Youth as Agenda-Setters between Donors and Beneficiaries: The Limited Role of Libyan Youth after 2011

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Abstract

Based on interviews with young Libyan professionals carried out between 2017 and 2018, this paper examines their role as agenda-setters in international organizations operating in their country since 2011. The growing foreign demand for local expertise after the fall of the old regime was met mostly by the young activists who had helped organize the 2011 uprisings. For foreign organizations, Libyan youth have come to embody brokers, fixers, go-betweens, and persons-in-between, becoming key supporting actors in international project implementation. Despite the opportunities seemingly afforded by the collapse of the old regime, this paper shows that Libyan youth, torn between desires for political change and professional advancement, have struggled to influence the agendas of international organizations, leading to feelings of disenfranchisement. The transformative capacity of international projects is thus often limited by this new class of young, globalized elites who are disengaged from the local needs and realities facing Libyan civil society.

Keywords

Introduction

Since the Arab Spring, the situation in Libya has been one of the most puzzling and violent. Scholars have dealt with the Libyan crisis through analyses which privilege accounts of the national and international interests in the conflict;[1] the reconfiguring of domestic institutions, the configuration of local elites, and the challenges facing civil society during early stages of transition;[2] and the role of state and non-state security actors in promoting political stabilization or fragmentation.[3] However, the crucial actors assisting and implementing western donors' and organizations' programs, namely the Libyan youth, remains largely overlooked.[4] Moreover, while several investigations have already focused on youth activism and the emergence of new civil society organizations in the Arab world after 2011, what is missing in the scholarly literature is a focus on the role of youth as agenda-setters and their role as collaborators between international governmental organizations and domestic civil society organizations. This lacuna is particularly conspicuous given the new political climates brought about by youth-driven revolutionary change. In Libya, one would expect to see youths play a more crucial role in the agenda-setting between international governmental organizations and domestic civil society organizations, given their heavy involvement in the 2011 revolution and their subsequent enthusiasm for engagement in their societies. In reality, as this paper shows, youth do not have control of the agenda. Why is this not the case? Relying upon empirical evidence gathered from Libyans involved in such processes, this paper argues that the youth's inability to influence agenda-setting is not exclusively related to political instability, but due to a combination of factors, including the foreign imposition of agendas whose projects are managed

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1   Irene Costantini, "Conflict Dynamics in post-2011 Libya: A Political Economy Perspective," *Conflict, Security & Development* 16, no. 5 (2016): 405–422.

2   Wolfram Lacher, "Libya's Local Elites and the Politics Of Alliance Building," *Mediterranean Politics* 21, no. 1 (2016): 64–85; Mieczystaw P. Boduszynski and Duncan Pickard, "Libya Starts from Scratch," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 4 (2013): 86–96; Carmen Geha, *Civil Society and Political Reform in Lebanon and Libya: Transition and Constraint* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Frederic Wehrey, *Insecurity and Governance Challenges in Southern Libya* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 2017).

3   Youssef Mohammad Sawani, "Security Sector Reform, Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Militias: The Challenges for State Building in Libya," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 10, no. 2 (2017): 171–186.

4   A relevant exception is included in Kirstie Lynn Dobbs and Peter J. Schraeder, "Evolving Role of North African Civil Society Actors in the Foreign Policymaking Process: Youth, Women's, Labour and Human Rights Organisations," *The Journal of North African Studies* 24, no. 4 (2019): 661–681.

remotely, the fragmentation of domestic politics, and a lack of safety for the local staff of civil society organizations (csos). In addition, the rising frustration of these youths has led to lower expectations, a transactional approach to engagement with csos (so as to advance personal careers), and a reduced insistence on setting the agenda. Some Libyan youth have since reframed themselves and their political activism as the work of "brokers," who act as transmission belts in bringing developmental aid into local communities.[5]

The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings was more so characterized by young social activists using social media than long-standing opposition civil society groups, including Islamists, organizing protests.[6] In the Libyan case, the 2011 upheavals meant an unprecedented flourishing of csos and Non-Governmental Organizations (ngos) which filled up a newly created space for civil society actors following the revolution.[7] These organizations were able to speak about previously taboo issues such as political participation, freedom of speech, and human rights, while also turning into far more visible local partners for Western aid donors than Libya's more established local political leadership of elderly councils, notables, and unstructured networks. While other North African countries saw a flourishing of youth organizations that were highly engaged in post-authoritarian civil society and were able to influence domestic and foreign agenda setting,[8] in Libya, youth engagement was limited and hindered by the subsequent economic downturn, the fragility of state institutions, and the eventual departure of donors from the country. To understand this difference in outcome, this paper focuses on a microanalysis of actors' perspectives, expectations, and biographical turns in order to provide a bottom-up account of the international organizations' presence during a period of growing political instability and insecurity. Following the 2014 eruption of civil conflict, various foreign and domestic organizations engaged with Libya's transitional authorities to implement humanitarian projects to support civil society, local development, peacebuilding and conflict resolution, programs against gender-based violence,

5   Thomas Bierschenk, Jean-Pierre Chauveau, and Olivier de Sardan, "Local Development Brokers in Africa: The Rise of a New Social Category," Working Paper No. 13, Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikastudien, Department of Anthropology and African Studies (2002), 4.

6   Francesco Cavatorta, (2012), Arab Spring: The Awakening of Civil Society. A General Overview, 76. www.iemed.org/observatori-en/arees-danalisi/arxius-adjunts/anuari/med.2012/Cavatorta_en.pdf.

7   Altai Consulting, "Libya Civil Society Mapping" (2015), 18. http://www.altaiconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Libya-Civil-Society-Mapping-Altai-Consulting-SJD-PUBLIC-.pdf.

8   Dobbs and Schraeder, "Evolving Role of North African Civil Society Actors in the Foreign Policymaking Process."

and decentralization, along with dozens of training and capacity building programs mainly carried out in Tunis. These projects were implemented via a chain of Libyan nationals who acted as project managers, coordinators, consultants, and networkers, and who mediated between international organizations and local Libyan communities. Their role was strengthened and much more needed after the relocation of major western organizations to Tunis in mid-2014 due to security uncertainties for European or American staff in Libya. From then on, Libyan nationals became "brokers"[9] straddling between two different realities. The international organizations working in these domains have ranged from governmental and inter-governmental organizations to non-governmental organizations and other forms of private actors.

The research presented here is based upon twenty semi-structured interviews collected in Tunis continuously from May 2017 to September 2018.[10] Interviewees included youths working in Tunisia for organizations implementing projects in eastern and western Libya. Their geographical origins are in the main cities in both sub-regions: Tripoli, Bengazi, Al Khoms, Sirte, Zuwara, and Zawyya. This paper is presented in four parts. The first section discusses the transformation of youth activism in post-authoritarian regimes, the need to focus attention on youth activism within an environment replete with csos, and the role of youth as agenda-setters. The second part analyzes the reality of international and non-governmental organizations in post-2011 Libya. The third and the fourth parts discuss the personal accounts of young Libyans and the consequences of their agenda-setting roles in their engagement with international organizations and domestic csos.

Understanding the Link between Youth Activism and the Role of Agenda-Setting between International Organizations and Domestic Civil Society Groups

Investigations into youth activism in the Arab world have proliferated, especially after the 2011 upheavals. Since the 2000s, a well-established critical literature has

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9   Bierschenk, Chauveau, and de Sardan, "Local Development Brokers in Africa: The Rise of a New Social Category."

10 The reader will thus not find reference to the new phase of conflict that emerged in April 2019. Moreover, I decided to omit not only names but also any reference to sensitive personal data of my interviewees, as the persistent insecurity in Libya and the rule of law fragility can bear unpredictable outcomes and impact the Libyan youth travelling to and from Libya. Disclosure of any reference to places of origin, gender, precise dates of interviews, can represent a danger for my interlocutors.

put under scrutiny the orthodoxy of liberal theorists, and particularly the concept of civil society elaborated by de Tocqueville, who consider civil society organizations as a tool to reinforce political participation processes and, through associations, to mobilize citizens on behalf of public causes and enhance accountability mechanisms towards state authorities. In the 2000s, when it came to explaining processes of authoritarian persistence in the Arab world, the unachieved transitions, and lack of political liberalization, scholars proclaimed the failure of a transition paradigm based on these liberal theories of change.[11] They underlined the need to investigate how authoritarian regimes were exploiting procedural and institutional aspects of democratic programs, by promoting apparent forms of regime change and political opening while reinforcing instruments of informal control. No exception was made for civil society either, as the concept's value was equally questioned.[12] Empirical research underlined the backsliding role played by csos in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries where they were not independent bodies. Rather, they were extensions of the authoritarian grip over society and its powers of surveillance.[13] Other scholars highlighted how informal practices of political participation could convey forms of social resistance. Defined as historically counter-hegemonic processes, these processes do not fit liberal conceptualizations of civil society participation and do not necessarily promote democracy as expected.[14]

After 2011, in an effort to upgrade the tools used to understand the collapse of authoritarian regimes, formal and informal strategies of mobilization, and their long-lasting outcomes, gained attention,[15] opening a new literature on social movement dynamics and their interconnectedness with routine

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11   Holger Albrech and Oliver Schlumberger, "Waiting for Godot": Regime Change Without Democratization in the Middle East," *International Political Science Review* 25, no. 4 (2004): 371–392; Thomas Carothers, "The End of Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 5–21.

12   Thomas Carothers and William Barndt, "Civil Society," *Foreign Policy* 117 (Winter 1999–2000): 18–29.

13   Maha M. Abdelrahman, *Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt* (London: I.B Tauris, 2004); Claire Mercer, "NGOs, Civil Society and Democratization: A Critical Review of the Literature," *Progress in Development Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): 5–22; Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan," *Comparative Politics* 33, no. 1 (2000): 43–61.

14   Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen: A Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Asef, Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

15   Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel, "Introduction: The Middle East and North Africa: Beyond Classical Social Movement Theory," in *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 1–30.

governance.[16] Among what can be considered constitutive elements of civil society, there are ngos and all the other organizations involved in the development of policy. Though not ignoring the influence of donors, scholars started to reevaluate the role of the ngos and attempted to move beyond the polarized debate between the developmentalist vision of ngos as instruments of liberalization and the charge of Orientalism. This debate had prevented scholars from going beyond conventional assertions about Arab societies and Islam and grasping the actual venues of participation and independence.[17] In reality, a chain of semi-autonomous, Western democratization agencies in the menA countries distinguished itself from service-aid programs and put forward an explicitly democratic and good governance-promoting agenda by creating and funding a plethora of local organizations, think tanks, and peer institutions.[18]

However, all these accounts did not consider the role of youth activists as agenda-settings in international organizations since 2011. Scholars have mostly analyzed the transformation of youth political activism in their political context[19] and the interrelations between political instability and fragmentation with new forms of social movements and social networks.[20] In post-conflict scenarios such as the Balkans after 1989, scholars defined the diffusion of state-based intergovernmental organizations (igos) as a process of "ngo-ization," through which donors advanced peacebuilding by relying upon local ngos that embedded themselves in monitoring political transitions and transitional justice processes.[21] Interdisciplinary literature has also focused on youth activism

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16   Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transition from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1986); Lina Khatib and Ellen Lust, eds., *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2014); Frédéric Volpi and Janine A. Clark, "Activism in the Middle East and North Africa in Times of Upheaval: Social Networks' Actions and Interactions," *Social Movement Studies* 18, no. 1 (2019): 1–16.

17   Sheila Carapico, "NGOs, INGOs, GO-NGOs and DO-NGOs: Making Sense of Non-Governmental Organizations," *Middle East Report 214* 31, no. 1 (2000): 12–15; Caroline Abu-Sada and Benoit Challand, eds., *Le développement, une affaire d'ONG? Associations, Etats et bailleurs dans le monde arabe* (Paris: Karthala, 2011).

18   Sheila Carapico, "Foreign Aid for Promoting Democracy in the Arab World," *Middle East Journal* 56, no. 3 (2002): 379–395.

19   Nadine Sika, "Civil Society and the Rise of Unconventional Modes of Youth Participation in the MENA," *Middle East Law and Governance* 10 (2018): 237–263.

20   Carmen Geha, "Politics of a Garbage Crisis: Social Networks, Narratives, and Frames of Lebanon's 2015 Protests and Their Aftermath," *Social Movement Studies* 18, no. 1 (2019): 78–92.

21   Oliver P. Richmond, "Introduction: NGOs, Peace and Human Security," in *Mitigating Conflict: The Role of NGOs*, eds. Henry F. Carey and Oliver P. Richmond (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), 1–11; Patrice C. McMahon, "Introduction. Booms and Busts in Peacebuilding," in *The NGO Game. Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in the Balkans and*

transformation in the context of post-authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and the Balkans.[22] Here, ngos likewise emerged as tools of social and political domination hidden behind developmental programs and under the mandate of international financial institutions, thus diminishing the positive impact on local social and economic contexts.[23]

From a sociological and anthropological perspective, in post-conflict situations and in developing countries, developmental ngos and donors can be considered social organizations. Their chain of contractors and sub-contractors must circumvent uncertain scenarios to implement projects and their success depends on how successful their strategic choices are.[24] The constant presence of transmission chains that bring external actors into local societies are crucial for the survival of organizations. These are brokers, guides, translators, fixers, go-betweens,[25] or persons-in-between,[26] who can create the conditions for the success of a project, or its failure, by creating "associational cells" and adjusting conditionalities.[27] As a consequence of flourishing youth activism and participation in developing countries, ngos represented an additional arena of internationalization and exchange of practices between

Beyond (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 1–26. Mary Caldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 16; Bronwyn Evans-Kent and Roland Bleiker, "Peace Beyond the State? NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina," in *Mitigating Conflict*, 51–57.

22 Oskar Gruenwald, "Belgrade Student Demonstrations, 1996–97: Rebuilding Civil Society in Yugoslavia," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 13, no. 1/2 (2001): 155–174; Olena Nikolayenko, "Origins of the Movements' Strategy: The Case of the Serbian Youth Movement Otpor," *International Political Science Review* 34, no. 2 (2013): 140–158; Arnaud Kurze, "#WarCrimes #PostConflictJustice #Balkans: Youth, Performance Activism and the Politics of Memory," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 10, no. 3 (2016): 451–470.

23 Islah Jad, "NGOs: Between Buzzwords and Social Movements," *Development in Practice* 17, no. 4–5 (2007): 622–629.

24 Susan Cotts Watkins, Ann Swidler and Thomas Hannan, "Outsourcing Social Transformation: Development NGOs as Organizations," *Annual Review of Sociology* 38 (2012): 285–315.

25 Thomas Bierschenk, Jean-Pierre Chauveau, and Olivier de Sardan, "Local Development Brokers in Africa The rise of a new social category," Working Paper No. 13, Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikastudien, Department of Anthropology and African Studies (2002), 1–44; Sally Engle Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 2006); David Lewis and David Mosse, *Development Brokers and Translators: The Ethnography of Aid Agencies* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Books, 2006); Olivier de Sardan, *Anthropology and Development: Understanding Contemporary Social Change* (London: Zed, 2005).

26 Mai Thi Quynh Lan, "The 'Person-In-Between' Role of Young Graduates at INGOs in Vietnam," *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability* 8, no. 1 (2017): 137–151.

27 Olivier de Sardan, "The eight modes of local governance in West Africa," *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (2011): 22–31.

"North" and "South." However, this actually widened the gap between the most internationalized activists, those most endowed with social and financial resources, and the others, a fact that eventually fortified "African identities" in order to disguise this gap and affirm their rootedness in the local culture.[28] For instance, recipient societies often perceive external aid initiatives as based on a Northern or Western blueprint, so that local associations usually opt to mimic the same structures in order to survive.[29]

In this context, what is overlooked is the role of youth in influencing the agenda of this cooperation between international and domestic organizations. When an agenda is outlined, the priorities change. As a consequence of agenda shifts, local expertise usually changes, adapts, and readapts. What is often neglected in the literature on international and civil society organizations is their influence on foreign and domestic policies. With some limited exceptions, the literature underestimates the relevance of studying the conditions under which actors, and specifically youth, can play a role in setting the agenda between donors and beneficiaries, and that of international organizations.[30] Scholars have underlined why states and politicians decide to follow a specific policy strategy or agenda, and why states may choose to stand for an international organization amidst its international relationships. As stated by Risse, the role of ngos is of utmost importance as they provide "moral authority and knowledge about causal relationships," and "they are particularly crucial when it comes to paradigm shifts on the international agenda."[31] Applying the political opportunities structures approach, Joachim stresses how ngos may be able to exploit windows of opportunities for framing processes,[32] to access the

28   Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle and Johanna Siméant, "L'internationalisation du militantisme en Afrique," *Alternatives Sud* 17, no. 229 (2010): 229–234.

29   Antonio Donini, "Local Perceptions of Assistance to Afghanistan," *International Peacekeeping* 14, no. 1 (2007): 160.

30   Stephen M. Saideman, "International Organizations and Secessionist Crises: The Relevance of Agenda Setting," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 17, no. 3 (1994): 275–291; Jutta M. Joachim, *Agenda Setting, the UN, and NGOs: Gender Violence and Reproductive Rights* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007).

31   Thomas Risse, "Transnational Actors and World Politics," in *Handbook of International Relations*, eds. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons (London: Sage, 2002), 255–274.

32   Douglas McAdam, "Conceptual Origins, Current Problems, Future Directions," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings,* eds. Douglas McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer Zald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 23–40; Sindey Tarrow, *Power in Movement. Social Movement, Collective Action and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

agenda-setting process, and to have their ideas gain acceptance.[33] However, access does not guarantee impact. The influence of ngos, for instance, on policy outcomes of UN conferences varied significantly according to the subject area and countries involved.[34]

In particular, what the literature on foreign ngos neglects is how particular Arab youths feel, what they feel they have become, and how they construct themselves within this situation. Hanafi defines Arab individualism as "reflexive individualism," which stands in opposition to the neoliberal one; it is not an anti-community nor does it have an anti-system impulse, but it involves the constant act of renegotiation by an actor within the given social structure in order to achieve a form of emancipation from it.[35] This is particularly interesting when applied to ngos and the Libyan case in which the redefinition of these new subjectivities are embedded in the dominant language of development,[36] and potentially interact with foreign agendas. Dobbs and Schraeder investigate four civil society organizations in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia to highlight that, after the 2011 upheavals, civil society groups could impact foreign policy, especially between 2011 and 2012, but their roles diminished with the authoritarian backlash in the region.[37] Nevertheless, these empirical studies did not consider the perspectives of the youth in question through an investigation of the personal expectations and experiences of the actors.

International and Non-Governmental Organizations in Post-2011 Libya

The situation in Libya after 2011 was anything but a tidy and organized transitional process. The creation of the National Transitional Council (NTC) in 2011

33   Jutta M. Joachim, "Framing Decisions in the United Nations: The Exploitation of Political Opportunity Structure," in *Decision Making Within International Organisations*, eds. Bob Reinalda and Bertjan Verbeek (London: Routledge, 2004), 185–198.

34   Ann Marie Clark, Elisabeth J. Friedman, and Kathryn Hochstetler, "The Sovereign Limits of Global Civil Society: A Comparison of NGO Participation in UN World Conferences on the Environment, Human Rights, and Women," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 1–35.

35   Sara Hanafi, "The Arab Revolutions: The Emergence of a New Political Subjectivity," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5, no 2 (2012): 203.

36   Benoit Challand, "The Counter-Power of Civil Society and the Emergence of a New Political Imaginary in the Arab World," *Constellation* 18, no. 3 (2011): 275.

37   Kirstie Lynn Dobbs and Peter J. Schraeder, "Evolving Role of North African Civil Society Actors in the Foreign Policymaking Process: Youth, Women's, Labor and Human Rights Organizations," *The Journal of North African Studies* 24, no. 4 (2019): 661–681.

initially showed promising signs for a peaceful transition. A new civil society was emerging, as were new media outlets; in 2012, elections were held for a 200-member unicameral parliament named the General National Congress (gnc).[38] However, in 2014, the NTC's weakness and the escalation of conflicts arising from frail state institutions led to the establishment of two rival parliaments and their associated governments: one in western Libya and one in the east.[39] The crisis left many international and western organizations to face the challenge of continuing their work in a conflict zone while protecting their international and Libyan staff. This particular situation of conflict and insecurity led many international organizations and ngos to relocate to Tunis and implement their projects through remote management with occasional follow-up field missions. The instability of the political process and security sector governance directed financial support towards relief, humanitarian, and emergency projects. Despite different profiles and tasks between ngos and international organizations (IOs), they both had in common the crucial presence of Libyan nationals among their staff.

An office of European External Action Service (EEAS) was opened in Tripoli in November 2011 for the first time—though Libya never formally took part in any association agreement with the EU—to support the democratic transition. Through the European Neighbourhood Policy mechanism and the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (ICSP), the EU's assistance to Libya in 2012

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38 "Libya Starts from Scratch," 86.

39 Since 2014, these rival factions were the House of Representatives (HoR, based in Tobruk) and the gnc based in Tripoli). The House of Representatives (HoR) was elected to replace the gnc. As the Islamist, revolutionary political coalition dominant in the gnc refused the shift of power, in July 2014, Tripoli-based militias allied to the gnc leaders launched "Operation Dawn" to control key areas of the capital. In August, a number of HoR members gathered in Tobruk, eastern Libya, while others boycotted the HoR as unconstitutional. Following that, in November, the Supreme Court invalidated a constitutional amendment that could pave the way for the HoR elections. The HoR and international community refused the ruling, so the HoR remained the internationally-recognized parliament. As a result, Libya had rival parliaments and governments with limited territorial control and authority over armed groups. To solve the dispute, the UN mission to Libya organized and sponsored mediation efforts with the establishment of Skhirat negotiations between parliaments and governments. It created an executive body, the Presidency Council that took office in Tripoli in March 2016 and was tasked to form a unity government, and an advisory High State Council of ex-gnc members. In the longer run, however, this resulted in a reconfiguration of conflicting parties and security actors rather than solving the situation. For details, see International Crisis Group, "The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset," Middle East and North Africa Report no. 170 (4 November 2016); Wolfram Lacher and Alaa al-Idrissi, "Capital of Militias. Tripoli´s Armed Groups Capture the Libyan State," Small Arms Survey SANA Briefing Paper (June 2018).

and 2013 focused on employment opportunities for youth, state-building, supporting the establishment of local civil society, and demining and criminal investigations capacities.[40] Despite the EEAS office relocation to Tunis in 2014, due to the escalation of the armed conflict, assistance continued. With the establishment of the La Valletta process and the European Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) in 2015, eUTF became the principal funding instrument, committing €226 million for projects focusing mostly on migration and border management but also on support for displaced people and local development projects.[41] The EUTF represented a turn towards the prioritization of migration management and dealing with the so-called "2015 refugee crisis" to address European member states' concerns over flows of migrants. The EU assistance to Libya then shifted from state-building and liberal conflict transformation to realist conflict management and containment, focusing on more short-term solutions and delivering outcomes.[42] Moreover, remote management from Tunis worsened processes of dialogue between donors and recipients, needs assessment, and monitoring.[43]

In 2011, the United Nations Security Council voted on a resolution (1973) that, under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and in the name of the responsibility to protect (R2P) principle, established a ceasefire, imposed a no-fly zone over Libya and a strengthened a regime of arms embargoes and sanctions.44 The resolution was accompanied by the foreign military intervention led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), overthrowing Gaddafi's regime and leading to his execution by rival militias in Sirte in October 2011. Libyan organizations and academics started to question the legal grounds for such an operation and the legitimization of the responsibility to protect principle. They perceived it as a justification for foreign interference into Libyan affairs

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40   Kateryna Ivashchenko-Stadnik et al., "How The EU is Facing Crises in its Neighbourhood Evidence from Libya and Ukraine," Working Paper, EUNPACK research project, (2018): 15. http://www.eunpack.eu/sites/default/files/publications/D6.1%20The%20EU%20facing%20 crises%20in%20its%20neighbourhood%20evidence%20from%20Libya%20and%20 Ukraine.pdf.

41   European Commission, "EU Cooperation on Migration in Libya: EU Trust Fund for Africa - North of Africa window," (November 2018). https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/eutf-noa-ly-08052018.pdf.

42   Ivashchenko-Stadnik et al., 29.

43   Chiara Loschi and Alessandra Russo, "Whose Enemy at the Gates? Border Management in the Context of EU Crisis Response in Libya and Ukraine." *Geopolitics* (2020), 11.

44   This resolution was supported by France, UK and USA, while Germany aligned with Russia, China, India and Brazil and abstained.

and escalation of the conflict.[45] After the 2016 Skhirat agreement entered into force, UN and western countries formally backed the Government of National Agreement based in Tripoli, and most of the international organizations started to work in cooperation with these authorities, leaving the eastern region to mostly continue to receive limited humanitarian assistance and reconstruction projects.

With the end of the old regime in 2011, several international organizations entered the country for the first time: development and humanitarian ngos, professional and bureaucratic agencies, and cultural and political foundations. Before 2011, Qaddafi's control over political participation and daily life was so total that the few civil society organizations in existence were strictly related to him. Libya's rentier state acted abroad as a donor and assisted African counties through economic and development projects.[46] After 2011, most regime organizations disappeared; only a few humanitarian and well-rooted organizations, such as LibAid, were reconverted to local partners for humanitarian assistance from international aid.[47] Moreover, post-2011 Libyan governments rarely engaged in dialogue with local civil society organizations or granted citizens' demand for more space for civic engagement.[48] At the same time, a number of the young activists who helped lead the 2011 uprising started to engage with ios to help those organizations meet their needs for local experts and brokers who could assist and coordinate the implementation of projects. This kind of work required skills including English proficiency, social networking, knowledge of local authorities and political realities, and the ability to adapt to donors' and projects' implementation language, agendas, and organizational capacities.

This intervention in Libya supported by EU and western countries led to the establishment of partnerships between international organizations, usually the signatories of projects, and subcontracted Libyan-based ngos. They also

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45   The opinions is shared among my interviewees and it has been the subject of a workshop organized by Libyan Institute for Advanced Studies, "Responsibility to protect (R2P) Civilians In Libya," February 26th 2018, Carthage Thalasso Hotel, Tunis.

46   Dirk Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 198. In 2010, Gaddafi also sponsored unesco project ""Renovating History Teaching in Africa": the Pedagogical Use of the General History of Africa" and supported workshops organized in Tripoli, 10–16 June 2010. Personal observation of final workshop, 16th June 2010, Hotel Corinthia, Tripoli, Libya.

47   Interview with representative of LibAid Tripoli, November 2018, Tunis.

48   Jean Louis Romanet Perroux, "Libya's Untold Story: Civil Society Amid Chaos", Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Middle East Brief, no. 93 (2015), 2. https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/middle-east-briefs/pdfs/1–100/meb93.pdf.

directly cooperated with them on the implementation on projects in the field. From 2014 onward, most of the international organizations relocated to Tunis due to the civil war, thus creating a new exigency to rely upon Libyan staff who flew continuously between Tunis and Libyan cities to carry out project implementation with local actors and communities, as persistently requested by donors. Libyan brokers moved between their networks and leveraged their reputation in the homeland, managing access to specific fields under the radar of external organizations. The political and humanitarian crisis in Libya, and the subsequent EU turn towards securitization of migration in 2015 transformed the agenda of many projects to that of "migration and border management." This then amplified the need for local staff for those ios participating in EU programs for migration management. However, Libyan expertise increasingly found itself more engaged with think tanks and organizations that focused on broader transitional projects and development rather than crisis response in border control, the security sector, or the management of migration.

The Libyan Brokers: Translating Western Demands into Local Needs

Libyan youth organized through social networks and by subverting internet censorship to support the first protests that erupted in Benghazi and Tripoli between February 13 and 17 in 2011. After that, from the early months of 2011 to the explosion of civil unrest and recurring civil wars from 2014 onward, the international community invested financial resources and contributed to the emergence of local civil society organizations. To name a few, USAID disbursements to Libya increased from $9.4 million in 2010 to $210 million in 2011 and then $147 million in 2012.[49] In 2016, the European Union had only allocated €26 million, or 26%, of the newly created European Trust Fund for Libya, but this became €200 million in 2017 for projects on humanitarian and migration-related issues.[50] As foreign aid increased after 2011, and local CSOs flourished, their relationship and dependence grew along with it. In the flourishing of domestic CSOs, youth played a crucial role as brokers and as persons in between, moving in the space between foreign donors and local beneficiaries, hoping to play a role in setting the interaction's agenda.

Many of them received job offers thanks to their English proficiency and personal connections with international journalists, experts, and transnational

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49   Personal elaboration from data provided in USAID public database. https://www.usaid.gov/.
50   Loschi and Russo, "Whose Enemy at the Gates?".

political networks. This is how they remodeled their activist identity into the form of "brokers." Nevertheless, this process had manifold implications and drawbacks: "'Civil society' is a concept that large part of the Libyan communities ignore or do not understand, and international organizations hardly consider that when subcontracting their projects."[51] This is how one of my respondents explained the most critical challenge of being a young broker working between international organizations and the Libyan society. The challenge was to find a way to translate western concepts into local and daily language. He did not wish to criticize this or that institution, but mostly to describe a situation in which several organizations started to cooperate with few or zero connections to a country that was experiencing a tortuous transition and, soon enough, a persistent conflict situation. With high flows of money available, and with pressing demands from European constituencies to deal with spillovers of the fragmented country (e.g., migration flows and the proliferation of weapons), young activists found themselves flying between different worlds.

Most of the interviewees were born between 1984 and 1990, and they have received higher education in areas such as medicine, engineering, architecture and urban planning, law, and literature studies. Many of these courses included English education. They also completed further education abroad, both before and some after 2011, in Europe and, in one case, in the United States, to improve their English, organizational skills, and project manager profiles. During the uprisings, they took to the streets, organized rallies and helped maintain communications. Many of them only started to embrace such political participation in 2011, and some only later. As they began reframing themselves as young experts and brokers, they bridged together education and professional activities, relying upon personal networks built during 2011, along with family relationships and other local networks. In two cases, interviewees with educational backgrounds in health had previous experience with national Libyan organizations at the local level that they reinvested after 2011 so as to promote trainings and projects on vulnerability assessments and implications of gender-based violence.

Their most important characteristics is the ability of these youths to move between personal relationships, networks, and a sort of privileged status which derives from having spent months abroad in Europe or the United States. Undeniably, their diplomas and education background represented a privileged position with which to engage and enhance their brokering skills, eventually climbing the social ladder within Libyan society in the new political context; at the same time, crucial for their continued experience as project managers, is

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51   Interview, January 2018.

their openness to changing their profile quickly whenever possible to accommodate western donors' needs, something interesting and rather unprecedented. Young people are most amenable to reconciliation and hard-working conditions not only due to their biographical background, and commitment to political participation and activism, but due to the potential for career opportunities. At the same time, their young age and commitment to the 2011 uprising made them ideal candidates for western-oriented projects and mindsets, including those employing both the concepts and practices of conflict resolution and civil society. As stated by an interlocutor of mine,

> Before being a project manager and working for all these international organizations, I am an activist. My objective is to promote values and support the Libyan population in conflict resolution. Human capital is in my opinion the most valuable thing we need now, and I feel I want to be part of it![52]

Youth accepted training and reeducation for the job that, in their view, allowed them to bridge their personal identity, as activist, with the pursuit of concrete outcomes in order to influence politics and the international agenda in their country.

> We all started during the revolution, especially with the opening of the media and supported journalists or media, or smaller activists' organization. Many of us have civil society background or one to two civil societies behind and we invested them in our professional career. I started because I am passionate about civil society, and I want to help my city. I see a link in working towards Libya's transition from dictatorship to democracy through state-building, starting from supporting civil society.[53]

International organizations saw an opportunity; they focused on capacity building, projects to exchange knowledge, and to "educate" these brand-new experts on new concepts and best practices, who would in turn reshape their activism in the form of brokerage between donors and recipients. But this, however, has had a short-term and limited impact. In particular, much of the work of international organizations with Libyan societies involves training and capacity building programs concerning human rights principles, gender-based issues, and protection for women and children which target Libyan trainers,

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52   Interview, January 2018.
53   Interview, February 2018.

security sector personnel, public service staff, and health and education services officials. Most of these trainings took place in Tunisia due to movement restrictions applied to western trainers, and there was almost no monitoring and follow up conducted in Libya. International organizations thus created frustration and a sense of vainness. As one interviewee stated:

> EU and UN organize many training courses for Libyans, but we as Libyans part of trainers and facilitators [sic] feel like part of European and foreign bureaucrats, having good opportunities for career, ok, but nothing else. We are of little help regarding our local community.[54]

Trainers, project managers, and coordinators are thus the new professional profiles for Libyan youth, traveling across countries and regions, able to translate different languages and with expectations of personal achievement and successful outcomes for international organizations. Nevertheless, the quotes above shed some light on the lack of knowledge or a sense of urgency coupled with the presence of externally-driven agendas and ideas that hardly fit within the Libyan society. Against this backdrop, the room for youth to influence international organizations agenda was almost non-existent. Organizations invested in agendas that poorly related to local needs, bearing minimal outcomes in the short term and casting some doubts on their real implications in the longer run.

> I collaborate with an international organization focusing on human rights, and I worked with them to support the rights of migrants, but I would like to focus on a broad range of human rights, not only migrants. The organization supports me, but eventually we have the idea that EU and its member states may have just the interest to focus on migration as a consequence of their internal political problems.[55]

As a consequence, both they and the local civil societies groups developed a sense of frustration: "Actors from the local community, including the beneficiaries we target, share a sense of frustration and being not listened, although after the project is successfully implemented, it helps improve the organization's credibility vis-à-vis these communities."[56] In addition to that, there is also a feeling frustration vis-à-vis the same international organizations they

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54   Interview, September 2017.
55   Interview, September 2017.
56   Interview, March 2018.

are working for, on the basis that the Libyan youth experts and managers are replaceable and, ultimately, are irrelevant for the organization: "I feel there is a level of institutional racism in ingos where 'national staff' are not always trusted, and who can't move up in hierarchy since they tend to see nationals as replaceable." Career advancement is not an option, for this interviewee, and it represents the irrelevance of being young, skilled, and available for these projects.

In reality, the agenda-setters are neither in Libya, nor in Tunisia, and ultimately not even in international organizations' headquarters. In the case of EU programs, indeed, even the EU delegation to Libya may find it challenging to redefine standards and priorities with headquarters in Brussels in the decision-making of priorities. With the 2015 migration crisis, EU institutions, especially the EU Commission, had to cope with member states' constituencies' definition of instability and threats by throwing money at international organizations and the EU delegation to finance quick-impact projects and to display problem-solving capacity.[57] In this context especially, Libyan youths have had minimal capacity to orient the programs of the international organizations for which they work for. They may be able to "translate" concepts from a top-down perspective, but the bottom-up direction is exceptionally narrow in defining or discussing criteria.

Libyan youth have also had limited freedom to choose which network and which actors to join together with western donors or organizations in order carry out successful projects. Moreover, poor evaluation and little field presence of international observers and monitoring bodies does not allow for adequate protection for local staff. Faced with foreign agendas and personal safety dangers, frustration can arise in the form of opportunistic strategies. There overwhelming international focus on sub-Saharan migration comes at the expense of humanitarian and local needs, including internally-displaced persons situations and gender-based violence issues. Another interviewee specified:

> You know, it is all about migrants. We know these are issues, but all my friends trying to create local organizations to support media, journalists, and another form of civil society, and survive with funding from western countries and organizations have to abandon the activity or find a way to focus on migration. There is not enough funding outside migration-related projects, especially if you do not work in Tripoli. Sometimes some Libyan leaders of organizations try to pretend they work on migrants only to

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57 Interview to EU officer, Tunis, June 2018.

gain a project. Since western donors work remotely from Tunis without regular assessment and on-field visits and need to have migration projects completed, this is a win-win situation.[58]

In addition to that, another impediment preventing youth from influencing agendas is the danger of being exposed to political control. The context of political instability, on-going conflict, and the presence of old regime members within new political institutions has allowed for the persistence of informal rules to continue to be reflected in associational life and in the relationships between locals and international organizations. The most serious concern is how political actors of rivaling Libyan governments may exploit young Libyan staff to access information about external aid and organizations. In one case, more than one interviewee[59] suggested that powerful members of one of the two rival governments may exploit their power to intimidate young staff of international organizations and gain access to information about foreign organizations, agendas, and staffing.

The situation frustrates the ambitions and expectations of these young Libyans. While a large part of these young people expected to focus on transforming Libyan society, all of the external support, aid, and agendas are based on different priorities and funding strategies. Youth professionals are not even necessarily required to approach local communities to implement their objectives as they found that they had little impact over international organization models. As a result, these professional activities usually diverge sharply from their personal activism and earlier engagement in the 2011 upheavals, as well as the repertoires of networking and political participation.

Between Brokerage and Personal Expectations: Individual Perspectives On Agenda-Setting

These youth have some power, although limited, to manage projects on the ground, particularly at sites that foreign and western nationals cannot access, and thus the youth can decide how to move from network to network and focus on specific local communities, utilizing structural opportunities, conflict, and personal human capital. But this brokerage only works insofar as it serves the already established agenda of the international organizations for whom they work. The frustration and problems in working for international

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58   Interview, December 2017.
59   Any reference to government location, political actors' position and agenda of international organizations mentioned, have been omitted for the sake of interviewees' safety.

aid organizations in local communities are reflected in low expectations of young professionals due to restricted opportunities. The effect is to create an elite of activists, representatives of local associations, and disengaged youth who are weary of long-lasting commitment.

Shifting from activism and participation in the 2011 protests to professional commitment with international organizations is an experience for most of the interviewed. International assistance in Libya actually turned the attention of some of the young people from changing the political environment to investing in themselves. Some local Libyan leaders had experience with organizations even before the revolution, meaning they were part of an elite with notions of political and social participation even as a part of old regime organizations. Many of the activities for Libyan staff included trainings and capacity building programs before becoming a project staff member or leader of a local organization, so that the intention to provide new inputs for agenda change is limited, especially if this could mean jeopardizing personal education and career advancement. Thus, a self-centered approach is much stronger:

> My organization is active since 2010, but we expanded after the revolution. We transferred the revolution to our activities. I invested a lot in my professional preparation. I received my first training in 2012, another one in 2013, and I worked as a staff of international organizations. In 2015, I traveled to a Middle Eastern country to attend specific training about educational awareness. In 2016 again, I attended advanced training to manage education projects on humanitarian needs and conflict settings. Now I am a trainer of trainers, and I can be a leader of my organization and work for international donors.[60]

Indeed, the presence of many international organizations and foreign ngos influenced personal choices for work and career exploration. For example, there is also a disconnect between education and working experience due to this new environment:

> My main education is not strictly related to what I am doing now. I am a project manager, but I studied medicine. Then I took a bA in management, outside Libya, and after 2011. But knowledge of what I am doing right now in my job comes from professional experience and my networking, not really from education.[61]

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60   Interview, December 2018.
61   Interview, January 2018.

Another interviewee stated that "my education was very technical (engineering) so it was only minimally related to my current employment, which is project manager following support towards civil society organizations and women participation all over Libya."[62]

However, political instability represents a constraint concerning strengthening personal competences and opportunities. The quick replacement of projects, revision of priorities, staff, and demands for quick-impacts projects especially the EU as a donor, have a dreadful impact on personal perspectives and a general feeling of de-personification, while others see external aid as an opportunity to leave the country:

> Most of the Libyans feel that they are just an object, i.e., they are highly replaceable after the end of the project, and that's frustrating. We feel to be just the key to enter the ground for organizations, making money, and then that's all. This is not to deny that some people also see this job only as an opportunity to get a Schengen visa and leave the country, there isn't always a high motivation. Hence, they engage and hope for a better opportunity to leave the country. But I feel it is part of the consequences.[63]

This process of domestic CSOs flourishing and external donors funding provided a window of opportunity for many young people to reach new professional environments, inside and outside the country. In addition, there is a lack of enduring networking and long-lasting relationships between international organizations and local society and recipients, which is explained by short-term and poor relationships between external organizations and local staff in them. Again, another interviewee has a specific explanation for that: "I perceive a level of institutional racism in ingos where national staffs are not always trusted, and who cannot move up in hierarchy since they tend to see Libyans as replaceable."[64]

Starting from such a personal experience, this interviewee used the idea of "institutional racism" to express the feeling that young Libyan staff hired in international ngos are forced to renounce career advancements within international organizations, and are indirectly invited to avoid any demands for promotion and renegotiation of salary. While young Libyans were not naïve in their engagement with western donors while trying to climb the social scale through international organizations, some nevertheless underlined

62   Interview, January 2018.
63   Interview, February 2018.
64   Interview, February 2018.

how international ngos were more or less overtly "selling a dream" by creating false expectations for international career opportunities. According to some of my interviewees, these organizations were perpetuating forms of inequality and disparity that echoed the same conditions against which Libyan youths denounced on the streets in 2011. While this argument testifies to one dimension of the political subjectivity and "reflexive individualism"[65] emerging among young Libyans after 2011, it also confirms that such a situation may alienate both smaller and bigger local organizations, and that international intervention should be reassessed.

The high turn-over affects many Libyans that may want both to leave the country and to visit Europe as part of both their personal experience and to help their community. The presence of international organizations was seen as a window of opportunity for a personal career. But these rarely translate into personal migration opportunities, at least not outside the Arab world. In particular, the experience with international organizations raises expectations and knowledge of how life "can be" while working as a professional for international organizations that deny access to all the privileges that the position includes.

> I applied for a Schengen visa for a European country, but its embassy refused it. Before that, during the application interview, they investigated my motivations, my past job commitments in Libya, in Tunisia, and inquired why I wanted to visit the country. I thought it was a legit consequence: I worked for European organizations, Europeans came to Tunis, they hired me, they appreciated me, and then? I wished to continue and at least visit the country. Yet, just because I am unemployed and I do not fit Schengen visa requirements, I am refused. That's humiliating. It does not make sense to me.[66]

Personal experiences of these youth are intertwined with awareness about North-South inequalities in terms of freedom of movement, opportunities to influence agendas, and to set personal definitions of situations. There is no doubt that some western organizations want to support the transition, promote dialogue and peace, and to deliver relief to displaced people and victims of conflict. However, some well-intentioned organizations are subject to management priorities and the need to deliver outcomes, as a justification for their

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65   Hanafi, "The Arab Revolutions."
66   Interview, August 2018.

presence in Libya, such that sometimes ethical and non-harm considerations are deprioritized:

> Once a European organization working on conflict resolution offered me a collaboration, but they needed someone to work in my city and to make questions among people, which is something you can hardly do in Libya, especially in my region, given 40 years of the regime and constant spying on citizens' life. This job could harm me personally, also due to persistent conflicts, and I had to refuse. I was surprised they were keen on offering to a Libyan such position. They were in desperate need of someone from my city and to gain some results to show so that they tried to negotiate a compromise in terms of timing, but this was not the problem. They could not guarantee me any personal safety measure. This is something foreign organizations sometimes do not understand.[67]

Thus, interviewed youths felt unease not only with the amount of expectations from international organizations compared to their own perceptions of actual impact over Libyan society, they also perceived the stress implied in the position that does not provide for new personal opportunities, despite, in some cases, personal networks and career advancement. Youth relationships with international organizations generate only a limited room for maneuver and control over the agenda, which ends with the projects. Youth found themselves trapped in a loop between the cooperation with donors and international partners whose action is oriented to specific outputs and programs, such as those on migration topics, and maintaining their profile and survival as brokers, a career whose advancement and opportunity depends on those donors and international partners.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to examine the growing role of young Libyan activists within international organizations working in their country. The paper illustrates the conditions under which youth lack any control over the agendas driving the flourishing cooperation between international organizations and domestic csos since 2011. The main reasons for this are not only the civil conflict and political fragmentation witnessed in Libya, especially since 2014, but also how the dynamics of international organizations, even in such a troublesome context, fail to promote and enhance diversity, bottom-up project

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67   Interview, August 2018.

revisions, and evaluation. As a result, Libyan youth activists have adopted a more self-centered strategy of survival and detachment, one that also further jeopardizes their capacity to play a role in the agenda-setting process.

Even years after the removal of the old regime, Libyan youth continue to struggle to find ways of reinforcing and supporting political change. Their main frustration resides in the conflict between, on the one hand, personal expectations and ambitions and, on the other hand, the needs of international organizations, which ask Libyan staff to access the field, move between different personal networks and draw upon social capital. In the longer run, the conflict and the lack of opportunities to provide for meaningful change have led many Libyan youth activists to feel disenfranchised. Not only is the space for such youths to influence the agendas of international donors and organizations almost absent, those foreign actors have cultivated the emergence of a class of Libyan brokers who, though they may be connected with some portions of local society, are ultimately at risk in the long run of inflating the importance of local ngos and of a globalized Libyan elite loosely embedded within local needs, and whose transformative capacity may be highly questionable. As a consequence, the relationships between donors and local communities have been weakened, and the long-run implication may lead to a diminished ability of foreign aid to have positive effects over local social and economic contexts. Moreover, the situation could fuel a distorted image of international organizations all over the country. As foreign aid proves unable to change realities, the Libyan perceptions of international organizations and donors could return to that of the Qaddafi's era, during which western interference over domestic affairs was harshly condemned.

By focusing on micro-cases, this paper has shed some light on the dangers of constraining youth to a closed structure of weak needs assessments, funding, and reporting, as the rushed delivery of impacts can develop, among youth professionals, disenchantment and frustration, ultimately working against their willingness to commit. The long-term risk is to create an elite of youth professionals detached from society but who monopolize civil society activism by translating the needs of foreign organizations in order to advance their own personal careers.