemplify this.

A particular problem is the divergence, under current conditions, of individual and collective notions regarding the rites of passage into adult life and the concrete possibilities to actually realize them. Families, schools and community produce expectations within the framework of socialization processes, both on the part of youths and on the part of adults, as to the necessary rites of passage and conditions for complete membership in the particular society. In many cases, however, these transitions do not occur due to rapid social change, economic crises and societal upheavals. The majority of the protests over the past two years have been driven by the fact that young people either view their opportunities to complete central transitions as restricted or want to expand them.

In almost all regions of the world, exceptional events or developments occurred before the acceleration of the protests and provided the moti-

vation behind them. In Tunisia this was the self-immolation of a young vegetable vendor who had been harassed by the police; in Chile it was the government's refusal to change the statute of the central university; and in London it was the death of a 29-year-old man during a police operation. The initial protests and acts of violence find many supporters and copycats, who in some circumstances have the same, but at times completely different, goals. The reaction of the particular government and its security forces plays a central role in the continuation and escalation. A look at the lifeworlds in the different regions of the world makes clear which problems are especially difficult for youths.

Lifeworlds

Despite all the differences, there are three processes that today influence the lifeworlds of youth: demographic developments; urbanization and migration; and, last but not least, globalization.

Demographic changes are a central component of the processes of social change. At the beginning of November 2011, the United Nations welcomed the seven billionth world citizen. Both the region in which this child was born and the demographic realities of the immediate environment will decisively impact its life prospects. Industrial societies such as Germany have a steadily aging population. This theoretically improves younger people's chances in the labor market, but at the same time puts pressure on the social welfare system. In contrast, in the poorest developing countries more than half of the population is under 20 years old. It is these societies that will continue to grow in the coming decades. The dependency ratio, among other things, makes clear the accompanying problems. While this ratio lies at 41.5 for East Asia and the Pacific, it is more than twice as high in South Africa at 83.5. In contrast, from a demographic perspective societies with decreasing birth rates and increasing life expectancy have the chance of "demographic dividends" when they are able to increase growth and wealth as a result of a high proportion of the population being of working age. China's rigorous one-child policy is an answer to the challenges of demographic change.

Migration and *urbanization* also influence the lifeworlds and thus the transitions of youths worldwide. In agrarian societies youth continue to gradually grow into the adult world and take on successive social duties. However, in many cases they have no access to education beyond the primary school level. Migration and urbanization offer a way out. Yet the barriers to transborder migration are increasing worldwide, particularly at the interfaces between developing and industrial countries. For instance, the USA has been building an extensive separating wall at the Mexican border, and the EU intercepts refugees and migrants on the Mediterranean Sea. Yet event though illegal migration entails dangers, it nevertheless offers opportunities for social mobility and a way out of traditional roles and precarious living conditions – for example, a lack of social infrastructure or educational opportunities. The 2009 *Human Development Report* (UNDP 2009: 67) found that migrants, even in societies where they are forced to move due to armed conflict, can improve their human development level by up to 23 percent. It is thus little wonder that youths represent one-third of transborder migrants worldwide. The number of those who migrate within country borders is certainly significantly higher, but no internationally comparable data on this phenomenon exist.

The year 2010 was presumably the first in human history in which the majority of the population lived in cities. The most rapidly growing cities in the world are located in countries of the Global South – led by Mumbai and Mexico City with approximately 20 million residents each and numerous metropolises with approximately 10 million residents (for example, Cairo, Manila, Lagos, Jakarta).

Yet for youth, migration and urbanization are connected not only with chances but also with dangers: Youths are in many cases left to care for themselves in the cities; are responsible, as the head of the family, for younger siblings; or must work in order to contribute to their family's livelihood. Charles Dickens described the accompanying conflicts in nineteenth-century London strikingly in his novel *Oliver Twist*. Surviving today in the slums of Calcutta or the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro is different, but not easier. Here too it is the social infrastructure – which is especially important for children and youths, above all in the health and education systems – that is absent, and informal networks at least partially replace state institutions.

The increasing interconnectedness of the world in the context of *globalization* has ultimately led to fundamental changes in the demands on

Table 1: Demography and Urbanization

	Proportion of Youth (15- to 25-years-old) in the Population, 2009		Proportion of Youth in Cities, 2005	
	In percent	Examples	In percent	Examples
World	17.6		50	
Africa (incl. North Africa)	20.2	Mauritius 18.0 Egypt 20.2 Zimbabwe 25.2	41	Burundi 11 Sudan 41 Gabon 84
Asia (incl. the Middle East)	18.1	Japan 9.9 China 16.9 India 19.3 Maldives 24.5	43	Sri Lanka 16 India 32 China 46 Singapore 100
Europe (incl. Russia)	12.7	Italy 9.8 Germany 11.2 Russia 14.4 Albania 19.1	73	Albania 39 Russia 74 Belgium 97
Latin America and the Caribbean (incl. Mexico)	17.9	Netherlands Antilles 11.5 Brazil 17.3 Grenada 22.6	78	Trinidad & Tobago 12 Mexico 77 Martinique 98
North America	14.1		83	
Oceania	15.3	Australia13.6 Micronesia 22.6	67	Papua New Guinea 15 Australia 89

Source: WYR 2010, Annex, Tables 1 and 2, 95–107.

and possibilities for youth. This applies on the one hand to their use of new digital media. Youths are way ahead of their parents' generation in this respect. Even when it is first and foremost youth from the middle and upper classes who have access to these technologies, the number of Internet users is growing worldwide, particularly in developing countries. Youth are overrepresented within virtual social networks. Here new forms of communication are coming into existence that are contributing not only to the spread of music (rap, hip-hop) and consumption patterns but also to the diffusion of values and norms. New social media such as Facebook or Twitter are not only accelerating global communication, but are also being used by young people for the organization and mobilization of protests, as the *Arab Social Media Report* (2011) has demonstrated for the case of the Arab Spring. The Mexican Yo Soy 132 movement, which led to more transparency and debates in the 2012 presidential campaign, is another example. At the same time, however, globalization has changed the requirements for entering the labor market. Here it is not just education alone, but rather education fitting to the globalized economy that is key to the transition into economic independence. The over-proportionally high level of youth unemployment worldwide makes clear the problems related to this.

While an ever-increasing number of children have access to primary education, this is only one of several conditions for the later entry into working life. In many societies it is not those youths without any education who are unemployed; rather, it is often those who have completed secondary school or university. In Egypt, for example, the unemployment level among young university graduates is ten times higher than it is among young people who have only completed primary school (Goldstone 2011: 4). In addition to the absence of jobs, there is in many cases a strong discrepancy between education and personal expectations on the one hand and the requirements of the labor market on the other hand. For university graduates in Latin America and the Middle East, for instance, the civil service continues to be the employer of choice. However, given empty coffers and, often, the provision of access to positions through personal patronage relationships, these jobs remain out of reach for many graduates.

In view of these precarious lifeworlds, young people – above all unemployed young men – are often perceived as a risk to societal stability or even to international security. Particularly in relation to the Arab world, the so-called "youth bulge" hypothesis grew in popularity well in advance of the Arab Spring. People speak of a youth bulge when the proportion of 15- to 24-year-olds

Table 2: Youth and (Un)Employment

	Proportion of Youth Working (in percent), 2008		Unemployment (in percent)		
	Aged 15–19	Aged 20–24		Youths	Adults
Africa (incl. North Africa)	South Africa 9 Uganda 75	Sudan 44 Burundi 92	South Africa Ethiopia Zimbabwe Algeria Nigeria	47 25 25 24 15	18 13 4 9 2
Asia (incl. the Middle East)	Kuwait 6 India 33 China 40 Cambodia 63	Iraq 38 India 57 China 79 Laos 84	Indonesia Sri Lanka India	25 21 11	5 3 4
Europe (incl. Russia)	Hungary 4 Germany 32 Iceland 75	Moldavia 33 Russia 59 Netherlands 82	Bosnia and Herzegovina Serbia Spain Russia	59 44 25 15	25 16 10 5
Latin America and the Caribbean (incl. Mexico)	Martinique 4 Brazil 49 Haiti 61	Surinam 45 Brazil 78 Barbados 81	Uruguay Columbia Mexico	24 21 7	6 8 3
North America	USA 40 Canada 56	USA 74 Canada 78	USA	11	4
Oceania	Fr. Polynesia 18 Australia 59 Vanuatu 68	Solomon Islands 41 Australia 82 Vanuatu 85	Solomon Islands Australia	46 9	26 3

Source: WYR 2010, Annex, Tables 7 and 8, 138–153.

in the overall population is over-proportionally large (above 20 percent). The proportion of youth at the global level is currently 17.6 percent (WYR 2010: 95). What is seen here as holding the potential for conflict is above all a high percentage of young men without prospects for integration either in the labor market or the political system (Urdal 2006, 2011). This debate focuses primarily on the structural conditions that motivate young people to participate in political violence. Youth's radicalization and their transgression of societal boundaries is usually assigned to a greater readiness for risk and a lower degree of integration in the status quo. However, even in the most difficult of conditions there is no automatism in this respect, otherwise far more young people would act violently. Thus, the question arises as to how and for what youths in these contexts can be mobilized. A great degree of variation, which is closely connected to the forms of socialization and the central societal problems, is evident here.

One question which has been inadequately empirically investigated to date is that regarding the connection between the forms of protest and the political regime. While the youths of the Arab Spring called the existing regimes into question in a highly politicized manner, the complaints in Latin America regarding societal problems such as inequality and the absence of prospects for the future have manifested overwhelmingly – though not exclusively, as the examples of Chile and Mexico show – as sporadic violent protests, petty crime, and political apathy. Against this background, youth have been perceived for the most part as hooligans, not as political actors. The Chilean student movement has been an exception in this respect. In Mexico the attempts to criminalize the Yo Soy 132 movement failed due to youths' massive mobilization in support of the initiators of the protests against the Institutional Revolutionary Party's (PRI) presidential candidate.

Mobilization and Social Cohesion

Mobilization for joint action is closely connected with existing forms of social cohesion, which, however, not only change but also multiply in the context of social change. Thus, loyalties in differentiated societies are not based exclusively on locally confined belonging to family networks, religious communities or a particular village, but also on broader concepts such as citizens' rights or the "nation." The related structures demonstrate a broad spectrum of types of organization: They can

be authoritarian and hierarchical, or democratic and open. Generally different forms coexist, and don't necessarily have to rule one another out. In societies with a high degree of conflict potential, however, there exist multiple forms of social cohesion, which exclude one another – for example, religious, ethnic or social identities. Therefore, when looking at youth, the question of whether and how young people are integrated into the existing patterns of social cohesion is a decisive one.

Differences exist above all in the way in which youths and adults are part of the society's socialization processes. In many cases youths are accompanied, instructed or controlled by adults – for example, in the youth organizations of political parties, unions or religious associations. Socialization processes that take place under the control of adults have a conservative bias and aim particularly to maintain the existing social order – or to change it according to the adults' wishes. The room for change is limited and/or dependent on the flexibility and openness of the societal institutions.

This is especially clear in different contexts of violence: In industrialized societies the national armed forces, as the "School of the Nation," have long played a central role in the socialization and integration of young men. In many countries of the South they still play a role today. The reintroduction of compulsory military service in Cambodia in 2006 was directly connected to controlling the growing number of unemployed young men. In contrast, the majority of Latin American countries have abolished compulsory military service in the course of democratization. In the Middle East, North Africa and several South East Asian countries, though, it remains widespread. In most nonstate armed groups youth also play a role primarily as fighters, while adults take on the leadership positions.

The mobilization of youth in Algeria in the 1990s is an interesting example in this regard. In this case the Islamists managed to politicize unemployed youths with no prospects and to mobilize them for armed battle against the regime. The rush of victory was followed by military defeat and then, quickly, political disillusionment and apathy (Martínez 2004). This background may have contributed significantly to the fact that the protests of the Arab Spring only spilled over in a limited way to Algeria – in connection with the May 2012 elections.

However, there are also forms of socialization that have been more or less autonomously organized by youths. Although these now also include hierarchical structures, at least the age differences are significantly smaller – something that nonetheless isn't automatically accompanied by egalitarian power structures. The absence of surveillance and control by adults often results in these peer-group activities being viewed with skepticism. Particularly when youths transgress the prevailing rules and conventions, they are viewed as being "unruly" or "out of control." Central America and West Africa offer ample evidence in this regard. Here the focus is on youths' real or alleged misconduct. In Central America youth have in recent years been stylized as enemies of the state (Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz 2010); the security forces persecute them in a repressive manner similar to that used against guerilla groups. Youth gangs are ascribed responsibility for the escalating violence, while their exclusion from society is given as little attention as the involvement of the military, the police and politics in the violence. In West Africa, young fighters are characterized as brainless, violent "war machines," while the multifaceted problems that youth face are ignored (Hoffman 2011). In both cases youths serve as scapegoats intended to distract from societal ills such as unemployment, inequality and corruption.

Beyond organizational structure, the possibilities for and forms of young people's socialization within society vary according to the type of political regime. Democratic systems – at least in theory – offer youth equal participation once they've reached voting age, while in authoritarian regimes this participation is based on membership in political, social, ethnic or religious groups or patronage networks. Long-term studies on youths' political participation have shown that their early engagement has long-term effects on the norms and values they stand for and is a good indicator of their political attitudes as adults (Youniss and Hart 2005). If they are to become responsible citizens, youths therefore require not only a vote (in elections or other decision-making processes) but also an active role in shaping their lifeworlds. Because in most countries public policy is overwhelmingly made by adults for adults, youths can mostly only make themselves heard through loud and public protest. Against this background, the many protests of 2011 and 2012 point to the central problems of the youths in the respective coun-

tries and in particular to their blocked transitions into adult life.

Youth as a Seismograph

The youth protests of the last two years reflect two closely connected, overarching conflicts: First, youths' blocked path into economic independence, and second, their lack of participation in deciding political questions that are critical to their ability to realize future opportunities.

In many regions the education system and the labor market do not make it possible for young people to obtain a future-oriented education or to find work. In Chile the protests have been directed against an education system that is to a great extent commercialized and privatized, and thus hinders social mobility. In Mexico the students of private universities see their opportunities as being endangered by the return of the PRI and its clientelist politics. In Spain and many countries of the Middle East, unemployment, even among well-educated young people, is particularly high. Yet even in those places where youth have work, the percentage of those who can't survive on this income is considerable. In this respect the political systems are clearly failing, independently of whether they are democratic or authoritarian.

The problems facing the youths who took to the streets in 2011 and 2012 had long been known; however, no measures to overcome them had been undertaken. Whether such protests become violent – as in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Greece and Great Britain – also depends upon whether youths are taken seriously, not only in "pretty speeches" but also as central actors of the future. Where this is not the case, the sporadic protests could very likely transform into calls for the overthrow of the particular political regime. This applies equally to the societies of the Arab Spring and those in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Youths everywhere are mobilized (and controlled) for political purposes, but only rarely do they receive the leeway to organize autonomously or to formulate (let alone implement) alternative lifeworlds. The 1.2 billion youths in the countries of the Global South are already too large a group to be ignored. Rather, their problems should serve as a seismograph and an early warning system for fundamental societal problems. Where societies react flexibly and openly to the need for reform, youth have a chance to participate actively and to shape the future of their society.

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■ **Related GIGA Research**

Political violence and internal security are a key focus of GIGA Research Programme (RP) 2: Violence and Security. As part of the RP, the "Forms of Violence and Public (In)Security" research team analyzes the causes and dynamics of violence, as well as societies' responses to forms of violence other than organized conflict. Youth are a relevant actor group in various contexts.

■ **Related GIGA Publications**

Huhn, Sebastian, Annika Oettler, and Peter Peetz (2010), Jugendbanden in Zentralamerika – zur sozialen Konstruktion einer teuflischen Tätergruppen, in: Peter Imbusch (ed.), *Jugendliche als Täter und Opfer von Gewalt*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 213–241.

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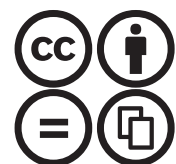
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