

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON YOUNG PEOPLE

A Survey among »Young Leaders«  
in the Middle East and North Africa

**Jörg Gertel and David Kreuer**  
September 2021



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This study provides insights into the group of participants in the »Young Leaders« programme of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in the Middle East and North Africa and their experience of the Covid-19 crisis in 2020. Most of them are young, educated and socially engaged members of their countries' middle classes. While the Covid-19 pandemic was not the only, and arguably not even the most severe crisis that affected daily lives in 2020, its adverse impact was nevertheless immense.



The Corona virus directly threatened and sometimes took the lives of friends and family; indirectly, the drastic measures taken to curb the pandemic destroyed job security, education trajectories and mental health stability for many young people. Daily routines were disrupted with most families being restricted to their homes for periods of time; spending priorities shifted away from leisure activities to necessities.



At the same time, a high level of reflection, resourcefulness and persistent optimism is evident among many of the young people. They report a perception of increased solidarity, new forms of civic engagement, which are appreciated by society, increased awareness of environmental issues and global climate change, and offer constructive proposals on how the public health infrastructure of their home countries could be improved.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

<https://mena.fes.de/topics/youth-study>



# Content

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	2
<b>2</b>	<b>WHO ARE THE FES YOUNG LEADERS?</b>	4
<b>3</b>	<b>FES YOUNG LEADERS AND THE PANDEMIC</b>	6
<b>4</b>	<b>VALUES, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH</b>	12
<b>5</b>	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	20
	References .....	21
	List of Tables .....	22
	List of Figures .....	22

## 1

## INTRODUCTION

This report addresses the circumstances of the participants and alumni of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's youth capacity-building programme, who we refer to as Young Leaders (YL), during the 2020/2021 Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The Young Leaders programme is a regional programme launched to strengthen the civic and political capacities of young women and men and to promote social democratic values through a series of training events, leading to practical local initiatives, where the participants translate theory into action. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) recruits young people from 12 countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) onto the programme.

Young Leaders are women and men aged between 20 and 30 years, who are active members in political parties or civil society organisations. The programme aims to include university students or graduates who are committed to and believe in social democratic values, and also those who have implemented social projects or wish to do so. Depending on the country, English or French language skills are a requirement for participating in the programme. This group, therefore, represents a very specific segment of society in MENA countries: almost equal numbers of young people from both genders, with an academic background, and committed to a democratic society.

### THE FES YOUNG LEADERS ONLINE SURVEY

Several hundred of the programme's Young Leaders (from ten different YL generations) participated in a series of five online surveys between mid-summer and early winter 2020. They were recruited via email by the national programme coordinators; participation was voluntary and anonymous. The survey participants were able to switch between Arabic, English and French translations of the questionnaire. Hence, their free-text responses are trilingual. We only considered fully completed questionnaires.

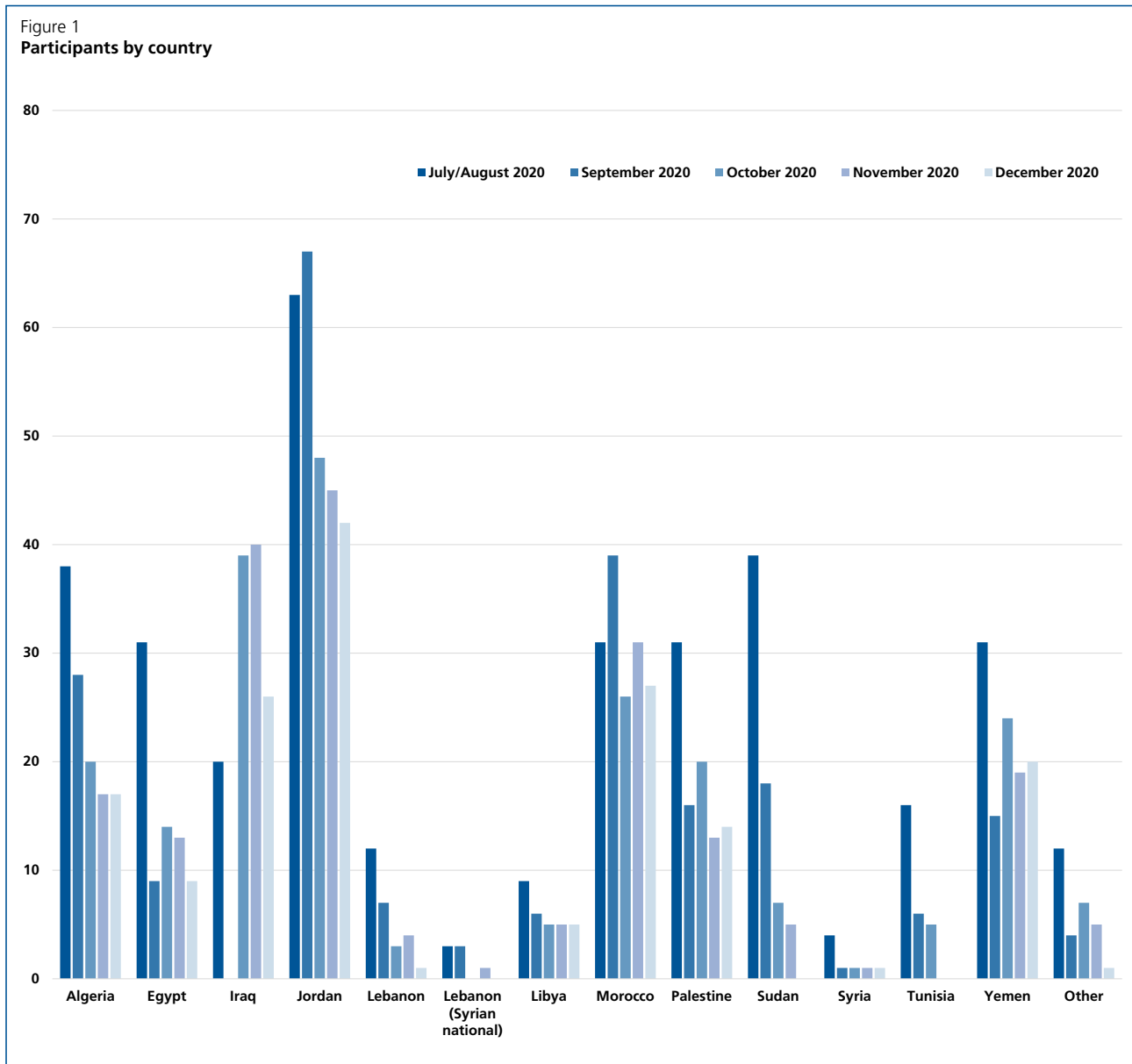
The following findings are based on data from the baseline survey (July/August 2020), addressing the pandemic and the socio-economic situation of the Young Leaders, and on four subsequent monthly updates (one per month from September to December 2020). The number of respondents was highest for the baseline survey (n=340). The updates were each composed of two sections: one with recurrent items and one with new questions around a salient topic. The September update survey addressed values (n=219), the October survey investigated civic engagement (n=219), the November survey focused on mental health (n=199), and the final, more extensive survey conducted in December addressed environmental issues and prospects for 2021 (n=163). Participation declined continuously (from 340 to 163), and the country composition of participants fluctuated (see Figure 1). The highest numbers of participants came from five countries: Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Yemen.

What do these numbers represent and what do they tell us? To answer this question, it is important to consider the following:

- Who from the group of Young Leaders participated?
- How are the Young Leaders positioned, socially and economically, compared to all young people in the MENA region?
- How can we deal with the declining participation and the shifting country composition of the survey participants?

First, the entire group of Young Leaders consists – depending on the country – of a maximum of ten alumni generations and a current generation. The latter comprises a total of 274 people across all countries, and older generations include a total of 1,019 people (with the 500 from Jordan constituting the single largest group). Thus, the entire Young Leaders population in the MENA region comprises 1,293 young people. The baseline survey (n=340) therefore represents 26 per cent of all Young Leaders (or 35 per cent if Jordan is excluded). However, additional respondents joined later, completing an update survey, while others dropped out during the project. According to a non-traceable identity key, 30 individuals contributed to all five surveys, 53 to

<sup>1</sup> This study, aimed at providing insights into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the everyday lives of young people in the MENA region, was jointly designed by Jörg Gertel and David Kreuer (both University of Leipzig) on behalf of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. The design and outcomes of the study were discussed at length with Friederike Stolleis, Manuel Gath, Svenja Bode and Henda Maarfi (FES Tunis and Berlin).



four, and 71 young people took part in three surveys. If participation in at least one of the surveys is counted, the total amounts to 573 individuals. Hence, almost half (44 per cent) of all Young Leaders participated at least once in the overall survey project in 2020 (with this share being even higher if Jordan would be considered as statistical outlier). This means that the findings are likely to be highly representative of the entire YL group.

Second, in order to position the group of Young Leaders within their social settings, we compare the findings of this study with data from the 2016 FES MENA Youth Study (Gertel/Hexel 2018). It should be kept in mind, however, that both the country composition and the age structure are somewhat different. The latter ranges from 19 to 30 years (and in two countries to 35 years), while in the 2016 survey, people between 16 and 30 years of age were interviewed.

Third, one way of understanding and dealing with the effects of the changing sample structure of the current study is to examine the comparative weight of the Human Development

Index for each of the five surveys.<sup>2</sup> This reveals that the average HDI score for the 12 countries amounted to 0.667 (Algeria has the highest HDI score = 0.748 and Yemen the lowest = 0.47). The baseline survey showed an identical score (0.667) – and is thus entirely in line with the country averages; the September follow-up amounted to 0.682; October was 0.675; November 0.677; and December 0.679. We conclude that, on average, the changing structure of the samples did not produce heterogeneous groups in relation to the Human Development Index, which represents aspects of life expectancy, education, and income. Nevertheless, any statements we infer about »the MENA region« are necessarily based on an analytical construct rather than on a directly accessible and uncontested reality, something which does not exist.

<sup>2</sup> To do so, we selected the HDI for each country, multiplied it by the number of respondents, then added all the country totals for each survey period to the total; this was then divided by the total number of respondents in order to achieve an average HDI per survey period (UNDP 2020).

## 2

## WHO ARE THE FES YOUNG LEADERS?

In this section, we use data from the baseline survey to obtain a more detailed picture of the group of respondents. Comparisons with the 2016 Youth Study sample situate the Young Leaders within the wider context of their societies.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

The gender balance is almost equal (51 per cent female and 49 per cent male), the respondents are 27 years old, on average, and are predominantly single (single 78 per cent, engaged 5 per cent, married 17 per cent). About 84 per cent of them hold a university degree, and more than half of the Young Leaders are in paid work. However, they largely still live with their parents (61 per cent); only 12 per cent have their own family; 9 per cent share an apartment with friends, and 8 per cent live alone. The vast majority define themselves as youths (92 per cent) and not adults (about 11 per cent of female and 8 per cent of male respondents).

### HOUSING

The average size of a Young Leader's household is five people, and their homes have 3.9 rooms, on average. Of the Young Leaders, 63 per cent have their own room, and 69 per cent have access to fresh air – these numbers are higher in smaller towns/villages than in big cities. The respondents predominantly live in private neighbourhoods (83 per cent); some live in public housing schemes (11 per cent) and a tiny minority in informal settlements (4 per cent) or refugee camps (2 per cent). The most frequent housing type is apartments (44 per cent), followed by terraced housing (26 per cent) and detached houses (22 per cent), villas (5 per cent), and informal constructions (3 per cent). The settlement size varies: 36 per cent live in locations with less than 100,000 inhabitants, while 28 per cent live in large cities with a population of up to one million, and the remaining 35 per cent live in metropolises of more than one million people.

### OCCUPATION

More than half of the Young Leaders (54 per cent) are currently in paid work. This is twice as high as the corresponding number of young people who were interviewed in 2016

(25 per cent), and even increased slightly as 2020 progressed (see Table 1). Almost one in three of the YL respondents were attending university in early 2020, but this share dropped to one in five by the end of the year – a value similar to the 2016 study (17 per cent). A mere 20 per cent of the Young Leaders are temporarily or permanently not in work (compared to 40 per cent of the 2016 sample).

### LIFE GOALS, CLASS AND LIFESTYLES

In the 2016 survey, having a »good job« was the top priority (of four options) for 48 per cent of interviewees, especially for male respondents (62 per cent; women 34 per cent). In the Young Leaders baseline study, more than two-thirds (70 per cent) gave this response, with the frequency being equally distributed between genders. Men and women alike are interested in their professional career above everything else at this stage in their lives.

A majority (71 per cent) of Young Leaders consider themselves members of the lower middle class, while 18 per cent position themselves in the upper middle class, and 1 per cent consider themselves wealthy. On the other end of the wealth spectrum, about 10 per cent see themselves as being poor and 1 per cent (three cases from three different countries) even ultra-poor.

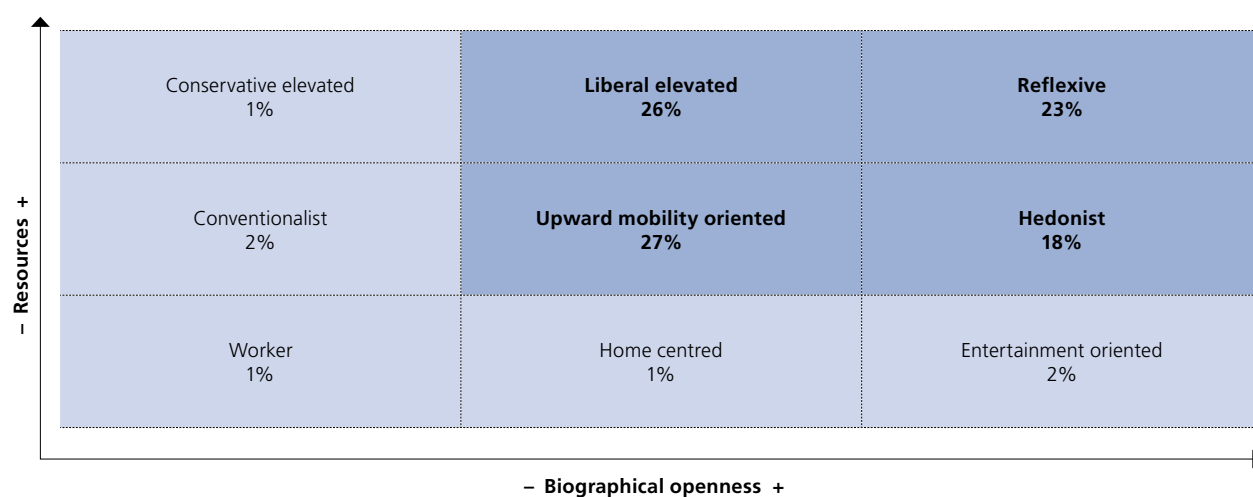
It is not only the class assessment that reveals the social position of young adults in society but also lifestyle. Inspired by a methodological framework developed by Otte (2005) for Germany, nine regionally adjusted »lifestyle types« can be distinguished.<sup>3</sup> Among the Young Leaders, only four of these types seem to be relevant (see Table 2): our Young Leaders appear to be positioned in the middle and elevat-

<sup>3</sup> In order to keep the lifestyle analysis manageable, Otte (2005) focuses only on two main lifestyle dimensions: »time« and »money«. The time dimension pertains to the biographical openness of a person and a personal orientation towards »modernity« (a rather problematic term that warrants further discussion). The money dimension addresses the availability of capital, assets, and equipment and thus a personal resource perspective. While the time dimension partly reflects (a cohort-specific) modernity and partly (a life cycle-specific) biographical perspective of lifestyles, the capital level represents the access to and use of resources and also value orientations (ibid. 452). Otte further divides each dimension into three segments. This results in nine types of lifestyles.

Table 1  
Occupational status

	2016 youth study	Early 2020 (pre-pandemic) YL	July/August 2020 (baseline) YL	December 2020 YL
School	18%	1%	1%	2%
University	17%	29%	24%	20%
In work	25%	52%	54%	58%
Temporarily not in work	18%	11%	14%	15%
Permanently not in work	22%	7%	6%	5%

Table 2  
Lifestyles



ed capital categories and also in the middle and elevated biographical openness categories. The categories in the respective bottom positions are hardly represented in this group.

- The largest group (27 per cent) is oriented towards **upward mobility**. This is the group that is in the centre of the matrix of lifestyle types. These individuals are focused on a solid professional career, family and participation in the mainstream of modern leisure culture, and are characterized by internal heterogeneity.
- This is followed by the **liberal elevated** type (26 per cent). Here, we find the tradition of the educated bourgeoisie, liberality, professional self-realization, consumption of high culture with alternative tendencies, and a sense of authenticity and connoisseurship in consumption.
- The **reflexive** group (23 per cent) is described as cultural, academic avant-garde with characteristics such as

reflexivity, creativity and joy of experimentation. Individuals in this group seek independent self-development, and they have a cosmopolitan attitude to life.

- The **hedonists** (18 per cent) value fashion and music as part of youth culture and are characterized by joy of innovation, contemporary enjoyment and consumption orientation, extraversion, and urban spectacle.

In relation to the class self-assessment (predominantly lower middle class), it makes sense to interpret the participation of YL in the FES programme as an action of self-empowerment and as a strategy for upward mobility. The internal composition of the four most frequent lifestyle types reveals a differentiated gender structure: while the lower positions for resource availability are more frequently held by males, females are often found in the upper positions. Given the frequency of male Young Leaders in paid employment (cf. occupation and life goals) and the drive for personal independence (cf. lifestyle), their civil engagement seems to be partially driven by aspirations of social mobility.

# 3

## FES YOUNG LEADERS AND THE PANDEMIC

The Covid-19 pandemic, declared by WHO in March 2020, led to an unprecedented, global experience of restrictions and confinement, fear and loss, extreme uncertainty and radically changed daily routines. While, since we have not yet come out the other side, it is still too early to draw broad historical conclusions about the significance of the pandemic, the main idea behind this study was to document the respondents’ experiences, thoughts and emotions as they happened. We assume that these reflect broader patterns in the societies in which the respondents live, particularly as they tend to be very connected and educated young people, politically engaged and highly aware of events and debates occurring around them.

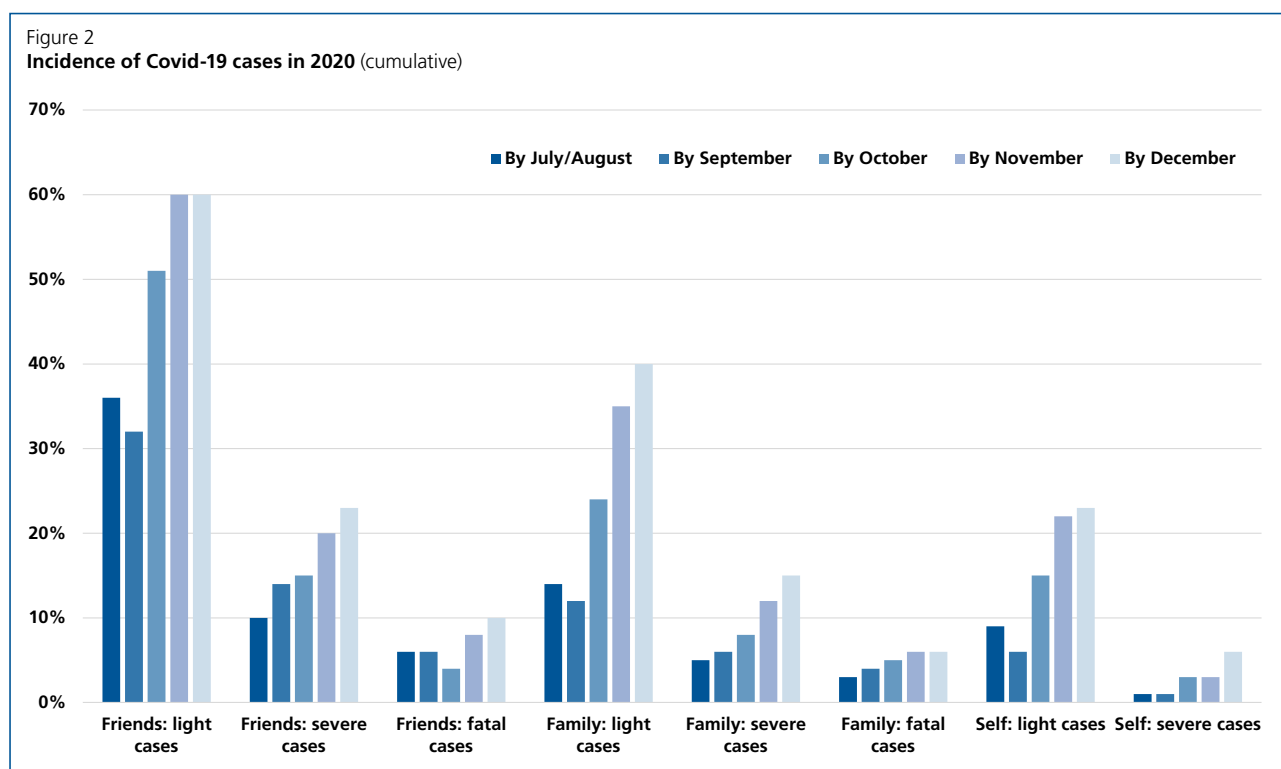
### INFECTIONS

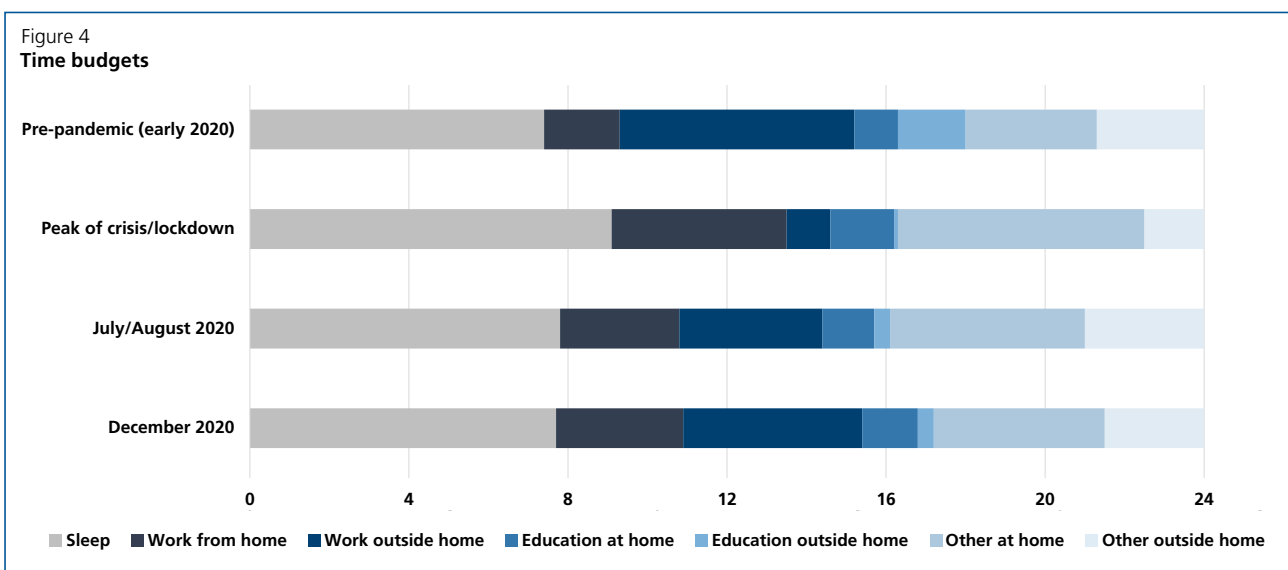
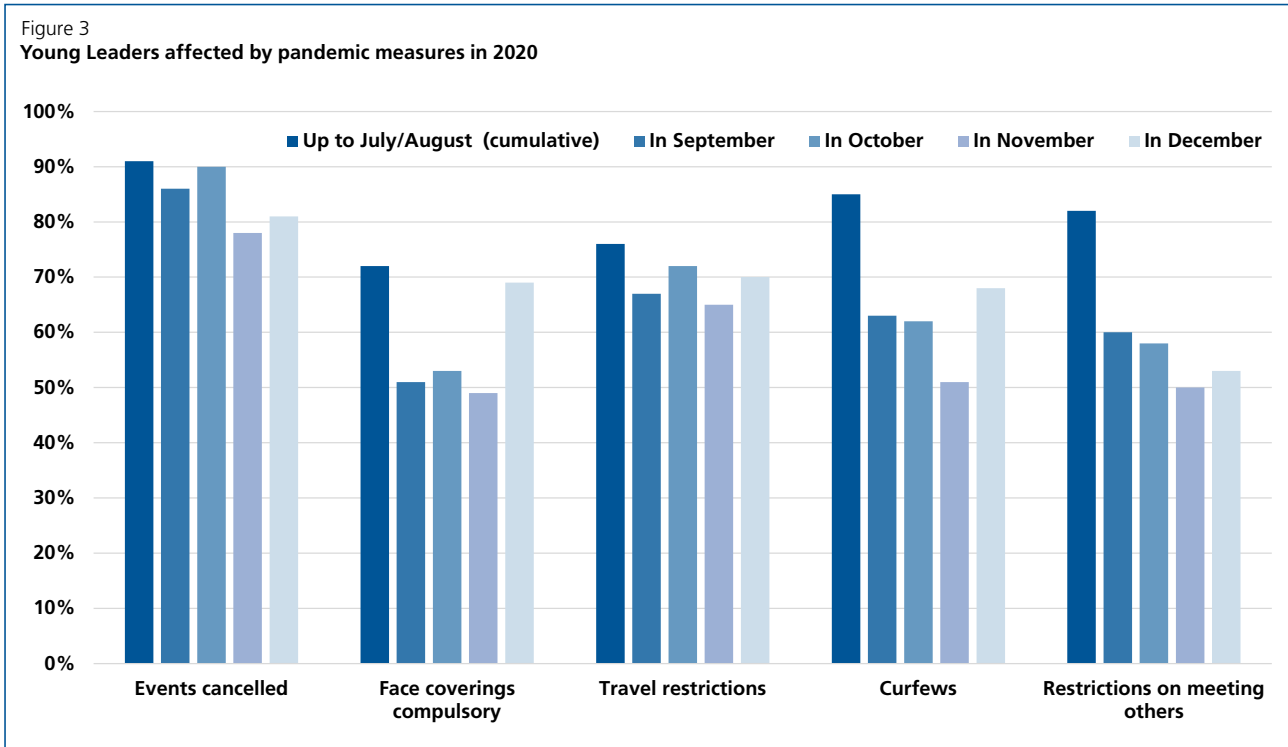
The global spread of Covid-19, with its regionally differentiated peaks and troughs, is also reflected in the MENA region and the immediate surroundings of the Young Leaders

are no exception. About one in ten participants had lost a friend or family member to the disease by the end of 2020, and nearly one in three respondents to the closing survey in December 2020 had been infected themselves. Overall, the data documents a steady increase in cases (see Figure 2).

### PANDEMIC MEASURES

When the pandemic first broke out in early 2020, many governments were confronted with a similar situation. They had to make decisions on public health measures, such as social distancing rules, the cancellation of mass events, and increasingly strict curfews to contain the uncontrolled spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Given the high initial uncertainty about transmission mechanisms and the effectiveness of various containment measures, these instruments were continually adapted and refined over the course of the year.





The data reveals how various measures affected the daily lives of Young Leaders across the MENA region. The five most common measures and their usage over time are illustrated in the graph (see Figure 3). Several observations can be made:

- The cancellation of events, curfews and restrictions on meeting others were almost universally imposed at some point during the first wave in spring 2020.
- Most measures were relaxed during the summer as infection rates went down.
- By December 2020, the use of face coverings and curfews had picked up once again with rising infection numbers, while other measures were not reinstated to the same extent.

- Nevertheless, over half the respondents were affected by multiple simultaneous pandemic measures throughout the year.

### TIME BUDGETS

Reconstructing the time budgets of Young Leaders for 2020 shows that the average time spent at home in relation to the time outside home (including at work or school) dramatically increased with the Covid-19 pandemic: 21.3 of 24 hours were spent at home during the peak of the first wave, compared to just 13.6 hours before the pandemic (see Figure 4). This had not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels by December 2020 (16.6 hours at home).

## ECONOMY AND EXPENDITURES

During the first half of 2020, the self-reported economic situation of Young Leaders' families deteriorated rather dramatically. More than half (53 per cent) of the families experienced increased insecurity. This was revealed by the changing distribution of four possible response options: the share of respondents who assessed the economic situation as »very good« fell from 23 per cent before the pandemic to just 6 per cent in the summer of 2020; »rather good« fell from 64 per cent to 53 per cent; »rather bad« more than doubled from 13 per cent to 31 per cent; and »bad« rose from 0 per cent to 11 per cent.

We also asked: »Did your monthly expenditures change during the crisis?« Each respondent was asked to rank the top four expenditures of 21 items. The responses show that pre-pandemic, the top expenditures were for food, Internet and going out with friends. At the peak of the pandemic, depending on the country, going out with friends or for snacks locally was no longer an option, and expenditures for

staple food became more important. Housing rent and costs for mobile phones also became a new priority. After the peak, paying debts became an issue for many Young Leaders. In the longer run, by the end of 2020, paying rents became more important. Clearly, expenditures had to be adjusted to the changing economic conditions and insecurities.

## MULTIPLE CRISES AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

To position the Covid-19 crisis in the context of livelihood challenges, two findings are crucial. The threat of the coronavirus, for one, was not considered to be the only ongoing crisis. In fact, most Young Leaders deemed the national economic crisis more important than the pandemic in their respective countries. Second, this crisis perception did not change significantly between mid-2020 and the end of the year. The only visible change relates to the perception of armed conflicts by respondents in North Africa, which decreased over the course of the year.

Table 3  
Future prospects in July/August 2020 (baseline)

	Society: Pessimistic	Society: Mixed	Society: Optimistic	Total
Own future: Pessimistic	9%	1%	1%	10%
Own future: Mixed	16%	23%	2%	41%
Own future: Optimistic	11%	16%	22%	49%
<b>Total</b>	36%	40%	24%	100%

Table 4  
Future prospects in December 2020

	Society: Pessimistic	Society: Mixed	Society: Optimistic	Total
Own future: Pessimistic	12%	4%	1%	17%
Own future: Mixed	15%	21%	3%	39%
Own future: Optimistic	8%	15%	21%	44%
<b>Total</b>	35%	40%	25%	100%

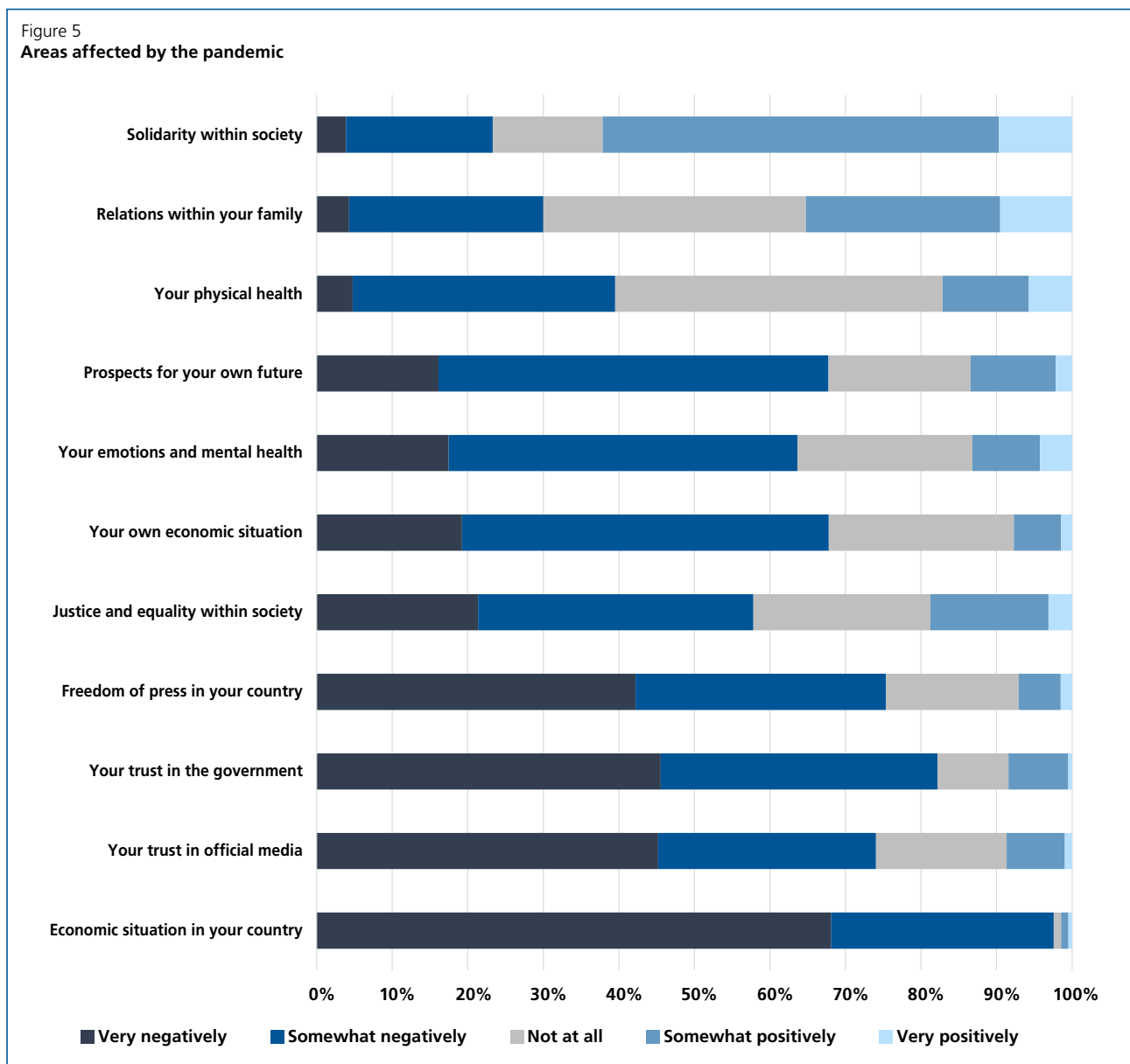
Asked about their outlook regarding their personal future, the respondents – and this is typical for young people – were mostly optimistic (49 per cent optimists versus 10 per cent pessimists) (see Table 3). In contrast, the prospects for society in general were only seen as bright by one in four respondents, with most seeing them as mixed (40 per cent). For the majority, assessment of own prospects corresponded to assessment of society’s prospects (i.e., the bold numbers in each table add up more than 50 per cent). In December 2020, the share of optimists was slightly smaller, but the overall distribution remained remarkably stable (see Table 4) despite the changing sample composition.

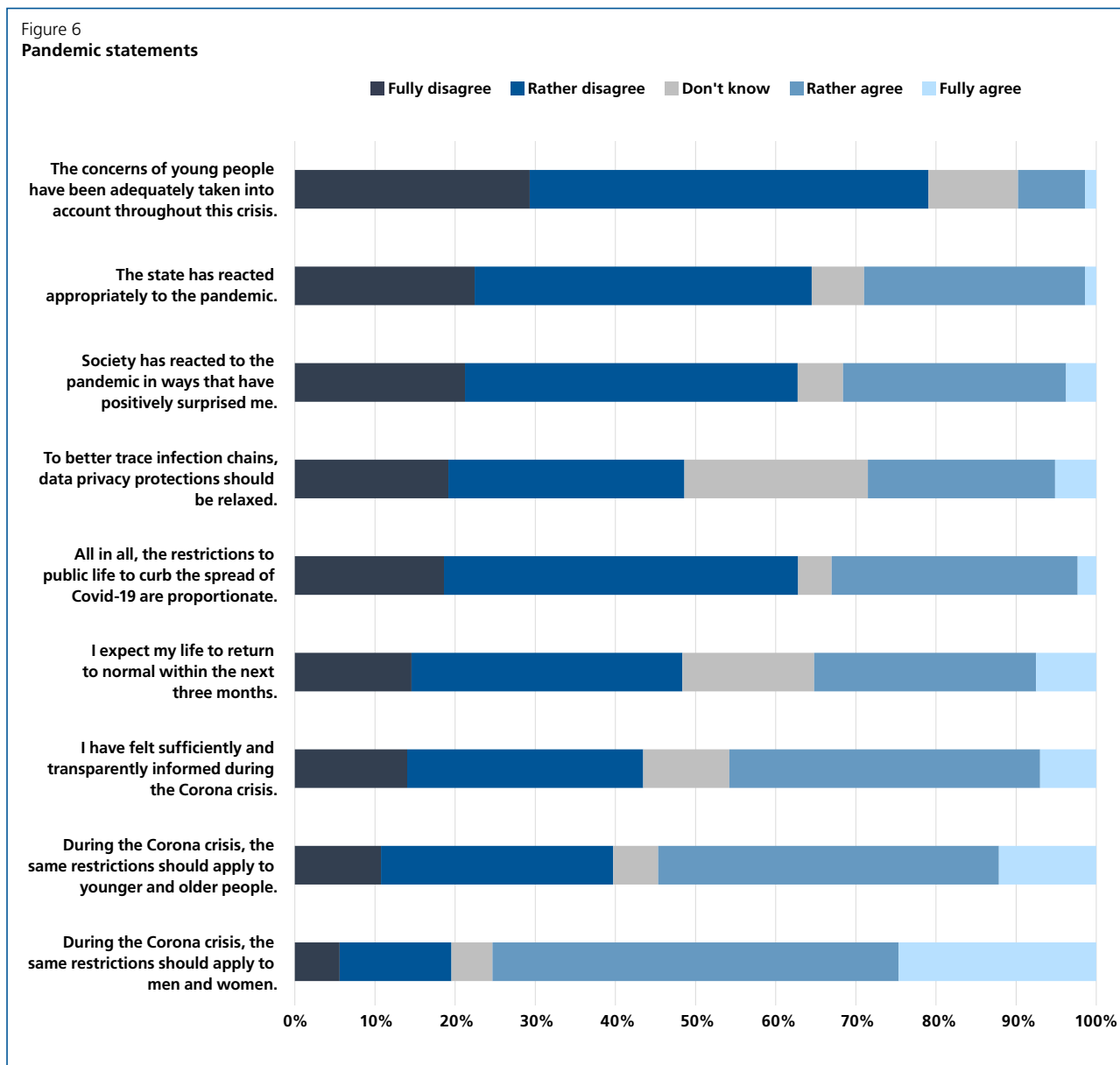
### CHALLENGES AND CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19

In the September survey, we asked the respondents to rate how various areas of public and private life had been affected by the pandemic (see Figure 5). From the perspective

of the Young Leaders, the country’s economic situation, trust in the government and trust in official media were rather negatively affected, while solidarity within society was frequently considered to have been positively affected. Relations within the respondents’ families showed a mixed response pattern, while prospects for their own future, their own economic situation and the freedom of press were rather negatively affected.

In the same survey round, the respondents assessed a number of statements related to the pandemic. Some items show strong agreement across the various respondent categories and countries, while on others there is less consensus (see Figure 6). The Young Leaders mostly believed that the concerns of young people had not been taken adequately into account during the crisis, and the state had not (or rather not) reacted appropriately to the pandemic. That said, the reaction of society to the pandemic positively surprised about one in three respondents. Responses to questions about transparent information and





data privacy protection were varied, mirroring the debates on these issues in many countries of the world.

The baseline survey ended with an open question: *»If you reflect on the current Covid-19 situation, what kind of issues, challenges and problems in your everyday life are worth mentioning?«* The replies varied in length and covered a range of issues. The following visual representation (see Figure 7) shows the most frequently used words by all respondents, providing a first impression of the main issues. Besides general terms such as *»problems«* and *»situation«*, the main shared concerns seem to be of an economic nature (*amal*, *»work«* and *iqtisadi*, *»economic«* stand out).

For a more systematic analysis, we carried out a qualitative content analysis with the help of coding software (Maxqda). In an inductive process, ideas mentioned in the open-text responses were turned into categories which other, similar quotes could then be assigned to. A basic distinction was made between problems and challenges, on the one hand,

and the consequences of those issues, on the other. The resulting codes represent the content of the young people's responses on a more aggregated level. Once again, the most frequently assigned codes are displayed in the largest font sizes.

The main problems (see Figure 8) are indeed economic and also concern a lack or loss of career opportunities. Many respondents observed that public health systems were overwhelmed by the situation, found political structures inefficient or unjust, and complained about a lack of awareness in society. On a personal level, isolation, restricted mobility and working or attending school from home were often quoted as problematic.

The consequences are crushingly negative with very few exceptions (see Figure 9). This figure quintessentially illustrates what the unprecedented pandemic situation in 2020 meant for young people, more specifically what it meant for the well-educated and actively engaged Young Leaders in the MENA countries.

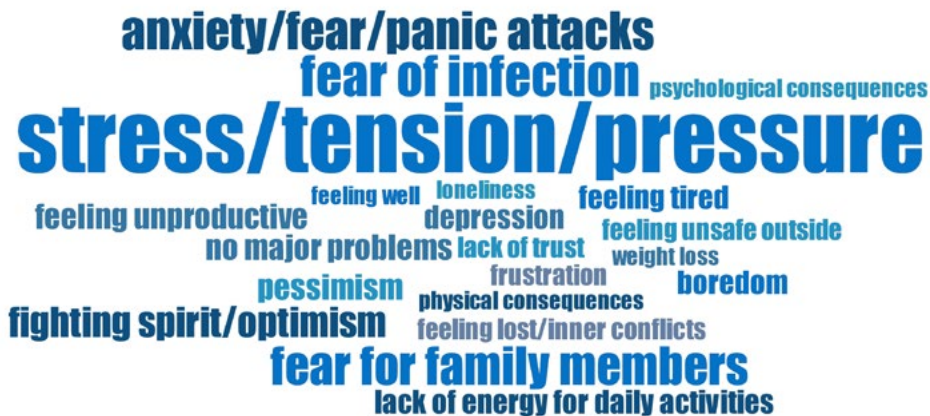
Figure 7  
 Covid-19 situation: Issues, challenges and problems – word cloud of responses



Figure 8  
 Covid-19 situation: Code cloud of problems



Figure 9  
 Covid-19 situation: Code cloud of consequences



## 4

## VALUES, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH

The monthly update surveys allowed us not only to repeat certain questions to track developments over time, but also to address selected topics in more detail. We agreed on these topics from one month to the next, based on previous responses, the specific research interests of the project team and topical issues of the day.

### VALUES (SEPTEMBER 2020)

The question about values was repeated from the 2016 FES MENA Youth Study (Gertel/Kreuer 2018). As we assume values to be rather stable, even in a crisis situation, this serves mainly to compare the Young Leaders to their peers in the region's societies at large. Three ideas and achievements seem to be crucial for the respondents (see Table 5):

- Being financially independent from others
- Always acting in an environmentally conscious way
- Enjoying life as much as possible

These statements represent three key value orientations of this group of young people: gearing their lives towards becoming economically independent, contributing to a sustainable environment and enjoying their youth. In addition, the following items achieve an average score of 9.0 points or more:<sup>4</sup> »Developing my imagination and creativity«; »Living a consciously healthy life«; »Being diligent, hardworking and ambitious«; »Being able to choose my own partner« and »Having a partner whom I can trust«; and »Aiming for more security«. These aspects add more detail to our picture that achieving economic security through creative work is paramount, combined with an orientation towards environmentally conscious and healthy living with a trustworthy partner. »Doing the same as others«, in contrast, appears highly unappealing to the Young Leaders. This is something they share with German youth (cf. Albert/Gertel 2018). The largest positive difference between the scores of the Young

Leaders interviewed in 2020 and the young people from the MENA region interviewed in 2016 relates to their political activity and their support for marginalised groups. On the flipside, the values of »Paying attention to the codes of honour and shame« and »Safeguarding the traditions of my home country« are rather not important for Young Leaders.

### CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (OCTOBER 2020)

Almost all respondents were engaged in civic activity at least occasionally before the outbreak of Covid-19 (see Table 6), with a high time commitment of 15 hours per week on average. This was expected given that such engagement is a prerequisite for joining the Young Leaders programme (the exception is Egypt where the respondents were not part of the YL programme). By autumn 2020, many stated that they had to give up these activities, with even those who continued having to reduce their hours. The priority fields for civic engagement remained however unchanged, with frequent overlaps between fields (multiple answers were possible) (see Table 6).

The October survey also contained a list of statements on civic engagement (see Figure 10). The respondents' average trust in the social impact and necessity of civic engagement had even grown during the pandemic. However, regular engagement had had to be drastically reduced and shifted to occasional engagement and online forms.

Some Young Leaders reported that their political views had changed during the crisis, while about half said it had not. The most significant negative response was regarding participation in political protests since the start of the pandemic. Much as in the 2016 study, the sharp contrast between (low) political mobilisation and (high) civic engagement can be observed among this group of young people.

### MENTAL HEALTH (NOVEMBER 2020)

Taking up the massive emotional consequences of the pandemic situation described by participants in the baseline survey, the November interviews focused on mental health. The largely negative impact of the losses, fears and restrictions are confirmed by the deterioration in mental health

<sup>4</sup> This is related to the following question: »As individuals, we have ideas and visions about our personal life, our attitudes and behaviour. If you reflect on possible achievements in your life, how important are the following points for you, on a scale from 1 = absolutely unimportant to 10 = absolutely important?«

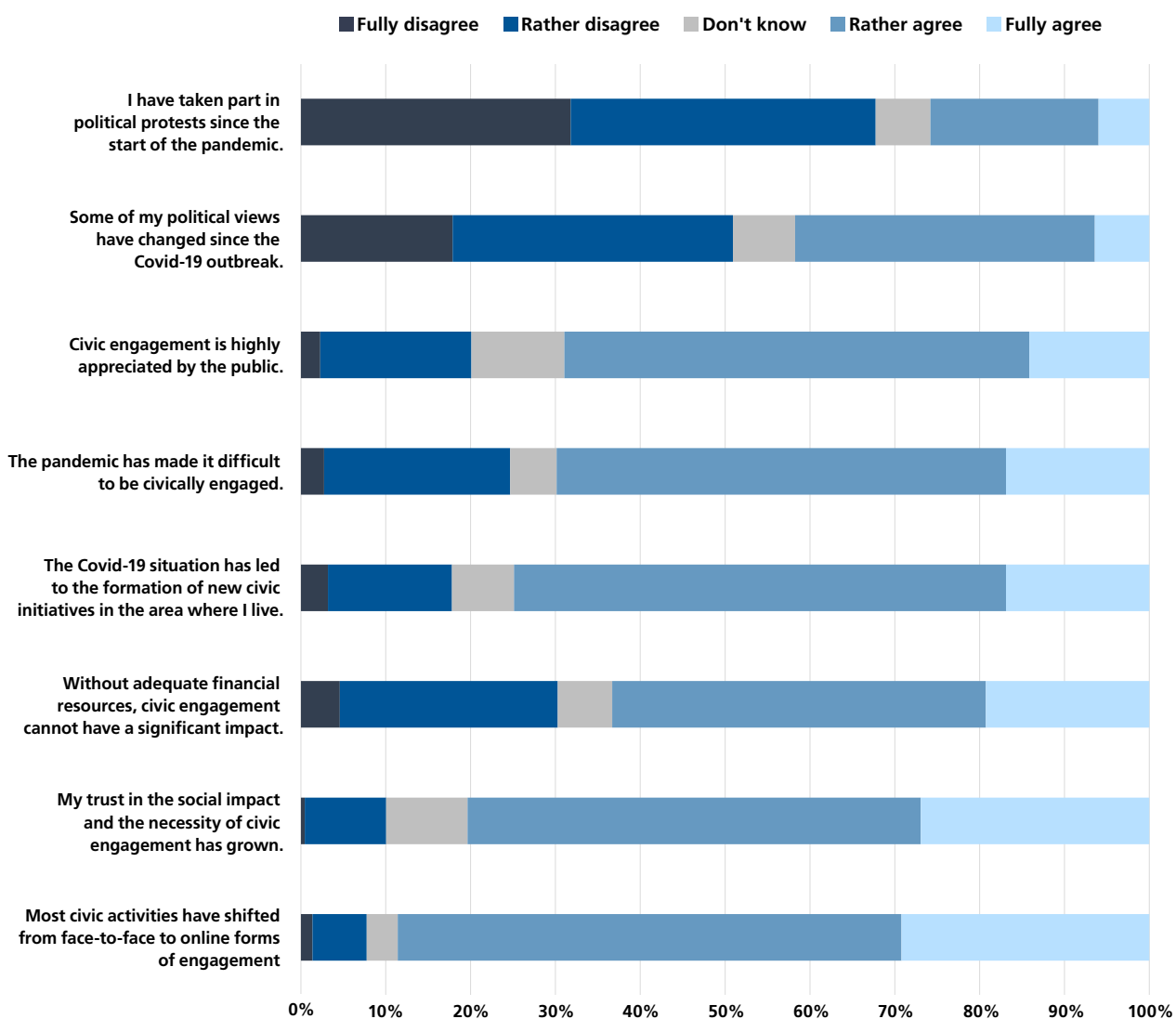
Table 5  
Values

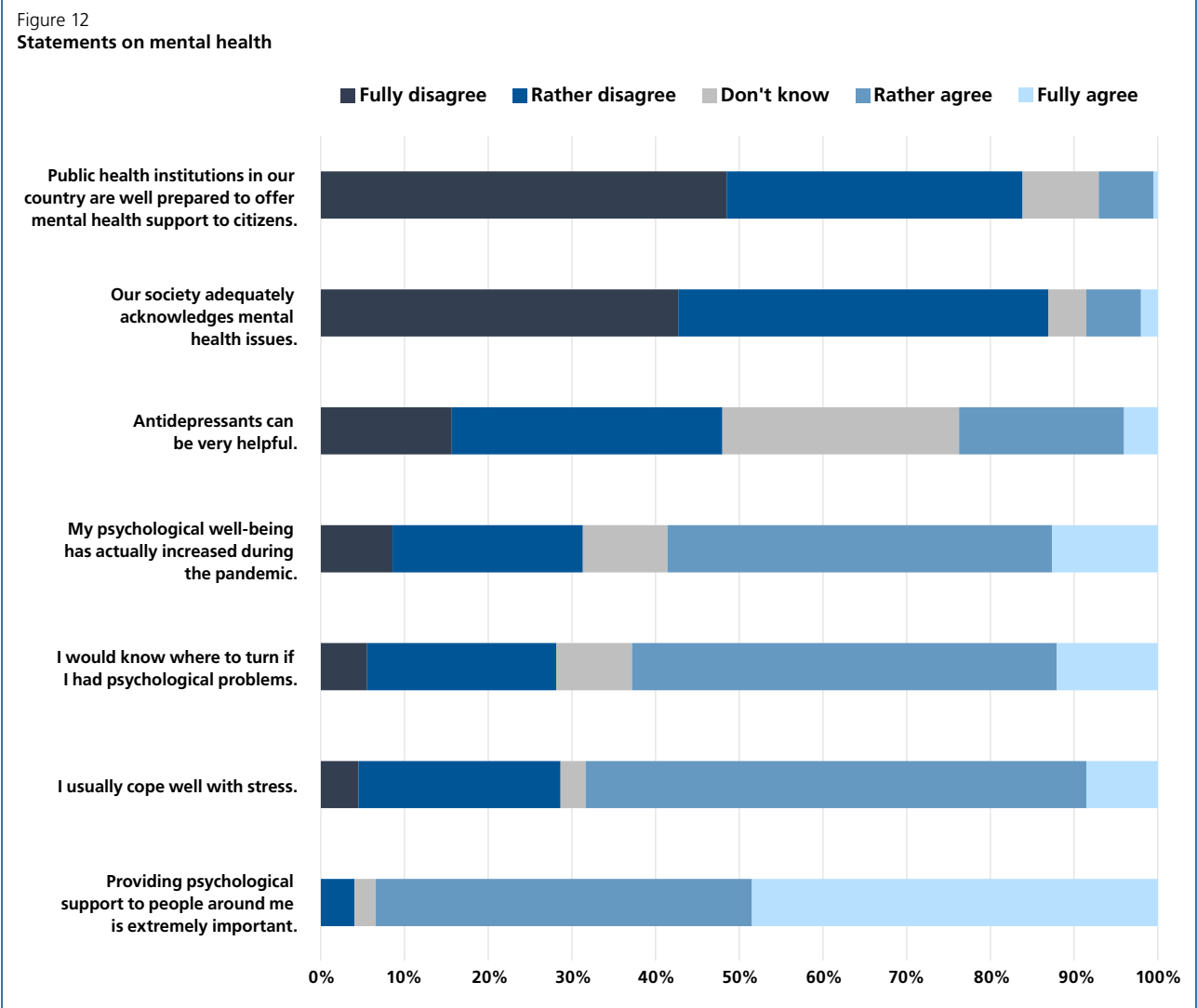
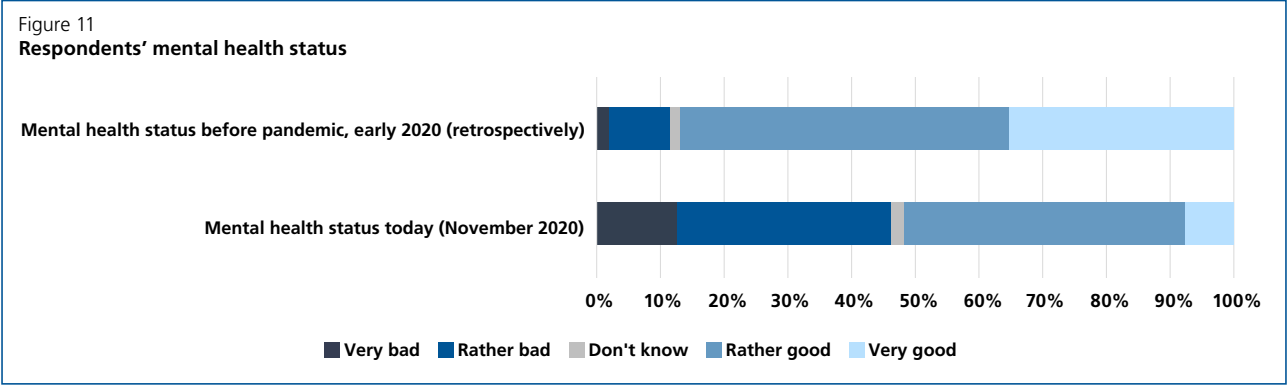
	MENA 2016	YL 2020	Difference
Believing in God	9.1	7.6	-1.5
Respecting law and order	8.9	8.9	0.0
Achieving a high standard of living	8.8	8.5	-0.3
Having a partner whom I can trust	8.8	9.0	0.2
Having a good family life	8.7	7.9	-0.8
Aiming for more security	8.7	9.1	0.4
Living a consciously healthy life	8.6	9.2	0.6
Having good friends who appreciate and accept me	8.5	8.7	0.2
Always acting in an environmentally conscious way	8.4	9.3	0.9
Being able to choose my own partner	8.4	9.1	0.7
Being proud of the history of my country	8.4	7.4	-1.0
Being diligent, hardworking and ambitious	8.4	9.1	0.7
Enjoying life as much as possible	8.3	9.3	1.0
Being financially independent from others	8.3	9.4	1.1
Being connected to others	8.3	8.5	0.2
Paying attention to the codes of honour and shame	8.2	5.4	-2.8
Safeguarding the traditions of my home country	8.0	5.6	-2.4
Developing my imagination and creativity	7.9	9.2	1.3
Tolerating opinions that I do not agree with	7.7	8.6	0.9
Acting independently of advice from others	7.5	6.6	-0.9
Avoiding Westernisation	7.1	5.4	-1.7
Supporting socially excluded and marginalised people	7.0	8.9	1.9
Allowing my decisions to be guided by my emotions	6.7	6.4	-0.3
Doing the same as others	5.9	2.7	-3.2
Having power and exerting influence	5.8	5.2	-0.6
Pursuing my own agenda, even if it goes against the interests of others	5.2	4.6	-0.6
Being politically active	4.7	7.3	2.6

Table 6  
Civic engagement

	Before Covid-19	Now
Regularly engaged	52%	19%
Occasionally engaged	41%	53%
Not engaged	6%	27%
Mean hours per month	60 hrs	47 hrs
Main fields	Social (80%) Cultural (57%) Political (51%)	Social (58%) Cultural (43%) Political (38%)

Figure 10  
Civic engagement statements





status reported by about one-third of the respondents (see Figure 11). Nevertheless, even in November, just over half of the Young Leaders assessed their mental health situation as »rather good« or »very good«.

A list of statements provides more insight into some of the details of this assessment (see Figure 12). Most respondents agreed that they cared deeply about the mental health of people around them, on the one hand, and that public health institutions were ill-prepared to offer psychological support, on the other. Societal awareness was broadly seen

as underdeveloped (more than 85 per cent tended to agree with this statement). Opinions and experiences were more divided on the question of whether antidepressants were helpful or not. Seemingly in contradiction with the finding that young people suffered significant psychological challenges is the affirmation by over half of the respondents that their mental health status had actually improved during the crisis. This may be explained by the deeply ambivalent nature of the experience of confinement that is currently being discussed by scholars (Latour 2021). In an open question, we went on to ask respondents for

specific ideas on how to improve the mental health infrastructures in their communities. The Young Leaders provided many thoughtful suggestions and recommendations. We summarize the key points:

- Conduct awareness-raising campaigns through national media, social media and in schools.
- Establish open self-help groups and exchange forums for free expression and sharing best practices, including online.
- Establish accessible local centres with free mental health counselling from experts.
- Create more opportunities for physical exercise outside, especially for girls and young women.
- Provide online resources for relaxation techniques for people who cannot go outside or meet others.
- Support urban gardening and community agriculture initiatives to reconnect people with the land and food, which reduces stress and depression.
- Make therapy sessions more affordable.
- Several respondents also emphasized that better fulfilling people’s basic needs would help immensely in reducing stress and anxiety.

## LABOUR UNIONS, ENVIRONMENT, OUTLOOK (DECEMBER 2020)

Labour unions in the MENA countries are potential FES partners. To understand how they are perceived by young people, we asked two basic questions about the role of unions. It transpired that even the FES-affiliated Young Leaders saw the role played by unions in their societies in an overwhelmingly negative light (see Figure 13), although a high percentage also said they had no role at all, or were unsure. This did not change substantially during the Covid-19 crisis. On a by-country basis, the respondents from Lebanon, Lib-

ya, Syria and Yemen had the most negative views about the role of unions, although the case numbers were very low and thus not very informative. Somewhat more positive attitudes were observed in Jordan and Palestine. Some Algerian respondents highlighted the positive role played by unions during the pandemic in their country.

The worldwide concern for environmental issues – ranging from global climate change, ocean pollution and biodiversity loss to more local issues – is increasingly also echoed in the MENA region, with media outlets debating such issues, governments acknowledging challenges and adopting policies, and environmental activists becoming more visible on the streets and in institutions. Given the status of YL participants as potential opinion leaders, we wondered to what extent they too were involved in these topics. It emerged that the vast majority of Young Leaders were concerned about the environment and had personally experienced the consequences of climate change (see Figure 14). They also acknowledged that it was difficult to find reliable information on such issues. Around two out of three respondents thought that individual actions could make a difference, and a similar proportion would consider taking part in climate protests. A majority also reported that societal awareness seemed to be growing.

Returning now to the Young Leaders’ personal economic situation. Given that a large share of our respondents were in work before the pandemic and many reported loss of income as one of the effects of the lockdowns and other measures, we decided to inquire about the extent of this reduction in income. Figure 15 shows that this phenomenon was widespread, but differentiated. While the majority had experienced income losses to varying extents, a large group had not experienced any change; and a small minority was actually earning more than before the crisis.

A correlation between respondents’ life satisfaction and economic status becomes evident in another question asked of the Young Leaders in December 2020. The graph below (see Figure 16) illustrates three patterns: the better the respondents’ perception of their own family’s current economic situation, the higher their satisfaction with life in

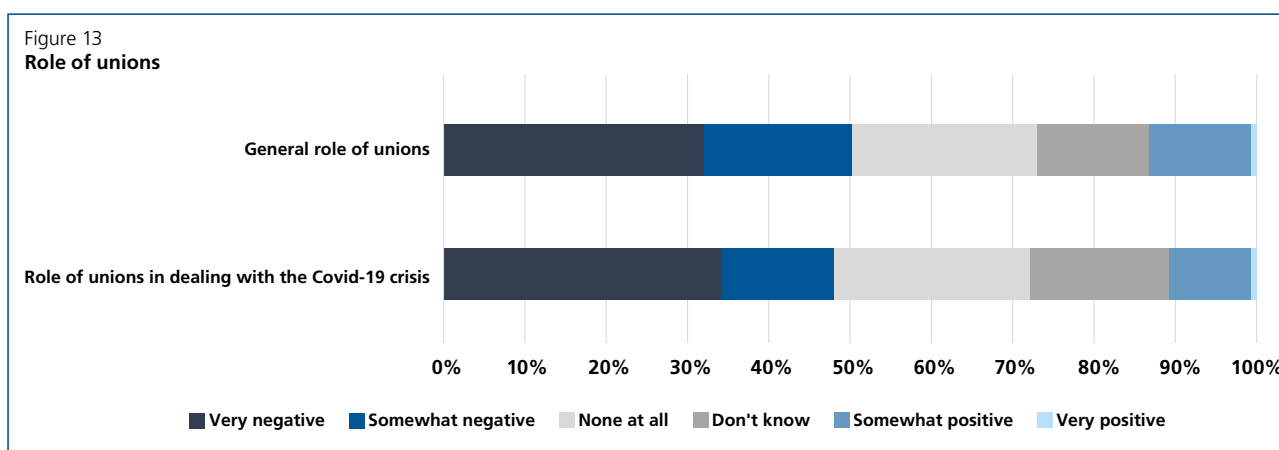


Figure 14  
**Statements on the environment**

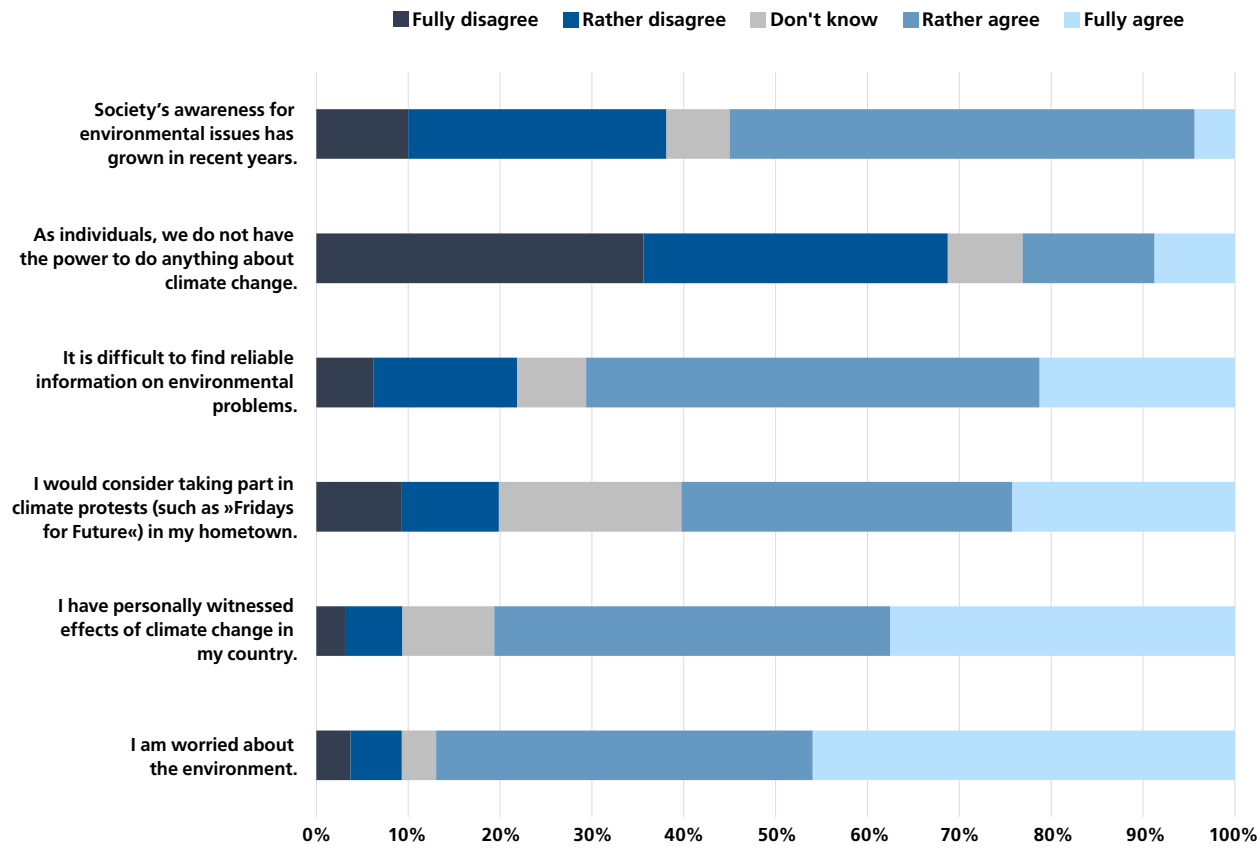
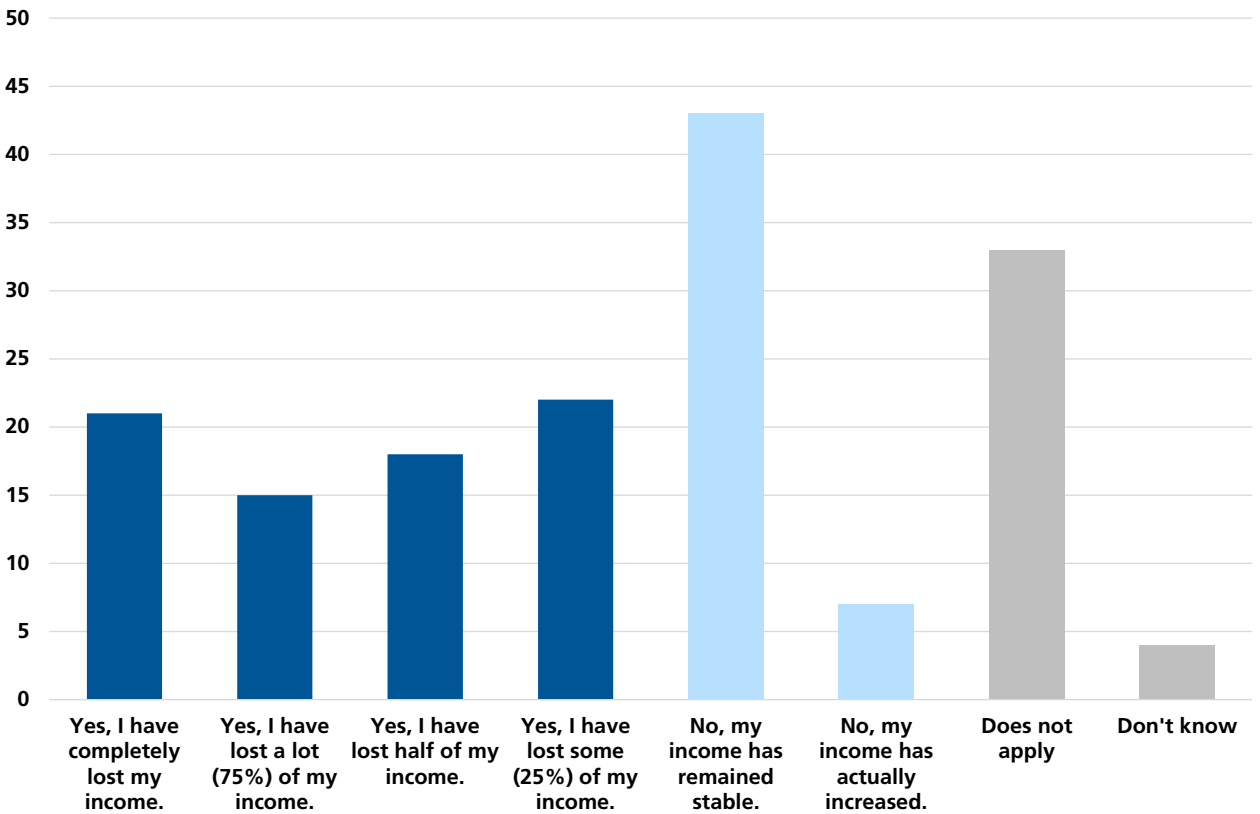
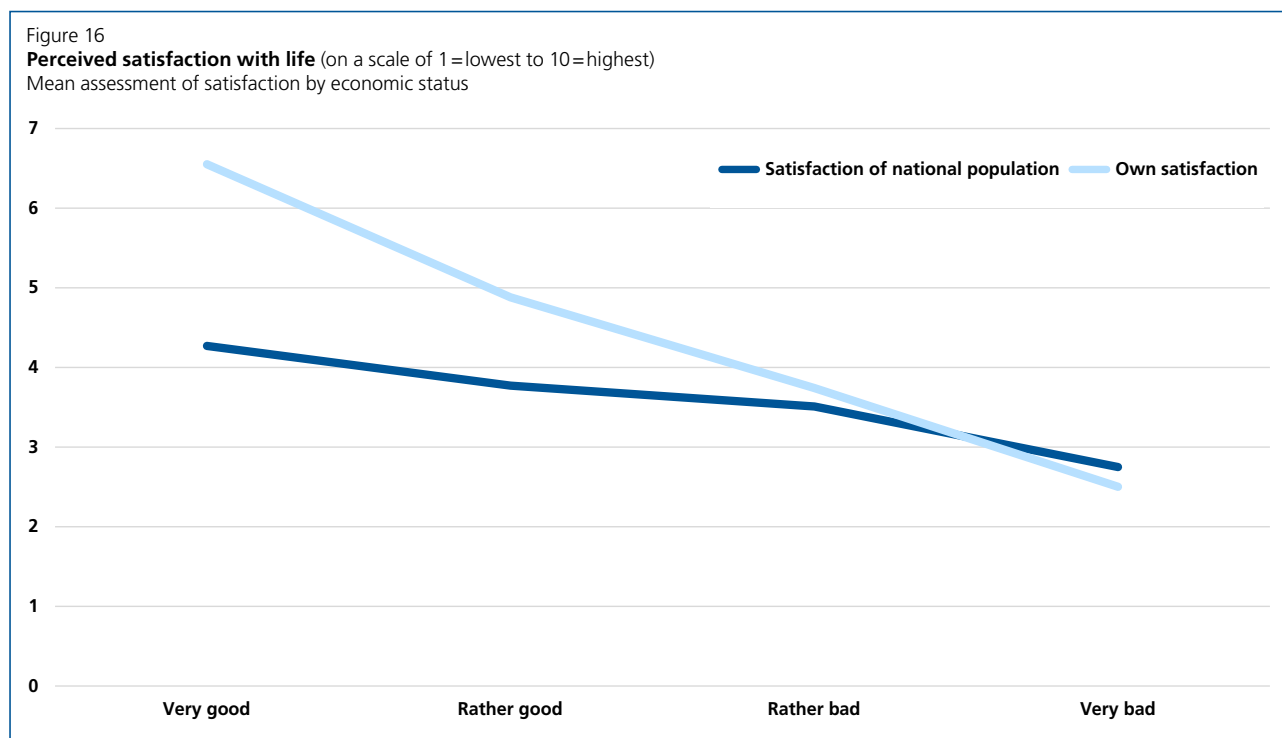


Figure 15  
**Income loss during the pandemic**





general. In addition, all but the most economically insecure respondents perceive their own satisfaction to be higher than that of society in general, which is consistent with the optimism about future prospects described above. Finally, however, the Young Leaders' average life satisfaction score of 4.5 out of 10 is remarkably low – indicating that societies in the MENA region still have plenty of room for improvement when it comes to young people's lives in the face of multiple crises.

The survey ended with an open question, asking the Young Leaders to look back on 2020 and tell us about their view of the prospects for the coming year. Their responses are often pensive and cautiously optimistic along the lines of: »it was a difficult year – but also taught us important lessons«. Of course, there is a broad range of personal experiences, which also varies between as well as within countries. The following examples illustrate this (responses have been summarized):

- It was an intense year and I hope we return to normality.
- The year 2020 has been terribly difficult, both on the private and public level. I think 2021 will also be challenging for young people, the world will still be suffering from the aftermath of 2020. However, from every crisis stems an opportunity to become better and more aware of the injustices entrenched in the existing world system.
- 2020 forced me to revise my habits and lifestyle, but also gave me the opportunity to reflect on my current situation and professional orientation. I hope to make the first steps in my professional life in 2021 and be able to support my relatives.
- A sad year because I lost many family members.
- 2020 was an emotional rollercoaster ride. My father contracted the disease and we had to deal with our inadequate health system. But I remain hopeful that things will get better.
- From bad to worse.
- 2020 brought a lot of unexpected events and emotions. But perhaps this shock made people think, and there are many opportunities to start new projects.
- This year, we faced death, pain, social, mental and health-related problems, but it also showed that scientific research is the only way to solve our problems.
- Despite the difficulties, we also learned how to do many things differently, which will help us jointly rebuild our lives for a better future.
- 2020 was a tough year, a very tough one, especially for Lebanese youth. It was a mixture of crises and unprecedented problems, and Covid was the one that seemed to be the least serious, facing the risk of subsidies on basic products being lifted because of the financial crisis. Of course, above all, there was the explosion on 4th August and the ongoing trauma and national depression... 2021 will be more challenging, where education in particular will become a privilege. With an unemployment rate of 60 per cent, youth emigration is definitely the issue of 2021.
- It was an extremely difficult year, strange in all aspects. I hope we get a chance to improve our situation as a society after facing a disease like Covid-19. What made the year worse was the corruption in this country.
- The crisis does not allow us to see clearly into the future.

Everything is hazy.

- It was a year full of obstacles. Whenever I made one or two steps forward, that was followed by ten steps back. I suffered from severe depression during the year, but I am proud to have made it through safely. We faced massive challenges before Corona, such as unemployment – they will not disappear once the pandemic is over. I hope we will all find what we desire.
- All I want is a normal life.
- 2020 was an eventful year that challenged many things we had taken for granted (travelling, meeting others, going to parties), but also gave us more time to reflect and to increase solidarity among people. Overcoming the crisis in 2021 will be tough, but may open up opportunities for change.

# 5

## CONCLUSION

This study provides insights into the group of Young Leaders across the Middle East and North Africa and their experience of 2020. Most of the programme's participants are young, educated and socially engaged members of their countries' middle classes. While the Covid-19 pandemic was not the only, and arguably not even the most severe crisis that affected daily lives in 2020, its adverse impact was nevertheless immense. The disease directly threatened and sometimes took the lives of friends and family; indirectly, the drastic measures taken to curb the pandemic destroyed job security, education trajectories and mental health stability for many young people. Daily routines were disrupted with most families being restricted to their homes for periods of time; spending priorities shifted away from leisure activities to basic necessities. These shifts can be clearly observed among the participants and alumni of the Young Leaders programme; it is likely that they were even more severe for disadvantaged segments of society.

Yet, at the same time, a high level of reflection, resourcefulness and persistent optimism is evident among many of the young people interviewed. They report a perception of increased solidarity, new forms of civic engagement, which are appreciated by society, increased awareness of environmental issues and global climate change; and they offer constructive proposals on how the public health infrastructure of their home countries could be improved, for example. These Young Leaders constitute an important potential source of inspiration and change that deserves every form of support and further nurturing by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

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## LIST OF TABLES

- 5 Table 1**  
Occupational status
- 5 Table 2**  
Lifestyles
- 8 Table 3**  
Future prospects in July/August 2020
- 8 Table 4**  
Future prospects in December 2020
- 13 Table 5**  
Values
- 14 Table 6**  
Civic engagement

## LIST OF FIGURES

- 3 Figure 1**  
Participants by country
- 6 Figure 2**  
Incidence of Covid-19 cases in 2020
- 7 Figure 3**  
Young Leaders affected by pandemic measures in 2020
- 7 Figure 4**  
Time budgets
- 9 Figure 5**  
Areas affected by the pandemic
- 10 Figure 6**  
Pandemic statements
- 11 Figure 7**  
Covid-19 situation: Issues, challenges and problems – word cloud of responses
- 11 Figure 8**  
Covid-19 situation: Code cloud of problems
- 11 Figure 9**  
Covid-19 situation: Code cloud of consequences
- 14 Figure 10**  
Civic engagement statements
- 15 Figure 11**  
Respondents' mental health status
- 15 Figure 12**  
Statements on mental health
- 16 Figure 13**  
Role of unions
- 17 Figure 14**  
Statements on the environment
- 17 Figure 15**  
Income loss during the pandemic
- 18 Figure 16**  
Perceived satisfaction with life

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