

# SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND



## YOUTH MAPPING

## Promoting Inclusive Governance for Youth and Women in Iraq

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## Executive Summary

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The nascent system of governance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) was birthed by a long struggle for autonomy and legitimacy, and has, to a large extent, been shaped by an often-herculean effort to maintain both in the face of persistent existential threat. At the center of this system is an uneasy partnership, intermittently devolving into an acrimonious rivalry, between the two dominant political parties: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Rather than contributing to robust and sustainable patterns of bipartisan collaboration, a series of power-sharing agreements signed since the Iraqi Kurdish Civil War have served to institutionalize party divisions and reinforce party dominance over the economic, military, media, and political apparatuses in their respective areas of influence (ICG, 2019; Jongerden, 2019; Van Veen & Al-Shadeedi, 2018). Unfortunately, the competitive and clientelist relations spawned by this two-party duopoly have consolidated power in the hands of the political elite, resulting in “mediocre governance” and a dearth of strong, accountable public institutions (ICG, 2019; Jongerden, 2019; Petkova, 2018; Van Veen & Al-Shadeedi, 2018). Many policy analysts now concur that it is time for Kurdistan’s current governance system, rooted in reactive nationalism and the struggle for liberation, to recalibrate, directing its energies inward in order to secure a sustainable future for the region as a whole (Benaim, 2018; Golpy, 2017; Salih & Fantappie, 2019; Van Veen & Al-Shadeedi, 2018).

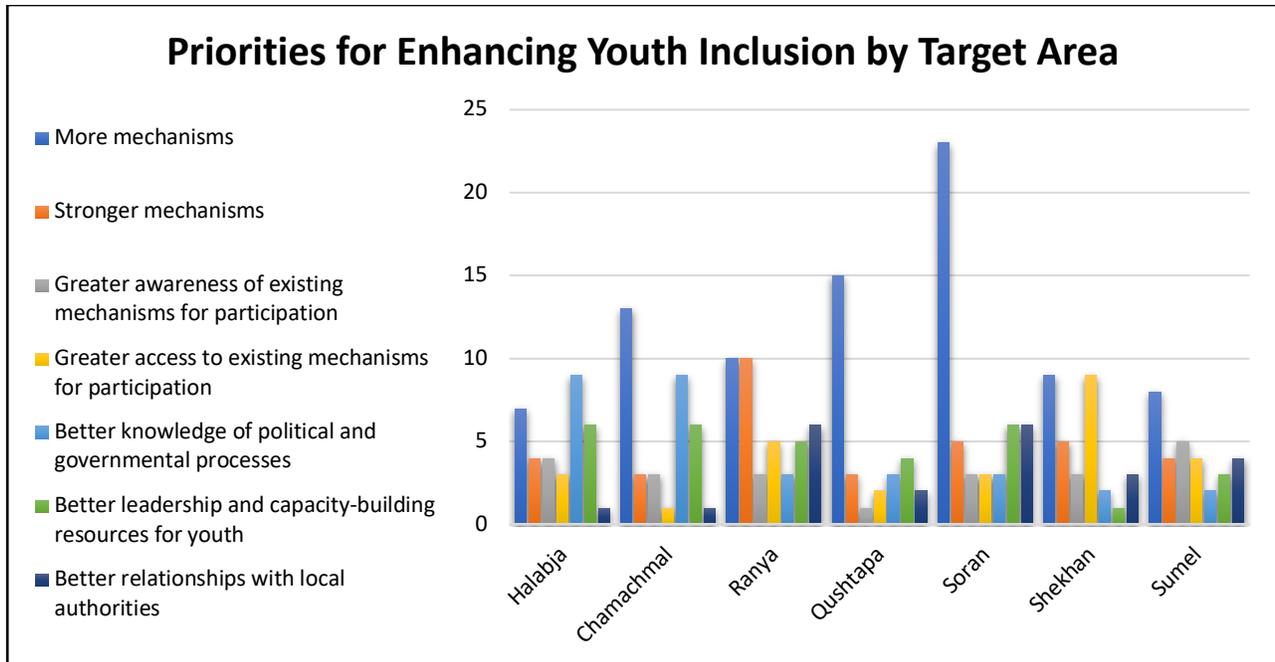
In order to win back a restless and dissatisfied constituency, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) must embark on a process of strategic state-building characterized by responsive governance and pluralistic politics. Given the inevitable role that Kurdistan’s youth will play in assuring the region’s continued survival and solvency, stemming the pervasive loss of nationalist sentiment among this demographic and restoring their trust in the governance process will be especially critical (Benaim, 2018).

In keeping with trends emerging across Kurdistan, an analysis of youth perspectives in seven distinct target areas – Soran, Qushtapa, Ranya, Chamchamal, Sumel, Sheikhan, and Halabja – reveals widespread youth disillusionment with the heavily politicized system of governance and its two-party duopoly. Findings suggest a consequent decrease in the salience of political identity among the younger generation, as well as an increase in the number of youths who consider themselves to be positioned outside of the political establishment. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a notable pattern of disengagement from the political process was also observed across all target locations,<sup>1</sup> with significant percentages of surveyed youth stating that they are ‘not invested or engaged’ in local politics.

Across all seven target locations, current efforts to include youth in the process of governance are reported to be unavailable or grossly inadequate. In a concomitant manner, ‘more mechanisms for participation’ was consistently identified as an essential prerequisite for enhancing the involvement of youth in their local governments.

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<sup>1</sup> Soran (65%), Chamchamal (56%), Halabja (56%), Ranya (55%), Sumel (37%), Qushtapa (37%), Sheikhan (28%).



This study elucidates several distinct but interlocking barriers to robust youth inclusion and participation in the decision-making process. High rates of unemployment and economic deprivation pose structural barriers to youth participation, as they lock many of the region’s youth into a subsistence bracket where their energies are preoccupied by the satisfaction of basic needs. The inordinate influence of the political parties on the governance process forms an administrative barrier, which effectively precludes the participation of an increasingly unaffiliated and independent youth constituency. Finally, the prevalence of tribalism is considered to be a sociocultural barrier in a majority of target locations, as tribal norms often disincentivize youth participation entirely or reserve it as a privilege for those who are well-connected. As a result of such constellating and compounding barriers, youth are largely excluded from the governance process. This finding is particularly pronounced among women, who emerge as the most consistently marginalized youth component.

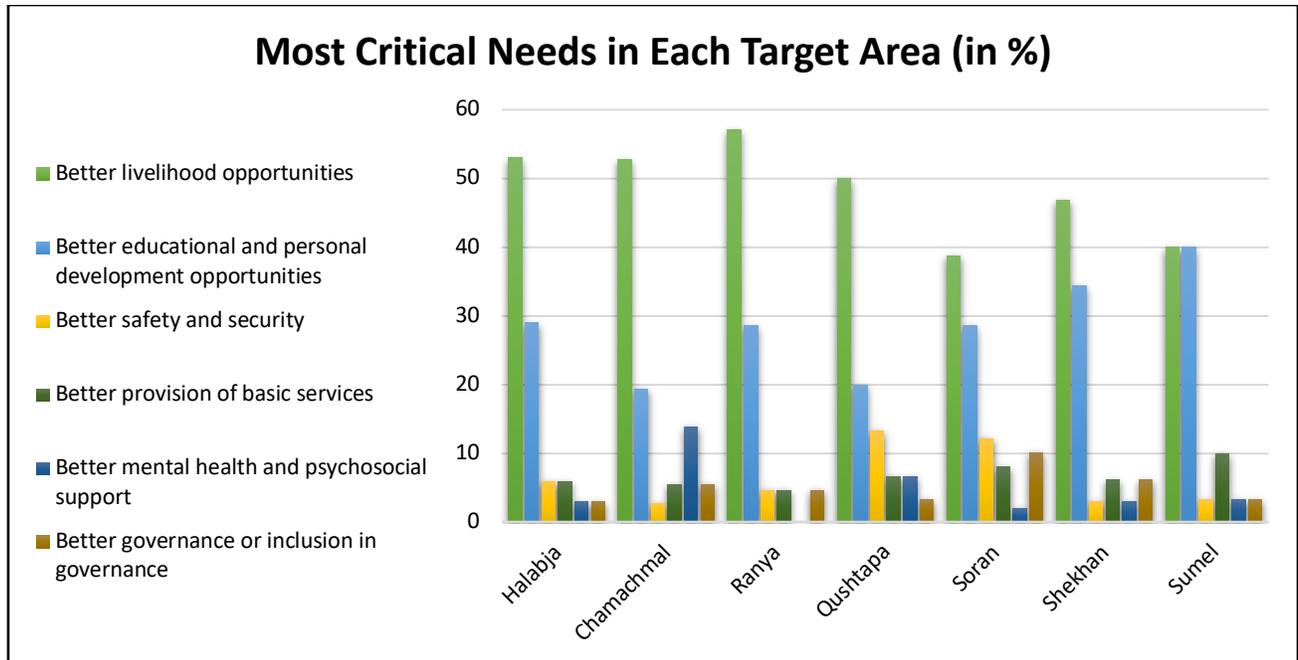
Despite these plentiful and self-evident deficiencies, ‘better governance or inclusion in governance’ was not identified as a critical need by youth informants.<sup>2</sup> Instead, ‘better livelihood opportunities’ emerged as the primary youth need<sup>3</sup> in each of the seven target areas, followed consistently by ‘better educational and personal development opportunities,’<sup>4</sup> although the respective prioritization of these two needs varied by gender in several locations.<sup>5</sup> Youth informants also frequently highlighted the need for additional youth-specific resources in their respective districts. While the prevalence of youth organizations and dedicated youth spaces appears to vary significantly between target areas, 74% of survey respondents, comprising a clear majority in each location, claimed that they do not utilize these resources. This finding suggests a mismatch between available assets and the needs of youth.

<sup>2</sup> Selected by 5.5% of surveyed youth; not cited as a critical need by FGD participants.

<sup>3</sup> Selected by 47% of surveyed youth; consistently cited as a critical need by FGD participants.

<sup>4</sup> Selected by 28% of surveyed youth; frequently cited as a critical need by FGD participants.

<sup>5</sup> Survey data indicates that better educational and personal development opportunities emerged as a higher priority for females in Chamchamal, Ranya, and Sumel, and as a slightly higher priority for female respondents overall by a margin of 3-4%.



Overall, the circumstances of youth across the seven target areas remain quite precarious. Without viable recourse to the mechanisms that might allow them to transform these circumstances, the region’s youth are growing increasingly “hopeless,” and eager to migrate in search of a better life. Securing the robust inclusion of youth in the governance process should be considered an essential investment in the future of Kurdistan.

## Framework

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A Youth Mapping of the seven target locations, conducted by the Middle East Research Institute, was completed between March and July, 2020. The stated goal of this Youth Mapping was to examine youth circumstances across the targeted locations in the KRI and to determine active youth groups and young leaders in their communities. The precise objectives of this evaluation, as delineated by Search for Common Ground, were as follows:

1. Identify existing formal and non-formal youth structures, young entrepreneurs, young leaders, and social media influencers in the targeted areas.
2. Investigate youth participation in the decision-making process and identify challenges and barriers.
3. Provide an inclusive summary of community and authority views on youth and their participation in community.

To achieve the above objectives, the Youth Mapping closely adhered to the specific lines of inquiry set forth in the project TOR. Researchers then analyzed the desired information in light of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) Framework.<sup>6</sup> The PYD philosophy is premised on the notion that healthy, productive, and engaged youth are best supported by developmental approaches that attend to needs in four distinct domains: assets, agency, contribution, and enabling environment.

- Assets: Youth have the resources and skills required to achieve desired outcomes.
- Agency: Youth have the capacity to make decisions and pursue desired outcomes without external constraints or fear of retribution.
- Contribution: Youth are recognized and engaged as agents of change for the positive development of their communities.
- Enabling environment: Youth are supported by healthy social and structural relationships, and situated in a holistic context that promotes their ability to thrive.

The application of the PYD Framework as an analytical lens elucidated critical gaps in youth inclusion in governance across each of the four domains.

In alignment with the long-standing sociopolitical maxim, *nothing about us without us*,<sup>7</sup> this mapping heavily solicited the opinions and contributions of youth themselves in order to identify resources, document needs, and explore possible strategies for improving their inclusion in governance. To ensure a multidimensional and conflict-sensitive approach, however, youth perspectives were also augmented and contextualized with the viewpoints of local leaders and other community members.

The data collected during the course of this study will inform the design and implementation of all subsequent activities under the *Promoting Inclusive Governance for Youth and Women in Iraq* project, thereby enhancing the relevance and responsiveness of its interventions.

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<sup>6</sup> More information on the PYD Framework can be found at <https://www.youthpower.org/>.

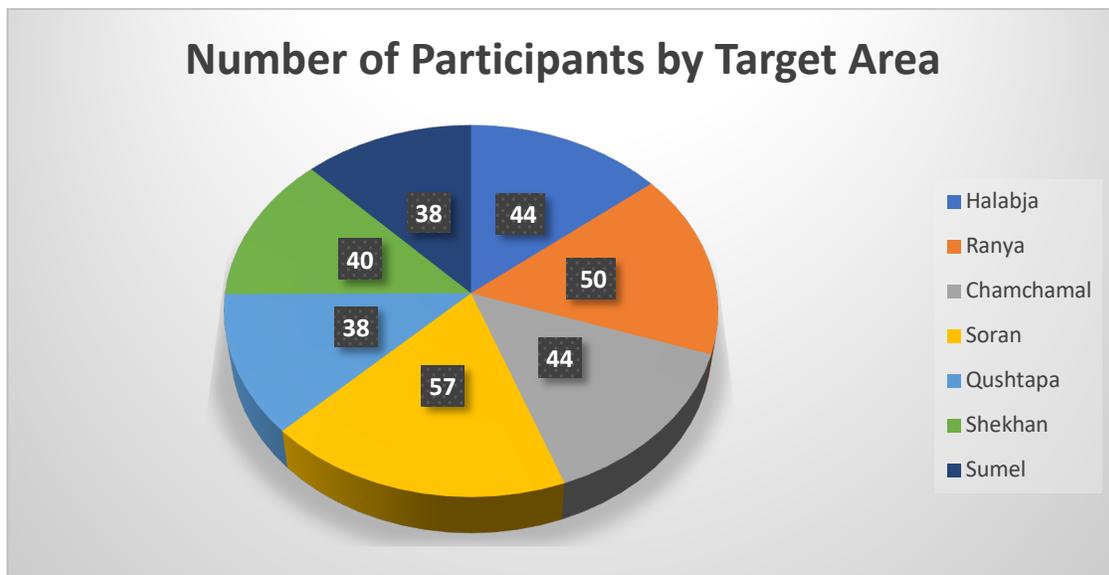
<sup>7</sup> This slogan, which originated over five centuries ago, encapsulates the political and ethical conviction that no representative entity should make policy decisions without soliciting the input and participation of the individuals or communities who will be impacted by those decisions. It has subsequently been used as a rallying cry to secure the robust engagement of marginalized groups in advocacy and self-determination initiatives, particularly within the context of the disability rights movement. For more on the implications of this slogan for research, see the work of David Bridges on “The Ethics of Outsider Research.”

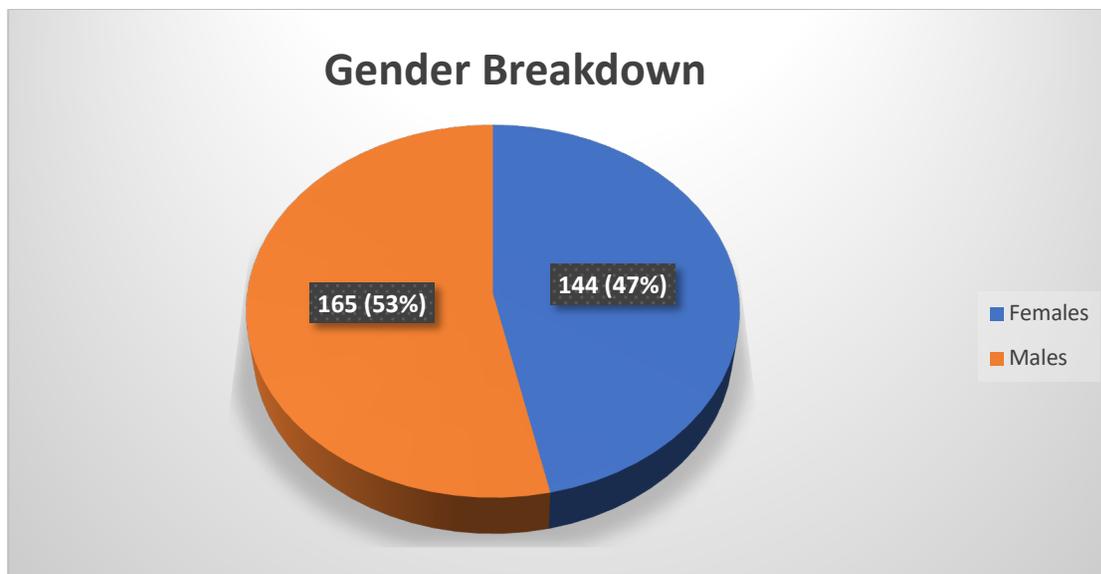
The primary audience for this Youth Mapping will be Search for Common Ground and its local partners, Peace and Freedom Organization (PFO) and Civil Development Organization (CDO), as well as The donor of the project. Should Search for Common Ground decide to make this report public, its secondary audience would likely include two main categories of readers: individual donors, who may have a vested interest in Search for Common Ground’s various activities; and peacebuilding practitioners, who may have a professional interest in programs designed to promote youth inclusion in governance.

### Methodology

To maximize the breadth and depth of the information collected during this Youth Mapping, MERI researchers utilized a rigorous “mixed methods” approach, which included: a preliminary desk review of project documents and existing literature on youth and governance in the KRI; 22 key informant interviews; a community-level survey of 253 respondents; and 7 focus group discussions.

The geographic scope of the study was limited to the 4 governorates of the KRI (Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, and Halabja), and, more specifically, to 7 target districts and sub-districts within those governorates: Soran, Qushtapa, Ranya, Chamchamal, Sumel, Sheikhan, and Halabja city. The demographic scope of the study was limited to host community residents of these 7 locations. Target populations included urban and rural youth (between the ages of 20 and 30), and members of local leadership (e.g. academics, political actors and elected officials, religious leaders, or media personalities) within each of the selected areas.





The research design for this Youth Mapping employed the following methods:

1. A desk review that synthesized and analyzed available literature pertaining to the topic of youth inclusion in governance across the KRI, with a special lens on the 7 target areas. Approximately 50 pieces of literature were examined, which included program documents, academic and policy reports, humanitarian profiles, and news articles from a variety of media outlets. Collectively, this body of literature shed light on the existing status of youth inclusion in governance across the KRI and highlighted critical information gaps by target area.
2. 22 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with local leaders and community members in the 7 target areas. These KIIs engaged diversified leaders from political, religious, academic, and media sectors whenever possible, subject to the presence and availability of such figures and with the understanding that not all components are equally available in all districts. MERI researchers conducted a minimum of 3 KIIs per target location. While it was not possible to achieve gender parity in this data collection exercise due to the critical underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (see *Limitations*), 2 female academics were included in the final tally of key informants.
3. 7 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), one in each of the seven target areas. Each FGD included 8 youth and young adult participants between the ages of 20 and 30. With the exception of a single in-person FGD for 8 residents of Qushtapa, all FGDs were conducted virtually as two separate sessions with 4 participants each. Complete gender parity was assured across all FGDs, and participants were also diversified by religion and ethnicity where possible and appropriate.
4. A community-level survey of 253 youth and young adult respondents (ages 20-30) across the seven target districts and subdistricts, which generated a sample size of between 30 and 50 respondents per location. While the gender breakdown of respondents varied by target area, the survey as a whole was reasonably gender-balanced; 46% of total respondents were female and 54% were male. Respondents were also diversified by religion and ethnicity where possible and appropriate. The survey relied heavily on Likert scales to facilitate rapid statistical analysis and disaggregation of data.

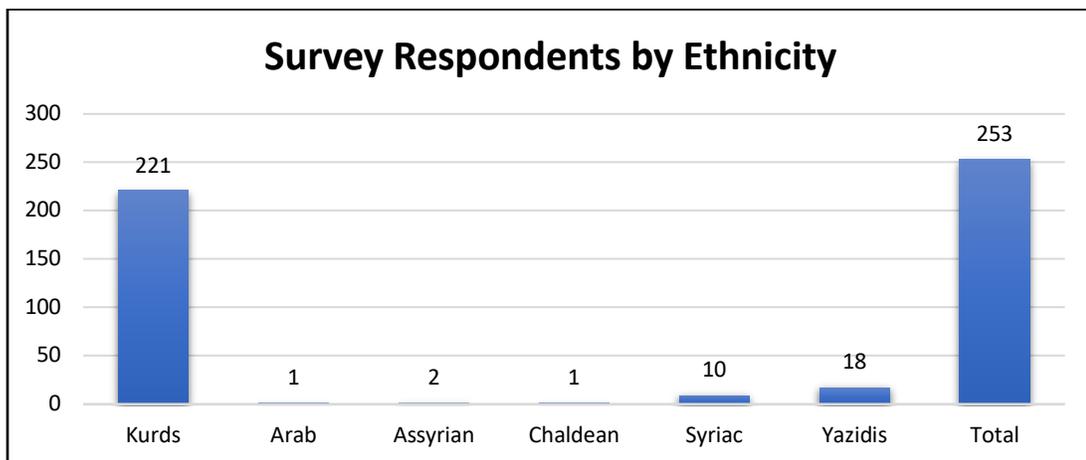
This combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods facilitated the development of a broad narrative analysis, which was further complemented and nuanced by descriptive statistics derived from survey data.

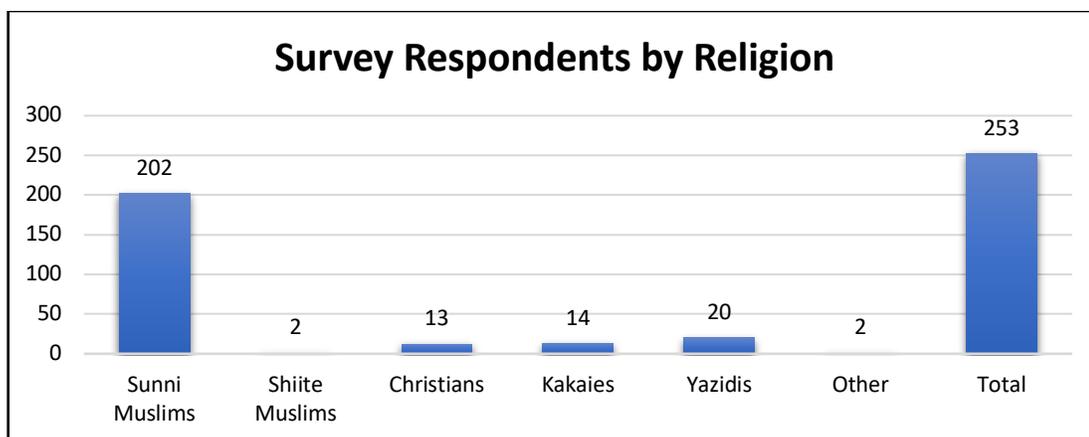
Snowball sampling was utilized to recruit key informants from MERI’s primary and secondary networks. In order to secure representative and proportional youth samples from each of the target areas, purposive or deliberate sampling was used for both the survey and FGDs. MERI researchers worked closely with Search, PFO, and CDO to ensure that the inclusion of commonly marginalized demographics, including women and minorities, was appropriately prioritized in these latter activities. The support of local partner organizations facilitated the identification, selection, and recruitment of participants from various ethnic and religious backgrounds in accordance with the demographic composition of each target area. All data collection activities and materials were made available in both Kurdish and Arabic in order to build a welcoming atmosphere, facilitate comfortable participation, and enhance the robustness and accuracy of the data.

## Limitations

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- Great care was taken to ensure that the research participants recruited for this Youth Mapping comprised representative samples of each target location identified within the study. Due to natural variance in the demographic composition of these areas, however, the samples from certain locations (such as Sheikhan, Halabja, and Soran) included greater ethnic or religious diversity than more homogeneous areas (such as Ranya, Chamchamal, Qushtapa, and Sumel). The selection of several heavily homogeneous areas for inclusion in this Youth Mapping, therefore, mitigates the degree of diversity present in the study as a whole.





- While a reasonable degree of gender parity was achieved among youth participants recruited for the FGDs and community survey, MERI researchers were not able to ensure gender balance in the final roster of key informants. This was due to the design of the study and the parameters established by Search for Common Ground. The target population for KIIs was comprised of members of local leadership (from political, religious, academic, and media sectors) in each of the 7 target districts. While extensive effort was made to solicit the participation of available women leaders, women remain critically underrepresented in leadership positions across many of these districts.
- Constraints on women’s agency, autonomy, and movement vary significantly throughout the Kurdistan Region. In some areas, young women may still be killed for being in possession of a mobile phone or prohibited from installing certain apps (Clancy, 2019; Ibrahim, 2019). The study’s more conservative target locations, such as Ranya and Chamchamal, perform particularly poorly according to indicators designed to measure violence against women. It is possible, therefore, that the women who were able to participate in this study safely may come from family, communal, or tribal systems with relatively relaxed gender-related rules and expectations. As a result, female participants within this study may represent a more privileged or progressive component than what is typical for women in their area as a whole.
- Due to logistical constraints and governmental restrictions arising from the COVID-19 crisis, all data collection activities were conducted remotely using virtual methods. Key informant interviews took place by phone; the community survey was administered entirely online; all FGDs, besides one, were held over Whatsapp or Google Meet. Reliance on remote technologies for these various field activities likely inhibited the participation of respondents who lack internet access, phone service, or consistent and reliable electricity. Such limitations may have disproportionately impacted rural populations, those lacking in computer literacy, and other less privileged components, enervating their degree of representation in the study overall.
- Inevitable technological disruptions and the limitations of virtual platforms significantly detracted from data collection activities that are typically more effective in person, such as focus group discussions. While the use of an uninterruptible power supply (UPS) device at MERI ensured consistent internet service for data collectors, many participants across the 7 target areas did not have access to the same technology. As a result, participants frequently dropped in and out of the FGDs or faced other technical difficulties at critical junctures. In some focus group events, female

participants or the sole representatives of minority groups were absent for a portion, the majority, or all of the discussion as a result of these difficulties. Their absence may skew available data from these events.

- While MERI researchers did attempt to recruit research participants from across a broad political spectrum, it is important to note that political affiliation is a complex, multi-faceted, and sensitive topic in the KRI. Verbal expressions of affiliation do not always indicate actual political identity or ideology, as party patronage is often used to secure jobs and professed loyalty to the party may be expected in return. Moreover, some individuals may be reluctant to self-identify as being independent or affiliated with a non-dominant political party for a variety of personal or professional reasons, including the real or perceived risks associated with these marginalized identities. Due to such underlying complexities and sensitivities, data was not disaggregated by political affiliation.
- The specific questions and lines of inquiry included in this Youth Mapping were designed to assess the circumstances of *youth*, particularly related to their inclusion in governance, across the 7 target locations. In demographic studies and population pyramids developed for Iraq, youth are typically defined as those between the ages of 15 and 24, while local perceptions about what constitutes “youth” across the 7 target areas may include persons between the ages of 14 and 50. However, in this study and the larger *Promoting Inclusive Governance for Youth and Women in Iraq* program, the target demographic is limited to those between the ages of 20 and 30. As a result, this Youth Mapping may not accurately reflect the circumstances of the youth population, as a whole, in the specified target locations.

## Introduction

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Evidence indicates that inclusive governance processes are essential in the building of stable, resilient, and socially cohesive societies (Carter, 2015). However, despite the ostensible aspirations of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the direction of greater inclusivity, as articulated in its Regional Strategic Development Vision for 2020, policy analysts have expressed concern over the KRI's failure to achieve a governance model that adequately represents its diverse population.

In recent years, the KRI has seen a marked uptick in public demonstrations against the political establishment, which comprises the traditional KDP-PUK party duopoly (Van Veen & Al-Shadeedi, 2018). Entrenched patterns of nepotism, cronyism, and clientelism among the two dominant parties have reinforced political patronage networks in their respective areas of influence – the Yellow and Green Zones – and consolidated available resources within Kurdistan's ruling political elite (Gurbuz, 2018; Jongerden, 2019; Petkova, 2019; Van Veen & Al-Shadeedi, 2018). In the context of a splintered, historically competitive governance system, these patterns have fed into a widespread public perception that the parties are more intent on shoring up political and economic power than on collaborating to serve their constituents. Unfortunately, expressions of public outrage and dissent have been met with increasingly violent suppression by both the KDP and PUK, signaling an unwillingness to allow a robust political opposition to flourish (Van Den Toorn, 2018; Van Veen & Al-Shadeedi, 2018).

Disillusionment with the current governance apparatus in the KRI is widespread, but appears to be particularly pronounced among the region's youth. Following the 2003 regime change, expectations for a “new social contract, one that would provide rights on the basis of citizenship rather than on party affiliation” burgeoned among the youth of Iraqi Kurdistan (Salih & Fantappie, 2019, pg. 1). However, these hopes were decimated as the entrenched party-based political system failed to adapt to more effective and responsive governance models. Instead, a series of consecutive political crises in the KRI served to deepen the rivalry between the two dominant parties and further erode democratic processes (Gurbuz, 2018; ICG, 2019; Jongerden, 2019; Petkova, 2018; Westcott, 2019). Youth have been disproportionately affected by these dynamics, which have inhibited the ability of the regional government to effectively address high unemployment, provide livelihood opportunities, and secure economic stability for the KRI (Golpy, 2017; Petkova, 2018; Westcott, 2019). IOM's recent demographic survey of the KRI revealed that more than 20% of the region's youth, between the ages of 18 and 34, are unemployed; that they comprise the vast majority of individuals actively seeking employment; and that approximately 65% of unemployed young men (between the ages of 25 and 34) have lost hope in finding a job (IOM, 2018). Young women, who experience far lower levels of labor force participation than their male counterparts, have been doubly disenfranchised under this competitive duopoly, as the patronage networks utilized by the political parties reinforce patriarchal relations and exacerbate women's dependence on men (IOM, 2018; Salih & Fantappie, 2019). Faced with a system that does not represent their interests or respond to their needs, the region's youth have become increasingly critical of the KDP, the PUK, and the KRG as a whole (Petkova, 2018).

Due to recent amendments in Iraqi electoral law, the age of eligibility for parliamentary elections has dropped to 25, while the age of eligibility for provincial council candidates is now 28 (Ibrahim, 2020). However, despite the fact that nearly 2/3 of the KRI's population is under the age of 30, young leaders remain a minority in the political sphere (Benaim, 2018; Ibrahim, 2020). Only 9% of KRG ministers, for instance, are under the age of 40 (Ibrahim, 2020). Unfortunately, as policy analysts have repeatedly observed, elections in the KRI “have become a tool of self-preservation for the established leadership” (Salih & Fantappie, 2019, p. 12). The few

young people who successfully integrate into the political sphere tend to do so under the auspices of political party structures; as such, their participation is conditional and bounded by party affiliation, leaving them unable to meaningfully challenge existing power dynamics (Salih & Fantappie, 2019). Thus, while there are avenues by which youth can ostensibly participate, at least nominally, in the political process – whether as voters, members of local party offices, provincial council members, or parliamentarians – these avenues do not always afford youth the opportunity to advocate for their distinct objectives and priorities (Ibrahim, 2020).

Meanwhile, avenues for political participation outside of traditional party patronage networks are limited. Those who eschew affiliation with the dominant parties may choose to join an opposition party, engage in small-scale advocacy initiatives through independent civil society organizations, or participate in historically ineffective anti-government protests (Petkova, 2019; Salih & Fantappie, 2019). As a result, youth have few viable mechanisms through which to air their grievances, challenge the status quo, engage in political transformation, or improve their own circumstances. Their consequent marginalization and alienation have had a number of deleterious psychosocial impacts. First, youth have lost trust in the KRI's governance system, its institutions and actors, and even the electoral process itself (Saeed, 2019). Second, there has been a troubling demise of nationalistic sentiment in youth across the KRI (Salih & Fantappie, 2019); as a young resident of Sulaymaniyah recently explained: “the Kurdish parties made us not believe in the flag anymore” (Westcott, 2019). Finally, the region's youth express a degree of pessimism, hopelessness, and resignation that is unprecedented (Saeed, 2019). Together, these developments have resulted in widespread disengagement from the political process and low voter turnout among this demographic (Benaim, 2018; Petkova, 2018).

The risks of such comprehensive disillusionment, disempowerment, and disengagement among the region's youth are profound. Youth increasingly choose migration to escape what they perceive to be an ineffective and unchangeable political system (Saeed, 2019; Salih & Fantappie, 2019). This increases the likelihood of regional brain drain and could compromise the potential for a demographic dividend. Meanwhile, those who remain may develop a reliance on informal structures and alternative mechanisms for addressing needs, securing rights and entitlements, achieving objectives, or resolving conflicts. Such strategies are likely to contribute to increasing civil unrest, social splintering, militarization, and radicalization among the region's youth (Benaim, 2018; IRIS, 2017; Langendorf, 2019; UNDP, 2014).

Providing viable mechanisms and a conducive environment for meaningful youth inclusion in governance may, therefore, prove to be critical in mitigating these risks and sustainably transforming extant dynamics.

## Key Findings

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The respective findings from Soran, Qushtapa, Ranya, Chamchamal, Sumel, Sheikhan, and Halabja exhibited a remarkable degree of consistency, elucidating broad thematic trends that may be, to some extent, indicative of youth circumstances across the KRI.

Across all seven target districts, youth and local leaders alike highlighted **the centrality of livelihood and job opportunities** to transforming youth circumstances. In most cases, the provision of gainful employment for the region's youth was also identified as a necessary prerequisite to facilitating youth inclusion in governance. This alleged relationship, suggesting the primacy of employment to participation in decision-making, appears to be fed by several distinct contextual tributaries. It is no secret that the government is the largest employer in the KRI. The functional and cultural dominance of the public sector in Kurdistan's labor market contributes

to a common conflation between employment and participation in governance, as procuring a job within the public sector is seen as a point of entry into the government and a gateway to decision-making. Additionally, communal perceptions about who is qualified for participation in governance appear to be dictated, at least in part, by relative degrees of financial capacity and professional experience, which effectively rules out the participation of unemployed youth.

*“If [youth] are not employed, they cannot be part of the local government.” (KII:2020)*

High youth unemployment across the KRI also locks many of Kurdistan’s young people into a subsistence bracket, where their energies and talents are, of necessity, fully dedicated to pursuing the satisfaction of what Abraham Maslow identified as basic or deficit needs (McLeod, 2020). According to Maslow’s hierarchy of human need, basic needs, including employment, often represent physiological and security imperatives that demand to be satisfied before most individuals can progress to addressing higher level growth needs, or “being” needs (McLeod, 2020). In the face of financial deprivation and insecurity arising from protracted or persistent unemployment, youth across the seven target areas may not have the capacity to prioritize engagement in non-subsistence activities, such as programs designed to enhance their inclusion in governance. This may impact the perceived resonance and responsiveness of such interventions among recipient communities, as only 5.5% of youth respondents identified ‘better governance or inclusion in governance’ as a critical need in their area. It may also have implications for the sustainability of these programs, particularly in the absence of broader systems change.

Another dominant theme that emerged across all seven target districts is a burgeoning sense of distrust and disillusionment among youth informants due to the rampant **politicization of the governance process**. The political parties are perceived to wield an inordinate degree of control over local governments and their institutions, as well as to be more preoccupied with self-preservation and the satisfaction of predetermined political agendas than with serving the youth constituency. As a result, when asked about what youth need to facilitate their robust inclusion in governance, informants frequently eschewed targeted, youth-specific recommendations in favor of proposing broad systemic solutions, such as decentering the political parties and curbing their influence on the local government. This may have additional implications for the sustainability of programs designed to enhance youth inclusion in governance. Outside of systemic transformation, such interventions may only treat the symptoms of youth disengagement, rather than its root causes.

In the interim, formal affiliation and membership in one of the political parties is perceived to be the principal mechanism for securing youth inclusion in governance. Unsurprisingly, given youth sentiments toward the political parties, **profound dissatisfaction with existing mechanisms for participation** was noted across all seven target districts. Current efforts to secure youth inclusion were predominantly described as unavailable (42%) or otherwise inadequate (56%) by survey respondents.<sup>8</sup> Satisfaction with existing efforts was only expressed by 1.6% of the total surveyed population. Concomitantly, ‘more mechanisms for participation’ emerged as a central demand across all target locations.<sup>9</sup> Youth appear to be looking for alternative avenues, outside of party affiliation, to enhance their own involvement in local governance. This may highlight the need for non-partisan and bi-partisan approaches to building youth participation.

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<sup>8</sup> The sundry categorizations of inadequacy selected by survey respondents include “limited or inaccessible,” “not inclusive or representative,” or “lacking in quality.”

<sup>9</sup> Highest priority, often by a considerable margin, in Soran, Qushtapa, Chamchamal, and Sumel; tied for highest in Ranya and Sheikhan; second highest priority in Halabja.

Another key finding that emerged from available data is that **local governments have limited decision-making capacity**. As a result of the highly centralized model of governance in Kurdistan, government entities within the seven target districts reportedly have little ability to make decisions for their own constituents. Unclear distributions of power at the local level not only complicate accountability for public grievance, but can also obscure appropriate channels for the escalation of critical priorities.

*“Halabja in itself is not where decisions are made.” (Halabja KII:2020)*

*“I myself do not have the power to make decisions here. [...] Power lies in the centers.” (Qushtapa KII:2020)*

*“The reality is that strategies, policies, and visions are not created by the local governance here.” (Sheikhan KII:2020)*

This dynamic raises the question of whether active and efficacious representation is even possible, under the current governance model, at the local level. It also has implications for the prospect of youth inclusion via local governance mechanisms. If local authorities do not have sufficient power to make decisions, youth confidence in the governance process may be further eroded when their increased participation is not matched by a commensurate change in their immediate circumstances. In order to avoid this outcome, interventions designed to promote youth inclusion in governance should either be scalable, integrate clear channels for escalation, or provide opportunities for youth to liaise directly with the decision-makers who can feasibly secure action on their critical priorities and objectives.

While the communities who suffer from heightened vulnerability and marginalization appear to vary slightly by target location, **young women were consistently identified as marginalized** in every area besides Halabja. Largely due to the continued salience of religious and tribal norms in many of these districts, women face compounding challenges in all categories of need highlighted by the youth. Women have fewer social and recreational resources, as well as less access to those resources<sup>10</sup>; fewer job opportunities; less capacity to prioritize personal development as a result of pregnancy and child-care responsibilities; less communal and familial support; less attention and provision from the government; more logistical barriers to their participation, and more cultural prohibitions of it; fewer freedoms; less mobility; more violations of their rights and bodily autonomy; and more drastic consequences for transgressing social mores. Given these considerable hurdles, any intervention designed to promote youth inclusion in governance should provide additional support for female beneficiaries in order to facilitate their equitable access and safe participation.

Data collected from the seven target areas also served to elucidate the **impact of cultural norms and precedents on youth participation** more broadly. These norms appear to be particularly salient in conservative, predominantly tribal communities, where youth are expected to defer to their elders in matters of ideology and opinion. Those who step outside of their socially prescribed roles by expressing public dissent or criticizing those in authority may face “vengeance” and retribution. In these contexts, youth participation in decision-making is not typically validated, and youth inclusion in governance may even be perceived as a “threat” to existing power structures and the established order. Given such dynamics, interventions designed to promote youth inclusion in local governance processes may risk exacerbating communal tensions if they do not include robust stakeholder engagement strategies to assure local buy-in and support.

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<sup>10</sup> The percentage of female survey respondents who stated that they do not use available youth resources in their area (80%) was notably higher than the percentage of male survey respondents who said the same (68%). It is likely, based on qualitative data, that this differential is due to women’s restricted mobility, childcare responsibilities, and other gendered barriers to equitable access.

## Soran

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Soran is a district within the Kurdistan Region's Erbil Governorate. It is an agricultural area and tourist destination with a large city center, located in the northeastern part of the KRI. Soran falls within the politically-defined Yellow Zone led by the KDP, and shares borders with Turkey and Iran. It is also heavily tribal, with a host community primarily comprised of Muslim Kurds and a Christian minority. In Soran, those who are considered to be "youth" may range in age between 14-50 years old.

### Assets

In Soran, youth have access to a number of private and public youth groups and spaces. 78% of surveyed youth from this area acknowledged the existence of dedicated youth groups, while 76% acknowledged the existence of youth-specific spaces. In terms of public entities, informants identified several governmental organizations and centers, including the Social & Cultural Affairs Organization, Soran Youth & Sports Center, and Sedakan Youth Center. Additionally, each of the political parties has a student union in Soran, although the KDP student union appears to have a more active role given its dominance in the district.

However, youth respondents from Soran were far more likely to identify civil society organizations and spaces than those that are governmental or politically affiliated. Youth-oriented CSOs include Aweza, Waar, Futsal, Warty Youth, Wra Youth, Sorchi Youth Organization, Para, Soran Youth Group, Sheen Group, and Bakhsheen Group. The most active youth organizations in Soran appear to be those at work in youth development and environmental protection. Youth spaces include Soran High Center, Youth Development Center, and the Center for Kirmanji Dialect.

Despite the plethora of available youth-based resources in Soran, 73% of surveyed youth stated that they do not use these resources. There appear to be several possible reasons for this discrepancy. The presence of such organizations is no guarantee of their functionality or efficacy. For example, youth informants allege that some CSOs are illegitimate, politically-affiliated "shadow" organizations, while others, ostensibly independent, may still be subject to the control or interference of the political parties. The accessibility and reputation of other organizations have been compromised by tribal patronage. Some are perceived to be driven by personal agendas rather than the needs of the community. Many youth organizations are established in response to critical need, and are therefore temporary or circumstantial by nature. Since funding has dried up due to the recent financial crisis, the majority of youth organizations in Soran are not financially supported and are, instead, comprised of volunteers, which is not a sustainable model in the present economic climate. As a result of such deficiencies, more effective youth organizations and dedicated youth spaces are needed in Soran. This is particularly true for women in this district, given their limited mobility due to tribal norms and a current paucity of female-specific spaces.

The most salient needs identified by Soran's youth, however, are 'better livelihood opportunities' (39%) and 'better educational and personal development opportunities' (29%). While Soran has many talented and capable youth, deficiencies in both the public and private sector have led to high youth unemployment across the board. Many of those who successfully graduate from universities and other institutions struggle to secure viable employment. Young women, in particular, are disproportionately impacted by the lack of jobs due to their restricted movement and limited freedom of choice when it comes to employment opportunities. Without a steady source of income, impoverished youths are often forced to drop out of school to provide for

themselves and their families. This is a vicious and disempowering cycle, as it locks youth into a subsistence bracket and prevents them from prioritizing their own educational and personal development.

Even in the face of limited avenues for youth development, however, a number of youths have reportedly risen to prominence in Soran, particularly in the fields of civil society, leadership, and social media. According to youth informants, young public figures in civil society organizations include: Hazhar Ibrahim, Ashorina Edward, Kalsoom Gaznayee, Zebar Taha, Sarkawt Abdulrahman, Aram Kurdistan, Mahdi Mohammed, Diyari Mohammed, Adnan Osman, Karzan Osman, and Sirwan Sabir. In leadership, prominent youth figures include: Lafaw Osman, Niyaz Balakee, Hunar Abdulwahid, Anas Aziz, Dilshad Mustafa, Niaz Shamsaddin, Nihad Mohammed Qadir, Ismael Abdulrazzaq, Sarbast Rawanduzi, Mahdi Dawood, and Dilan Jawhar. Youth active on social media include: Ako Hamad Rabi, Zahir Ibrahim, Evan Janti, Dyar Mohammed, Muslih Bradosti, Sirwan Khalifani, Jabir Wasman, Morshid Mohi, and Dorya Zikren. Rivan Paulis, Kariz Barzinja, and Darbaz Hastani are in entrepreneurship and business, while Hazhar Ali is in the field of media. Two young women, Jwan Abdullah and Shala Abdullah, are active in the space of gender equality. It is important to note that the vast majority of these names were offered by FGD participants and key informants, and may be reflective of personal connections and networks. 98% of surveyed youth claim that there are no young public figures in Soran.

## Agency

When it comes to participation in local governance, the agency of the youth in Soran is constrained by numerous structural, cultural, political, and personal barriers. Structurally, the dearth of available job opportunities is frequently identified as the main barrier preventing the youth of Soran from having active representation in their local government. The private sector in Soran is reportedly weak and monopolized, while jobs in the public sector are not equitably accessible to those without political, tribal, or social connections. Without financial security, youth are unlikely to prioritize non-subsistence activities.

Additionally, the educational system in Soran further constrains the agency of youth by neglecting to provide them with the requisite capacity and skills for meaningful participation in governance. Despite many attempts to reform the system, research participants reported that antiquated pedagogy favors rote memorization rather than critical thinking and fails to adequately inculcate skills and themes relevant to good governance, including language mastery, inclusivity, meritocracy, and nationalism. A majority of survey respondents (86%) either agree or strongly agree that more capacity-building and skills development is necessary to equip the youth of Soran to meaningfully contribute to local governance.

In addition to being constrained by structural deficiencies, youth are also disempowered by cultural dynamics. Soran is a conservative, traditional area where youth are expected to defer to their elders in matters of ideology and opinion, which fosters a widespread “sense of superiority” over them (KII:2020). Youth in this area suffer from limited freedom of speech. Critiquing the government is reportedly discouraged by the community as a foreign, embarrassing practice, and is also actively curtailed by the political parties and the authorities. Additionally, religious and social precedent often keeps many women house-bound, limiting their participation in the society at large and the government in particular. Soran is also a tribal area, where nepotism, cronyism, and familial connections determine educational access, professional opportunity, and participation in governance. The prevalence of tribalism in Soran not only impacts the ability of youth to procure adequate skills and credentials, but also creates an environment where governmental and other professional positions are not always awarded on the basis of those qualifications. Each of these factors can hinder the ability of youth to access positions of prominence.

The lack of institutionalization in the governance system has contributed to a highly politicized environment where governmental and political powers are often conflated. Research participants concur that the political parties largely control the local government in Soran and wield undue influence over its public institutions, including the police and education departments. As a result, inclusion in the governance process is often reserved for those with political connections and allegiances, while unaffiliated, independent individuals may experience difficulty gaining entrance to governmental institutions or receiving equitable benefits from them.

Finally, there are many individual or personal barriers that disincentivize the participation of youth in Soran's local governance. These barriers include pervasive disillusionment with a heavily politicized governance process, mistrust of government institutions, and fear of the authorities. Each of these barriers has attenuated patriotic and nationalist sentiment among the youth, leaving them prone to fragmentation and schism, and unable to advocate for their interests in a cohesive and unified way. A significant percentage (65%) of youth report that they do not feel personally invested in local politics, and local leaders have observed widespread youth disengagement from the political process as a result. "The youth are tired of this system; they are fed up with it" (KII:2020).

Distortions in the agency of Soran's youth are further compounded by existing categories of marginalization. While gender equality is reportedly improving in this area, women remain vulnerable due to the continued salience of traditional tribal structures in Soran, which limits their mobility and constrains their overall participation in society. Youth who live in villages on the peripheries of Soran are also marginalized, as they lack the ability, financial capacity, or motivation to avail themselves of resources in the city center. Unemployed graduates of universities and institutes are reportedly marginalized, as highly qualified individuals often struggle to find steady employment while their less skilled counterparts may manage to secure a decent salary by joining the Peshmerga or the security apparatus. While not openly or frequently discussed, gay and lesbian youth are also reported to be highly marginalized and vulnerable in this area. Finally, the political unaffiliated youth of Soran are marginalized.

## Contribution

In a survey administered to youth in Soran, all respondents either agreed (39%) or strongly agreed (61%) that youth should be included in the process of local governance. While 57% of respondents believe that youth *are* being included in this process, the overwhelming majority (98%) also believe that current efforts to secure youth inclusion in governance are inadequate. Survey results indicate that 'more mechanisms for participation' may be the single most important factor in enhancing youth involvement in local governance, followed closely by 'stronger mechanisms for participation.'

At present, given the heavy influence of the political parties on the local government, the primary mechanism for youth engagement in the decision-making process appears to be membership in one of the political parties. In Soran, the political parties may recruit young people whose ideologies or positions align with their own, and encourage them to participate in the process of governance. This arrangement means, however, that the support of a political party is necessary to secure inclusion, which tends to disenfranchise members of non-dominant parties or the politically unaffiliated. However, political affiliation alone does not guarantee equitable access to active participation in governance. Prominence and powerful positions are typically reserved for those with the strongest political connections.

In addition to being exclusive and inequitable, this mechanism also appears to be ineffective. For example, the engagement of youth and solicitation of their opinions by political entities tends to be particularly high

during campaigns and around election time. Youth are therefore recruited in support of a pre-established political agenda. Once elections have concluded, however, the youth are reportedly forgotten, and their opinions are no longer considered. In this way, current channels for participation have failed to provide the youth with legitimate representation through which their priorities can be instrumentalized and grievances addressed.

Unfortunately, opportunities for formal participation appear to be limited outside of this mechanism. Instead, youth frequently resort to alternative means to share their grievances and priorities with the local authorities. Chief among these is social media, which youth can utilize to direct targeted messages to members of local governance. However, most expressions of blame or grievance are communicated very cautiously due to fear of the authorities, anticipation of social and political repercussions, and restricted freedom of speech. Many youths choose to communicate under anonymous accounts so that they cannot be identified. Even with all of these precautions, social media is perceived to be an ineffective tool for engagement with the local authorities, who reportedly pay little attention to such platforms. Outside of social media, youth may choose to channel their grievances and priorities through civil society organizations, or escalate them up the chain of command through civil servants or the cadres of political parties. Ostensibly, according to local leaders, youth technically have the option to file formal complaints or speak with the mayor. However, no youth informants cited this as a viable avenue for engagement, as it is allegedly difficult for them to access local authorities. This may be why the largest single component of surveyed youth (45%) from this area believe that viable mechanisms for conveying their grievances and priorities do not exist in Soran.

Overall, youth inclusion in decision-making appears to be quite minimal in this area. Securing sustainable youth participation in governance may require broad, systemic political and cultural transformations, such as decentering the political parties and curbing their influence on the local government. In the interim, youth inclusion might be catalyzed through the provision of employment opportunities across sectors; funding and guidance to promote youth entrepreneurship; professional and social support for women, including gender awareness campaigns; and educational resources to enhance the relevant capacities and skills of youth.

## Enabling Environment

Within Soran, a majority (76%) of youth respondents report having positive relationships with other youth in their community, and this pattern largely holds true across categories of ethnicity (60%), religion (62%), and gender (72%).

However, the relationships between youth and other components of their communities appear to be more mixed. Some informants contend that the wider community views the youth as important, as they form the foundation of society and are expected to effect change. However, a majority of research participants argued otherwise, explaining that recent dynamics in Soran, including the emergence of ISIS and the Covid-19 pandemic, have had a negative impact on the community's view of the youth. While youth are expected to generate income and secure their futures, their ability to do so has diminished due to the lack of jobs and institutionalized support, which has given rise to an attitude of "dissatisfaction" and "distrust" among other community members. Negative perceptions include that the youth are constantly looking at their phones, wasting time in cafes, or causing trouble for the community instead of looking for jobs. The community expects more from them. Meanwhile, some tribal leaders reportedly fear the youth and portray them as a threat to cultural and religious precedent, thereby spreading suspicion among the larger community.

According to community leaders, local authorities cherish predominantly positive perceptions of the youth in Soran. Informants observe that government officials view the youth as important, and have therefore worked

to address their needs and integrate them into the decision-making process. Prior to the economic crisis, the government actively provided support for youth organizations and collaborated in their activities. The lack of insurgencies and violent protests is offered as evidence of the “good relationship” between the administration and the youth. Other components, however, caution that this relationship only appears “good” on the surface. While the administration appears to collaborate with the youth, it also serves as a barrier to their meaningful participation. Youth may be used as a tool to further existing political purposes and agendas when convenient; simultaneously, however, their criticisms and expressions of discontent on social media may be met with “vengeance” from the administration. Additionally, the government has failed to provide adequate job opportunities or design an overall policy for the youth. This has led to a weak and “asymmetric” relationship.

Youth informants concur, stating that the relationship between youth and the local authorities in Soran is very weak and quite negative. Out of survey respondents from Soran, 54% say that interactions between the youth and local authorities is negative or nonexistent. This appears to be based on a perception that the authorities are difficult to access, do not genuinely care for the youth, and have not actively sought to build a relationship with them. However, youth seem to be indispensable to the political parties as an important constituency, although the parties are not believed to be accountable to the youth, nor beholden to their priorities.

## Summary

- The most critical needs identified by Soran’s youth are ‘better livelihood opportunities’ (39%) and ‘better educational and personal development opportunities’ (29%).
- Barriers to youth participation in local governance include: high rates of unemployment; a deficient educational system; tribal and cultural dynamics that inhibit free speech and restrict the mobility of women; politicization of the governance process, which disenfranchises the politically unaffiliated; and enervated nationalistic sentiment among the youth constituency.
- The primary mechanism for youth participation in governance is membership in the political parties. *More mechanisms* and *stronger mechanisms* for participation were identified as the most important factors in enhancing youth involvement in decision-making.
- Most youth use social media to convey their grievances and priorities to local authorities, but 45% of respondents believe there are no viable mechanisms for this purpose.
- Soran has the highest percentage (65%) of youth respondents who do not feel personally invested or engaged in local politics.

## Qushtapa

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Qushtapa is a sub-district within the KRI’s Erbil Governorate, located along the main road that connects Erbil to Kirkuk. The fertile land in this area has given birth to a community chiefly focused on farming. Naturally, therefore, levels of educational attainment among its youth are low; nearly 40% have not completed primary school, while almost 85% have not completed secondary (Mercy Corps, 2019). Politically, Qushtapa falls within the ambit of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which wields considerable power in this area. Socially, Qushtapa is a predominantly conservative, tribal area, divided between two distinct Kurdish communities with separate dialects: the Mizories, who speak Badidni, and the Soranis, who speak Sorani. The former reportedly exert more power and influence in the area given their affiliation with the dominant political party, the KDP, but the latter constitute the demographic majority. The popular definition of “youth” in this sub-district is fairly standard, ranging from 14-35 years of age.

## Assets

Qushtapa appears to have very few youth-dedicated groups and spaces. One is the Youth and Sports Center, a governmental institution which is formally linked to the Ministry of Culture and Social Affairs, but is perceived by youth beneficiaries to be controlled by the KDP. Another is the Youth Activities Center, a dedicated youth space founded and sponsored by the KDP. Youth-oriented civil society organizations in this area include Ava Sheen and the Youth Union of Qushtapa. Outside of these formal venues for youth, Qushtapa reportedly has one football pitch and a small public park that is rarely serviced.

While various institutions and organizations in Qushtapa have offered recreational activities, educational and vocational trainings, and other services for the youth, available data reveals dissatisfaction with these resources among youth beneficiaries. The majority of surveyed youth (60%) from Qushtapa state that they do not avail themselves of these resources. A recurrent reason cited for this disuse is the influence of the political parties, as utilizing services provided by governmental entities is readily perceived as an expression of political affiliation by other members of the community. Additionally, the tribal culture in Qushtapa and lower levels of education among the community at large tend to orient youth toward focusing on income generation rather than on personal development or engagement in civil society. Cultural dynamics also inhibit the participation of young women by limiting their mobility and freedom or labeling them for violating social norms.

In addition to requiring more youth-specific organizations and spaces, Qushtapa's youth see a need to revitalize the roles of existing ones, broaden their scope, and expand their target beneficiaries to include more women and youth from other political parties. This may help to alleviate an assumption among the youth and the larger public that these organizations are engaged in profiteering.

Nevertheless, the most critical need identified by the youth of Qushtapa is 'better livelihood opportunities,' which was highlighted by 50% of survey respondents. Economic phenomena across Kurdistan have trickled down to the local level and shaped the overall environment in Qushtapa. The ISIS invasion, the financial recession, and stalled budget negotiations with Baghdad have weakened the economy of the region as a whole. This has impacted the government's ability to invest in industry, develop the public and private sectors, and provide sufficient job opportunities for youth. As a result, the youth of Qushtapa are economically deprived and suffer from high rates of unemployment.

The data indicates that there are few prominent youth figures in Qushtapa. The head of the Youth and Sports Center, Hadi Kharji, is reputed to be an active young person. The head of the Youth Activities Center, Ibrahim Abdullah, is also young, as is the head of its Activities Department, Adnan Wahid. Other youth figures include Barozh Mohammed Saeed, Zewar Rahman, and Karwan Mahdi in the field of entrepreneurship; Himdad Fatah, Ahmed Rahman and Saman Mam Abdullah in social media; and Adnan Wahid Kakarash in leadership. Besides this handful of names, informants were unable to easily identify young leaders from within the broader community. 83% of survey respondents claim that there are no public youth figures in Qushtapa.

## Agency

The youth of Qushtapa face several obstacles to participation in the decision-making process. The first relates to deficient employment. The weak economy in this area has given rise to a belief that gainful employment is necessary prerequisite to securing inclusion in governance. This perception appears to stem from two distinct arguments: first, that youth need to be financially stable before they can meaningfully contribute; and second, that some degree of professional experience is vital for government work. Building financial capacity and a

compelling professional portfolio are difficult prospects for Qushtapa's youth, however. Qushtapa is a largely neglected sub-district, marked by insufficient investment across both public and private sectors and high rates of youth unemployment, which constrains the agency of youth and inhibits their ability to participate in governance (Mercy Corps, 2019). Complicating this is the fact that, reportedly, securing employment often requires a letter of support from a political party.

Another barrier to inclusion in governance is inadequate education. Reportedly, to be considered for local governance, youth must graduate from an educational institution and possess the requisite academic credentials. Without these, youth are likely to be sidelined from the governance process. However, the educational attainment of Qushtapa's youth is threatened by a communal mentality that is not especially supportive of education. It has only been in the last thirty years that a small, nascent class of university graduates has begun to emerge in this area. Furthermore, a weak economy and persistent financial woes continue to herd many young people in the direction of a steady, guaranteed income, such as that provided within the security apparatus, which may disincentivize youth from pursuing a specialized course of study at the university level. By stymying the academic trajectories of youth, these social and economic factors constrain their agency.

Thus, while it is certainly possible for young people to ascend to positions of prominence in local institutions, they must be equipped to do so through adequate education and gainful employment. However, once both criteria for participation have been satisfied, youth face yet another barrier to inclusion in local governance. Out of the pool of qualified candidates, those who successfully enter the government sphere typically benefit from the 'right' social or political connections, suggesting that these requirements function more as gatekeeping mechanisms than as rubrics designed to secure the best of candidates. Access to prominent positions does not appear to be standardized, equitable, or exclusively based on merit, but rather overwhelmingly reserved for those affiliated with the KDP, the dominant political party in Qushtapa.

Due to such dynamics, the youth of Qushtapa are reportedly quite marginalized. Among this constituency, however, there are certain components who suffer from additional distortions of their agency. While the relative homogeneity of Qushtapa eliminates many common categories of marginalization, such as sect and ethnicity, women remain severely disadvantaged within the livelihood sector, as they are frequently sidelined from employment opportunities (Mercy Corps, 2019). This is largely a result of the closed, traditional community in Qushtapa, which often keeps women house-bound or otherwise moderates their public participation. Additionally, as Qushtapa is a KDP dominant area, youth who are politically unaffiliated or affiliated with a non-dominant party also tend to be marginalized. Sorani-speaking Kurds, for instance, are believed to be less powerful than their Badini-speaking neighbors who share a political alignment with the KDP. Finally, those with disabilities and members of displaced communities, such as IDPs and refugees, are believed to be highly vulnerable in Qushtapa.

## Contribution

The overwhelming majority (80%) of youth survey respondents from Qushtapa believe that youth should be included in the process of governance. This high percentage, though small in the overall sampling, demonstrates an eagerness among Qushtapa's youth to participate in local decision-making. Yet, despite this clear desire, only 40% of respondents believe that youth are currently being included in this process. In response to a question assessing the status of current efforts to secure youth inclusion in the local governance of Qushtapa, the majority of survey respondents indicated that these efforts are either non-existent (47%) or

limited and inaccessible (27%). Less than half of surveyed youth (43%) expressed satisfaction with their level of inclusion in decision-making and governance processes.

The participation of Qushtapa's youth is encumbered by a lack of formal mechanisms designed to secure their involvement in local governance. According to community leaders, there are no specific channels or procedures dedicated for this purpose. In fact, the head of Qushtapa subdistrict questioned the very premise of such a notion, explaining that current guidelines, laws, and regulations only allow governmental employees to participate in decision-making. "In Qushtapa, we go by guidelines and laws. [...] How could I bring on a young person to participate in the decision-making? [...] There are certain things that need to remain within the boundaries of local institutions" (KII:2020).

Meanwhile, the dominant political party in Qushtapa, the KDP, is believed by some research participants to hold a monopoly over public institutions in this area. One of the implications of this monopoly, they argue, is that entry to public institutions is further conditioned upon political allegiance to the KDP. Ultimately, without affiliation to this political party, access to local governance in this area is quite limited, perhaps even non-existent.

The lack of formal avenues for engagement and the political determinants of access may be contributing to a burgeoning sense of apathy among Qushtapa's youth. Quantitative data reveals that 37% of survey respondents do not feel personally invested or engaged in local politics, while another 43% only feel somewhat invested or engaged. When combined, these percentages are quite telling, revealing a staggering 80% of youth respondents from this area who feel little or no investment in local politics.

While existing precedent may hinder the formal participation of youth in decision-making, there are a handful of mechanisms which youth can utilize to convey their grievances and priorities to the relevant authorities. These mechanisms ostensibly include filing official complaints or contacting the mayor, although such avenues are not always or consistently feasible. Strategic partnerships with civil society organizations and local youth centers may also be effective in generating traction on youth issues, as CSOs may enjoy better and easier access to local authorities. Most youth grievances and priorities appear to be channeled through the respective political party offices in Qushtapa, which technically have the capacity to escalate issues and bring them to the head of the local government for consideration and resolution. However, this leaves a great deal of power, in terms of shaping and directing decision-making, in the hands of the political parties rather than the youth.

It is worth noting that subdistrict governments have very limited decision-making power. Due to the centralized governance model in Kurdistan, power is concentrated in the centers rather than the peripheries. This arrangement inhibits the ability of Qushtapa's local government to respond effectively to any youth demands that fall outside of its minimal remit. Even if the local government chooses to escalate youth priorities to the centers of governance in Erbil, the ultimate resolution of those priorities remains outside of local control.

Securing the robust and sustainable integration of youth in the local governance of Qushtapa might require a number of systemic and structural adjustments. Informants argue that youth cannot be included until employment is no longer predicated on political support; until cultural and communal dynamics shift to validate women's participation in the larger society; and until the educational system equips young people to fight for civil rights without fear of the authorities. In the interim, survey data indicates that providing 'more mechanisms for participation' may be the most important priority in enhancing youth involvement in the local government of Qushtapa.

## Enabling Environment

The preponderance of survey respondents, 80%, contend that they enjoy positive relations with other youth in Qushtapa. This trend remains relatively stable across multiple identity groupings, with respondents stating that they have positive relationships with youth from other ethnicities (70%), other religions and sects (66%), and the opposite gender (64%).

Relationships with other community members appear to be more tenuous, however. Youth informants claim that they suffer from inadequate communal and familial support due to the heavily patriarchal society in Qushtapa, which fosters widespread expectations that young men should be working and young women should be confined to their homes or controlled in public.

Available quantitative data on relationships between youth and the local authorities is quite mixed and inconclusive. A majority of survey respondents (60%) state that they trust the local authorities in Qushtapa, while over half (53%) report feeling trusted in their interactions with those authorities. At the same time, relatively few respondents describe the interaction of local authorities with Qushtapa's youth (30%) and broader community (20%) as positive.

The qualitative data gathered through focus group discussions and key informant interviews sheds further light on these mixed responses. The strained socioeconomic environment in Qushtapa inevitably impacts the caliber of relations between the local government and the youth. Some argue that the local government's failure to provide jobs and secure employment for the youth means that it has "forgotten" them and "left them behind." This has caused schisms between young constituents and their representatives, which have subsequently been exacerbated by the government's overall lack of vision for the youth. Compounding this dynamic, reportedly, is the fact that local authorities do not interact with the youth, inquire about their needs, or offer them sufficient support. Such comprehensive neglect has led some local leaders and FGD participants in Qushtapa to state that the relationship between the two is "very weak" and "almost non-existent" (KII:2020; FGDs:2020).

*"The authorities do not want the youth to open their eyes. They want people to accept the reality. They want the youth to be their servants." (FGD:2020)*

## Summary

- The most critical need identified by Qushtapa's youth is 'better livelihood opportunities' (50%), followed by 'better educational and personal development opportunities' (20%).
- Barriers to youth participation in local governance include: high unemployment and low financial capacity; inadequate education and a communal mentality that does not support educational attainment; and the prevalence of nepotism, cronyism, and other systems of patronage that favor those with the right social or political connections and disproportionately exclude those unaffiliated to the KDP.
- The principal mechanism for youth participation in governance, as well as the primary recourse for escalating youth priorities and grievances, is membership in the political parties.
- *More mechanisms for participation* may be the most important factor in enhancing youth involvement in decision-making.

## Ranya

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Ranya is a district within the Kurdistan Region's Sulaymaniyah Governorate. It is a mountainous, agricultural area located in the northeastern part of the KRI not far from the Iranian border. While Ranya falls within the politically-defined Green Zone, which has historically been led by the PUK, non-dominant political parties, such as Gorran and the Islamic Union, also enjoy a strong presence in this district. Ranya is a largely conservative, tribal area which performs poorly according to indicators designed to measure acts of violence against women, including honor crimes and FGM (Finnish Immigration Service, 2018; Kurdistan 24, 2019; Puttick, 2015; Shabila, 2019; The Danish Immigration Service, 2018). It is inhabited almost entirely by Muslim Kurds. In this area, there is reportedly no legal definition of what constitutes youth. Those who are considered to be young, therefore, may range in age between 18-40 years old or simply possess youthful mentalities.

### Assets

There appear to be a number of dedicated youth groups and organizations in Ranya. Frequently mentioned youth groups include the Youth Board, Kurdistan Youth Organization, and the student unions of the various political parties. Other notable groups include the recently established Bureau of Youth; the Raparin Youth Council; Rayal for Cultural Exchange; Ranya Environmental Group; Kurdistan Nature Organization; Basoz Group in Pishdar; Frya Group in Hajiwa; KYB Group; Macos Youth Organization; and the Ranya group for activities. Dabran platform, affiliated with the PUK, is also apparently active in Ranya. The dedicated youth spaces identified by informants include the Youth Center of Raparin; Ranya Youth Center; Center for Youth Activities; Sports and Youth Center; and the Cultural and Youth Development Center.

Despite the seemingly high number of youth groups present in Ranya, however, the majority of surveyed youth claim that there are no youth groups (60%) or dedicated youth spaces (57%) in this area, and 71% of respondents state that they do not utilize available resources. These responses may be reflective of several key deficiencies highlighted by youth informants. First, existing youth resources are reportedly insufficient in number, as well as limited in scope and purview, which impacts their capacity to meet the demands of an increasing number of youths who need access to robust services and programs. Second, available resources are not equitably accessible to all of Ranya's youth. The overwhelming majority of these resources are clustered in Ranya center, which renders them inaccessible to many who live in the peripheries. They are also less accessible to Ranya's women, whose participation and mobility are restricted by tribal norms and familial pressure. Youth who can reasonably benefit from the activities of these groups and centers also tend to be quite young, as those over 20 are typically preoccupied with securing an income for their families. The cost of various activities and trainings offered by these entities is also prohibitive for many of Ranya's youth, who cannot afford them due to limited financial capacity and high unemployment. Third, most youth groups and spaces suffer from inadequate governmental and financial support, which has forced them to reduce the number and quality of their activities. Finally, there is a dearth of independent youth organizations and centers. Most have political or religious affiliations, which can constrain their ability to advocate effectively for youth rights and even determine whether they remain operational. These factors have reportedly generated a sense of "hopelessness" and disillusionment among the youth, who primarily choose to gather in cafes rather than avail themselves of these resources. There is a dire need for more independent, impactful, and high caliber youth centers in Ranya, as well as facilities specific to women, in order to meet youth expectations and provide substantive benefit for their futures.

The most critical and salient need for Ranya’s youth, however, as indicated by 57% of survey respondents, is ‘better livelihood opportunities.’ Ranya suffers from high youth unemployment as a result of limited opportunities in the public sector and an underdeveloped private sector. This is especially pronounced among recent graduates, who have not been absorbed by the local labor market and are therefore incapable of making an impact within their chosen fields. While some of the area’s young people have the requisite skills and ingenuity to establish their own businesses, a lack of financial and professional support makes this prospect difficult for most. As a result, the majority of the district’s youth remain unemployed, and their energies and talents are consequently wasted. Importantly, the conditions of the economy and the job market appear to be equally dismal for both men and women. The second critical need identified by Ranya’s youth is ‘better educational and personal development opportunities’ (29%), which emerged as a higher priority among female respondents. Ranya reportedly has an abundance of qualified and talented young people, many of whom have graduated from university or technical institutes and are in possession of specialized educational certificates. However, the educational system in Ranya still needs improvement, as many graduates lack robust computer literacy and IT skills, as well as a reasonable mastery of national and foreign languages.

Faced with high youth unemployment and an alleged lack of governmental support, many of Ranya’s qualified and capable youth choose to migrate. Among those that remain, several prominent youth figures have emerged. Young entrepreneurs include Awat Salim, who started a car detailing business; Azhe Kanabi, who manages a language center; Rezan Muhammed, Azheen Ismael, and Dilan Ahmad, who run a handicraft business called Malochkay Awen; Sherko Alayee, a photographer; and Ali Mohammed<sup>11</sup>, who owns his own construction company. Social media and media figures include Ary Mustafa, Akam Aziz, and Bawar Mohammed. Other young leaders include Hamay Alaq; Lateef Yahya; Pishtiwan Aziz; and Zrian Yasin, who is known for her advocacy work on youth and women. Most of these names were offered by FGD participants and key informants, who may be better connected than their average counterparts. 98% of surveyed youth claim that there are no young public figures in Ranya, while local leaders observe that there is a notable dearth of prominent young people within Ranya’s formal institutions.

## Agency

When it comes to participation in the decision-making process, the agency of the youth in Ranya is constrained by several factors. Perhaps the most significant structural impediment is that gainful employment is perceived to be an essential prerequisite for inclusion in governance. This is particularly true of public sector employment. In Ranya, as in the rest of Kurdistan, the public sector is the primary employer, and securing a job within that sector is seen as a point of entry into the government. However, recent reforms have reduced public sector employment rates, and the ability to secure available opportunities frequently depends on political party affiliation or other powerful connections. Meanwhile, the private sector in Ranya is quite small, and its companies tend to be family owned and operated. “The business sectors,” as one key informant concludes, “are monopolized by families or politics” (KII:2020). As a result of these socioeconomic dynamics, many of Ranya’s youth remain unemployed and incapable of securing their own inclusion in decision-making processes.

Youth who wish to participate in governance are also constrained by problematic dynamics arising from the political context. According to youth informants, the political parties in Ranya, as in the rest of Kurdistan, have politicized the process of governance to such an extent that the support of these parties is now considered to

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<sup>11</sup> The key informant who identified this young entrepreneur was not entirely confident about his last name.

be an essential prerequisite for inclusion and participation. Available positions within the local government are often distributed among the politically affiliated, rather than awarded on the basis of qualifications and experience. The ostensible lack of standardized auditing tools, metrics, and protocols to level the proverbial playing field and ensure the appointment of qualified candidates means that inclusion in governance is typically reserved for those with strong political affiliation and support.

There are also cultural barriers that inhibit youth participation in the decision-making process. First, the prevalence of tribalism in Ranya often further delimits the boundaries of governance. Even among the politically affiliated, inclusion in the local government may be determined by tribal support, social connections, and *wasta*. This is critical, as the tribal mentality brings with it a perception that young people are incapable of holding positions of authority. Youth in tribal contexts often suffer from limited autonomy and independence, as they are taught to defer to their elders even in matters of personal preference. This cultural precedent, common across Kurdistan, keeps the number of young people in governmental positions quite low overall. “This system,” one local leader bemoans, “is incapable of identifying talented people” (KII:2020).

Women face additional obstacles to meaningful participation in governance. Overall, women have access to fewer governmental positions and opportunities than their male counterparts. Tribal norms and traditions do not validate women’s inclusion in decision-making processes, and women who aspire to positions in governance may be hampered by communal and familial resistance. There are also logistical barriers to women’s participation that stem from pregnancy and child-rearing responsibilities. Furthermore, those who step outside of their prescribed social roles may be subjected to retributive actions, such as sexual harassment and subsequent silencing. Each of these factors constrains the agency of Ranya’s women, and may disincentivize them from coming forward.

Due to these structural, political, and cultural dynamics, local leaders and youth informants alike concur that Ranya’s youth, as a whole, are severely marginalized. However, within this demographic, there are distinct components which suffer from compounding categories of marginalization. Chief among these are women, who are disproportionately disadvantaged by the social and cultural environment in Ranya. Ranya has the second-highest prevalence of female genital mutilation in Kurdistan, with no statistically significant difference between younger and older age groups, indicating an ongoing continuity to the practice (Puttick, 2015; The Danish Immigration Service, 2018; Shabila, 2019). Ranya is also reported to have a high incidence of forced marriage, child marriage, domestic violence, and female suicide (Finnish Immigration Service, 2018; Puttick, 2015; The Danish Immigration Service, 2018). Furthermore, while honor crimes and femicide have reportedly decreased in many other areas across Kurdistan, recent studies indicate that they may have increased in Ranya (The Danish Immigration Service, 2018). In addition to these violations, local leaders report that the government does not create a supportive environment for women, nor provide for their particular needs.

Other youth components who are additionally marginalized include those with disabilities, who do not have access to their own spaces and trainings, nor sufficient financial support from the government; the politically unaffiliated; and those who are critical of the authorities.

## Contribution

In a survey administered to youth in Ranya, most respondents either agreed (31%) or strongly agreed (60%) that youth should be included in the process of local governance. Unfortunately, 50% of respondents claim that youth are *not* being included in this process, and 98% believe that current efforts to include youth in

governance are either not available or are otherwise inadequate. Survey results indicate that ‘more mechanisms for participation’ and ‘stronger mechanisms for participation’ may prove equally critical in enhancing youth involvement in governance.

In Ranya, as in many other areas across Kurdistan, the central mechanism for youth participation in decision-making appears to be membership in the political parties, as the current governance system is built upon these units and they play an inordinately powerful role in determining electoral outcomes. However, this strategy for securing youth inclusion is problematic at best. The type of participation secured through political affiliation appears to be largely tokenistic, as youth are primarily included as voters rather than candidates or other influential actors. Moreover, those who do manage to ascend to positions in the local government are frequently beholden to certain political agendas and are not granted the power nor independence that would allow them to shape decision-making or secure youth objectives and interests. Such dynamics have fed into a perception that, in order to “make it,” one needs to be a pliable, easily controlled person. Meanwhile, the primacy of political party support in shaping the contours of local governance disproportionately disenfranchises politically unaffiliated youth, other independent candidates, and those with forward-looking vision. Overall, the viability and efficacy of this mechanism is questionable.

In the absence of effective formal mechanisms for participation, Ranya’s youth often resort to waging external pressure campaigns – through citizen advocacy groups, over social media, or via public protest – in order to convey their grievances and priorities to local authorities. Protests appear to be a particularly common strategy that youth utilize to draw attention to their needs. However, confidence in this mechanism appears to be dissipating, as protests often die out before securing their objectives due to either protracted inaction or violent suppression by the government. Alternatively, youth may choose to circulate their expressions of discontent or criticism in virtual space. Similarly, however, communiqués delivered over social media platforms are often ignored by the authorities, who allegedly view this medium as ephemeral and lack the technological prowess to engage effectively with it. Youth who disseminate such public complaints also risk being arrested. As a result of government inattention and restrictions on dissent, one informant notes, “the youth are quite incapable of expressing their grievances” (KII:2020). This may explain why 55% of survey respondents from Ranya believe that there are no viable mechanisms for this purpose.

In Ranya, the overall engagement of youth in the decision-making process is considered to be “very limited” and “quite weak” (KIIs:2020). According to youth informants, securing their robust and sustainable inclusion will require systemic solutions, such as initiating reforms at the apex of governance, instituting term limits on appointed positions, reducing political leverage in the allotment and maintenance of those positions, and sensitizing the community to the inordinate influence of the political parties in restricting access among the youth. Ultimately, youth concur that the current governance process is deeply flawed, and 62% of survey respondents report that they do not have confidence in their local governance mechanisms. Some transformation of extant dynamics appears imperative in order to address widespread hopelessness, prevent violence, and stem migration.

*“The government is not responsive to the demands of the people at all. It is blind, it is deaf, and it is mute. What I see is that perhaps the government wants the people to take up arms against it.” (FGD:2020)*

Systemic changes take time, however. In the interim, Ranya’s youth could be better prepared for inclusion through the provision of jobs and psychosocial support. Additionally, 93% of surveyed youth believe that more capacity building and skills development trainings are necessary to equip Ranya’s youth to meaningfully contribute to local governance.

## Enabling Environment

Within Ranya, a considerable majority (71%) of youth respondents report having positive relationships with other youth in their community. This pattern largely holds true across categories of religion (74%), ethnicity (60%), and gender (81%), although responses on whether youth from different identity groups collaborate to achieve shared objectives were mixed.

However, relations between youth and other components of their communities are reportedly strained. Community perceptions towards the youth of Ranya appear to be quite multifaceted and contradictory. While members of the older generation ostensibly believe that youth shape the future, they simultaneously disparage Ranya's young people, considering them to be "lost," uninformed, and addicted to social media and cell phones (KII:2020; FGD:2020). Such perspectives allegedly cause the community to view the youth with disappointment, hopelessness, and resignation. For their part, the youth believe the community has lost its relevance because it has allowed itself to become politicized, fragmented, and even militarized, which has shifted the communal orientation away from the important work of nurturing the youth.

The relationship between youth and the local authorities is also characterized by neglect. Key informants note that decision-makers in this area do not focus on the youth, develop clear and specific visions for their futures, or institute legal frameworks to manage their affairs. Youth are not incorporated into local institutions, nor are their opinions and perspectives solicited to inform the process of governance. As a result, the youth are "forgotten," "ignored," "deprived," and "devalued" (KIIs:2020; FGD:2020). Meanwhile, youth who attempt to drive change from outside the formal governance apparatus, whether through public protest or social media campaigns, face violent suppression or arrest. This dialectic of neglect and control has decimated the trust of youth in government institutions and disincentivized their participation in the political process. 55% of survey respondents report that they are 'not invested or engaged' in local politics.

The majority of research participants concur that these dynamics are actually quite calculated and intentional, and stem from a broader cultural pathology of resistance to change. Young people tend to be at the forefront of revolution and other missions for systemic transformation, and are therefore perceived as a threat to the status quo and a risk to those in power. As a result, interlocutors claim, the government and the political parties have no real intentions of incorporating youth in the process of governance. While the governance apparatus might allow for the indirect or tokenistic participation of Ranya's young people, it will not share power with them, delegate power to them, or integrate them into powerful institutions.

*"The government does not want the youth to come forward and lead the process of governance." (FGD:2020)*

*"The youth are the machine or engine of change. [...] The government does not want skilled or qualified youth to make changes in the community." (KII:2020)*

According to one young informant, "the youth are fed up with the authorities and they do not trust them" (FGD:2020). This sentiment is corroborated by quantitative data, which indicates that 50% of youth respondents do not trust their local authorities, while 55% perceive interactions between the local authorities and the youth to be either negative or nonexistent. Youth and community leaders alike describe the relationship between the two as "ineffective," "inactive," "at the lowest level possible," and "almost non-existent," and observe that there is "no healthy linkage" between Ranya's citizens and its government (KIIs:2020; FGD:2020). Reportedly, this critical demise of trust in the authorities has generated widespread hopelessness among the youth, weakened their nationalistic sentiment, and inspired a pervasive desire to migrate.

## Summary

- The most critical need identified by Ranya’s youth is ‘better livelihood opportunities’ (57%), followed by ‘better educational and personal development opportunities’ (29%), which emerged as a higher priority among female respondents.
- Barriers to youth participation in local governance include: high rates of unemployment; politicization of the governance process, which disenfranchises the politically unaffiliated; the prevalence of tribalism, which disincentivizes youth participation or reserves it as a privilege for those who are well-connected; and, for women, communal and familial resistance and a risk of retribution for stepping outside of culturally prescribed roles.
- The primary mechanism for youth participation in governance is membership in the political parties. *More mechanisms* and *stronger mechanisms* for participation may prove equally critical in enhancing youth involvement in decision-making.
- To convey their grievances and priorities to the local authorities, Ranya’s youth typically engage in public protest or communicate via social media; even so, 55% of respondents believe there are no viable mechanisms for this purpose.
- Ranya has a high percentage (55%) of youth respondents who do not feel personally invested or engaged in local politics.

## Chamchamal

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Chamchamal is a district within the Kurdistan Region’s Sulaymaniyah Governorate. It is located in the southeastern part of the KRI, bordering the disputed territories. Chamchamal is a historically agricultural area, rich in natural gas; it is also one of the poorest districts in Kurdistan (EASO, 2019). While Chamchamal has long been a stronghold of the PUK, other political parties, such as Gorran and the Islamic Union, have also gained public support in recent years. It is a largely conservative, tribal area which performs poorly according to indicators designed to measure violence against women (Ali, 2018; Lynch, 2019; NRT, 2018; The Danish Immigration Service, 2018). It is inhabited primarily by Muslim Kurds with a small minority of Kakais. In Chamchamal, those who are considered to be “youth” may range in age between 14-45 years old.

## Assets

Youth-specific resources are reportedly quite limited in Chamchamal, causing the overwhelming majority of surveyed youth to claim that there are no youth groups (81%) or dedicated youth spaces (75%) available in this area. The few youth groups that are mentioned include Didgai Nwy; SRC Group; and the student unions of the PUK, Islamic Union, Islamic Group, and KDP. The most active and accessible youth spaces appear to include the governmentally sponsored Youth Center and Shorish Youth Center; the Youth Freedom Center; the Chamchamal Youth Development Center; and Shazhin House. Additional youth spaces include the Union of Democratic Youth in Kurdistan, Azadi Youth Center, and the Student Development Center.

Despite the meager handful of youth-based resources in Chamchamal, 83% of youth respondents claim that they do not utilize these resources. The reasons behind this decision are numerous, multi-faceted, and varied. A recurrent criticism of the youth resources in Chamchamal centers upon their real or perceived affiliation with the political parties. Allegedly, the salience of political affiliation in Chamchamal can cause organizations

to limit activities and access to their own supporters; simultaneously, it can disincentivize the use of their services among the politically unaffiliated or those who do not wish to signal their allegiance to a specific political agenda among the wider community. Rather than serving the interests of youth, such groups and organizations are perceived to function primarily as tools for political recruitment. Independent organizations are reportedly quite rare in Chamchamal.

Following the ISIS invasion and the advent of the financial crisis, the number of youth groups and spaces in Chamchamal diminished, as many organizations were not able to sustain themselves due to the lack of available funding. Those that remained suffered from reduced activities and decreased influence. Many resources are now temporary or seasonal, or not truly youth-specific. As a whole, the organizations and groups that exist in Chamchamal have not succeeded in meeting the expectations and needs of the youth, and most have the reputation of being ineffective, inactive, disorganized, or disingenuous. Meanwhile, as there is no guiding policy that would enable the youth to establish their own independent organizations, most of the youth choose to spend their time in cafes. This situation highlights the need for better activation of existing youth resources, as well as the provision of additional, independent organizations and spaces that can deliver vital trainings and workshops, activities, and recreational opportunities to the youth.

The most critical need identified by Chamchamal's youth is 'better livelihood opportunities' (53%). Many of Chamchamal's recent graduates are unemployed, as the public sector labor market has contracted in response to recurrent crises and has, consequently, been unable to absorb the increasing number of young professionals. Youth unemployment in this region has contributed to low financial capacity and high financial insecurity among the youth, who are now in desperate need of material and professional support. Additionally, youth need 'better educational and personal development opportunities' (19%), which emerged as a higher priority among female respondents than their male counterparts. The educational system in Chamchamal is quite weak, and the level of general education among the district's populace is very low. The youth of Chamchamal reportedly need more libraries, as well as opportunities to attend workshops and trainings, earn certificates and degrees, build their personal and professional skills, and master languages. Finally, Chamchamal's youth need better mental health and psychosocial support (14%) to address the various social issues in their area.<sup>12</sup> This is particularly true for females, who are systematically marginalized and subjected to disproportionately high rates of gendered violence; unemployed graduates, who are now "psychologically damaged" and "hopeless"; and fatherless families from the surrounding areas who fled to Chamchamal to escape war (FGD:2020).

Despite these diverse and profound needs, there are apparently a number of active youth figures in Chamchamal. Notable figures include Soran Baban, head of the Shorish Youth Center; Mabast Sheikh Abbas, leader of Didgai Nwe; Payman Pasha, founder of Shazhin House; and Pishawa Sheikh Raoof, a prolific journalist. Other youth figures include Dirim Izaddim, Mahdi Jabar, Bakhtyar Sharif Qurbani, Hareem Abdullah, and Dr. Sangar Qadir in media and social media; young leaders Omed As'ad, Hareem Ameen, Farman Osman, and Khoshi Sayda; Haseeb Sadraddin Salih, Bestoon Rahim, and Shwan Midhat in the fields of civil society and youth development; Shwan Rahim Kareem in IT; Naz Najeeb in sports; and Mala Karzan Hamalaw, who reportedly assists the youth with business and job provision. Most of these names were offered by FGD participants and key informants, and may therefore be reflective of personal connections and networks. It is worth noting that 97% of surveyed youth claim there are no young public figures in Chamchamal, while local leaders from the area observe that the few youth figures who manage to ascend to prominence tend to be from wealthy and well-known families, and are therefore not representative of the youth as a whole.

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<sup>12</sup> This need was raised more frequently by female interlocutors and survey respondents from this area than their male counterparts.

## Agency

The agency of the youth in Chamchamal is likely constrained by several of the structural dynamics explored above. Given Chamchamal's status as one of the poorest districts in the KRI, high youth unemployment, economic deprivation and low financial capacity may lock a significant portion of this demographic into a subsistence bracket, leaving many youths preoccupied with the satisfaction of their most basic needs and therefore unable to meaningfully participate in local governance. Additionally, due to deficiencies in the educational system in this area, the youth of Chamchamal typically do not possess the qualifications or credentials required to influence decision-making. A staggering 94% of survey respondents from Chamchamal agree (36%) or strongly agree (58%) that more capacity-building and skills development trainings are necessary to equip youth in this area to meaningfully contribute to local governance. Community leaders believe remedial political education is particularly essential, in order to provide youth with leadership skills and a thorough grounding in democratic principles.

However, informants concur that the primary barrier to robust youth participation in governance in Chamchamal is the political environment. Chamchamal, like the rest of the KRI, is characterized by rampant politicization and entrenched rivalries between the various political parties. A spirit of competition, rather than collaboration, has birthed a system where each party has a vested interest in protecting its power and position. As a result, instead of considering talents and skills when appointing people to positions in governance, the parties reportedly prefer to support their own youth affiliates. This arrangement reinforces patterns of patronage, cronyism, and nepotism built upon party loyalty and disproportionately disenfranchises unaffiliated youth. According to youth informants, most of Chamchamal's youth are opposed to the political parties. However, since the political parties play such a significant role in determining who reaches power, these youth are unlikely to be meaningfully included in the decision-making process.

The tribal nature of the society also constrains the agency of Chamchamal's youth when it comes to inclusion in local governance. In general, the social and political participation of youth is not highly prioritized or supported by conservative norms and precedents. Young women face additional barriers to participation due to cultural and familial pressures that restrict their access to professional opportunities and prohibit them from engaging freely in politics. Finally, given the importance of social connections in this area, those who reach positions of prominence in Chamchamal typically represent a select subset of the youth population who enjoy tribal support, come from well-known families, or have other powerful sources of backing.

The precarious circumstances of youth in Chamchamal led one key informant to state: "The entirety of the youth is marginalized" (KII:2020). Not all youth are *equally* marginalized, however. Youth components who experience compounding categories of vulnerability include those with disabilities, who reportedly receive inadequate governmental support and the lowest salaries; women, whose rights are frequently violated and whose ability to focus on personal development is limited due to childcare responsibilities and cultural norms that keep them house-bound; youth from the peripheries, who may not have access to the same opportunities as those in the city center; the unemployed, particularly university graduates; the undereducated, who have dropped out of school to secure an income for their families; the politically unaffiliated; those without familial or tribal backing; and those who are perceived to have violated social mores.

## Contribution

In a survey administered to youth in Chamchamal, most respondents either agreed (28%) or strongly agreed (64%) that youth should be included in the process of local governance. While 47% of respondents believe

that youth *are* being included in this process, 58% are not satisfied with their level of inclusion, and the overwhelming majority (95%) also believe that current efforts to secure youth inclusion in governance are not available (56%) or are otherwise inadequate (39%). Survey results indicate that ‘more mechanisms for participation’ may be the single most important factor in enhancing youth involvement in local governance.

At present, the support of a political party appears to be an essential prerequisite for inclusion in local governance. Becoming a member of a political party and securing a prominent standing within it, therefore, forms the primary mechanism through which Chamchamal’s youth can participate in the decision-making process. However, some have questioned the viability and authenticity of this approach to youth inclusion. First, this mechanism inherently excludes the politically unaffiliated, as it is reportedly “impossible” to ascend to positions in the local government without party support (FGD:2020). Second, those who do manage to secure their own inclusion via this mechanism are often expected to answer to the entities that brought them to power. In consequence, youth leaders may be forced to adopt certain positions or parrot the party line in order to further pre-established political agendas, which can inhibit their ability to be active and influential change agents in the decision-making process. Their participation is therefore reported to be ineffective, superficial, and tokenistic. Interestingly, available data indicates that the political parties may be losing their ability to recruit young constituents as a result of recurrent failures to address youth needs and provide robust policy solutions.

In the absence of effective strategies for formal participation, the youth of Chamchamal have resorted to alternative methods to convey their grievances and priorities to the local government. Predominantly, and perhaps exclusively, this includes the use of media and social media platforms. Some youth believe that the use of such platforms, as opposed to participation in violent protests, indicates a burgeoning preference for peaceful means of conflict resolution among the current generation. Others argue that youth have simply “lost the energy and enthusiasm to take to the streets because they are hopeless” and “fed up with the government” (FGD:2020). Unfortunately, social media and media platforms do not appear to be an effective mechanism for securing action on youth needs, as their messages may not always reach the appropriate authorities. Ostensibly, at least on paper, there are other channels through which youth can escalate their grievances, such as by filing complaints with the mayor’s office. However, youth do not appear to use these mechanisms. Whether this is reflective of the widespread enervation of public trust and confidence in the formal governance apparatus<sup>13</sup>, the inaccessibility of local authorities outside of elections, or a general lack of awareness among the youth, 67% of youth respondents believe there are no viable mechanisms through which the youth of Chamchamal can channel their grievances and priorities to the local government.

Overall, the environment in Chamchamal is not conducive to youth inclusion in the decision-making process. This is reflected in limited and weak youth representation at the governmental level and political disengagement among 56% of surveyed youth. Facilitating the meaningful participation of youth in the governance of Chamchamal will likely require broad, system-level changes, including the development of a vision, policy, and legal framework to secure youth inclusion; strategies to diminish the influence of the political parties on the government; and gender awareness campaigns to shift patriarchal perceptions of women and draw attention to their roles in a flourishing society. However, removing systemic, political, and cultural barriers is not enough. Chamchamal must also invest in its youth to better equip them for participation in governance. In particular, the youth of Chamchamal would benefit from greater exposure to local government processes, which are not especially participatory or invitational, and can therefore be confusing and obscure. A majority of survey respondents (58%) state that they do not understand the local governance

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<sup>13</sup> While levels of public trust in the local government are reportedly low across the community, a staggering 72% of surveyed youth state that they do not have confidence in the local governance mechanisms in Chamchamal.

mechanisms in Chamchamal, which may explain why ‘better knowledge of political and governmental processes’ was also identified as a critical priority in enhancing youth involvement in governance.

## Enabling Environment

Within Chamchamal, a majority (64%) of youth respondents report having positive relationships with other youth in their community. This pattern holds true across categories of religion (75%) and gender (78%), although responses on whether youth have positive relationships with those of other ethnicities are very mixed, and 53% of all respondents do not believe that youth from different identity groups collaborate to achieve shared objectives. Despite this, the relative homogeneity of Chamchamal has reportedly facilitated a considerable degree of internal stability in this area.

The relationships between youth and the broader community also appear to be mixed. Some informants contend that the community’s attitude toward the youth has historically been positive, reasonable, and predicated on the understanding that youth form the cornerstone of society and are capable of creating change. Most informants agree that such positive sentiments have diminished and that communal perspectives on the youth are now predominantly negative. Some components of the community have reportedly “lost hope” for the youth, believing them to be fundamentally “helpless” rather than simply deprived of critical opportunities and resources (KII:2020). Other components are either uneducated or from rural areas, and are therefore less likely to support the inclusion of youth and women in governance, and more likely to be out of touch with youth needs. Ultimately, the community and the larger public in Chamchamal allegedly consider youth a “secondary issue,” rather than a priority (KII:2020).

Local leaders observe that there is an “unstable and disturbed” relationship between the governmental apparatus and the broader public in Chamchamal. The local administration and its institutions are perceived to be weak and ineffective, which has diminished the trust and confidence of the people and has fostered an increased reliance on political parties for securing individual and collective interests. Therefore, the relationship between the local administration and the community as a whole needs repair. These sentiments are supported by survey data, which indicates that the interaction between the local authorities and the community is predominantly negative (67%) or non-existent (11%).

These trends appear to be mirrored among Chamchamal’s youth. A majority (73%) of survey respondents describe the interaction between local authorities and the youth as negative or non-existent. 75% state that they do not trust the local authorities, while 67% state that they do not feel trusted by the authorities. Cycles of neglect and manipulation have reportedly caused the youth to lose hope and confidence in the government and its political parties, leading to a demise in patriotic sentiment and heightened rates of both migration and suicide. In the absence of systemic support and an overarching vision for the youth, the relationship between local authorities and their young constituents is perceived to be poor, weak, and dishonest.

## Summary

- The most critical need identified by Chamchamal’s youth is ‘better livelihood opportunities’ (53%), followed by ‘better educational and personal development opportunities’ (19%), which emerged as a higher priority among female respondents, and ‘better mental health and psychosocial support’ (14%).
- Barriers to youth participation in local governance include: high rates of unemployment and low financial capacity; a deficient educational system; a highly politicized environment, which reinforces

systems of party patronage and disenfranchises the politically unaffiliated; the prevalence of tribalism, which does not prioritize youth participation; cronyism, which reserves opportunities for the well-connected rather than the highly qualified; and, for women, communal and familial resistance to political engagement.

- The principal mechanism for youth participation in local governance is membership in the political parties. *More mechanisms for participation* may be the single most important factor in enhancing youth involvement in decision-making, followed by *better knowledge of political and governmental processes*, as 58% of respondents report that they do not understand local governance mechanisms.
- Chamchamal's youth primarily use media and social media to communicate their grievances and priorities to the local authorities. Nevertheless, 67% of youth respondents believe there are no viable mechanisms for this purpose.
- Chamchamal has a high percentage (56%) of youth respondents who do not feel personally invested or engaged in local politics, and the highest percentage (75%) who do not trust their local authorities.

## Sumel

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Sumel is one of the districts of Dohuk governorate in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Geographically, it is located to the northwest of Erbil, the capital of the KRI. The administrative center of Sumel is believed to host a Muslim majority and a small Yazidi minority. Politically, Sumel falls largely within the purview of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), although the Islamic Union of Kurdistan has gained a strong foothold in this district as well. With an estimated 143,000 inhabitants, the community in Sumel is thought to be predominantly tribal and conservative (IOM, 2019). Sumel also houses six camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and two refugee camps for Syrians (REACH, 2020). In Sumel, the age range for those who are considered to be young varies between 15-50 years old.

## Assets

Sumel seems to have a limited number of youth groups and spaces, with 80% of surveyed youth reporting that there are no youth groups, and 57% claiming a similar shortage of youth spaces. This view is corroborated by qualitative data, as FGD participants from the district reiterated these deficiencies. However, individual survey respondents did identify a smattering of available youth groups in Sumel, including the KDP Student Union, Sumel Center for Volunteering, Gal, Doski Group, and an organization called Reader to Leader. Key informant interviews highlighted a few additional groups, including Kaskasor, Sumel Music Band, Dashti Hareer, and Yilmanz Group. The first is a youth group dedicated to promoting coexistence, while the last three focus on music and theatre. The economic crisis, the youth argue, has taken a negative toll on these groups. Interest in such groups has dwindled, since recent economic hardships have shifted the focus of the youth, as well as the public at large, to income generation.

Sumel faces a similar dearth of dedicated youth spaces. The most notable and active youth-specific institution in Sumel appears to be the Youth Center, which is reportedly affiliated with the KDP. Additionally, there is a youth-oriented governmental facility, called the Culture Center, which falls under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture and Youth Affairs. Other identified youth spaces include the Sumel and Barkhodin Centers, as well as the Rizgari Culture and Youth Center in Domez. A number of these institutions have social media pages dedicated to supporting the youth. However, from the perspective of youth beneficiaries, the value of such spaces is compromised by their functional linkages to the KDP, as well as a prevalent perception that they “do

not work for the youth” (FGD:2020). Besides these resources, there are additional youth centers located in Sumel’s refugee and IDP camps.

Sumel adjoins Duhok city center. This proximity is perceived to be detrimental to the interests of Sumel’s youth. As a governorate city center, Duhok, the youth argue, attracts the focus of most international and local organizations, leaving Sumel marginalized. In the context of a protracted economic recession that has impacted the entire Kurdistan Region of Iraq, these factors have significantly reduced the activities of available youth groups and centers in Sumel. The youth also contend that the short-term, episodic modality of operations adopted by relevant youth organizations limits the impact of their interventions and may preclude the realization of substantive, sustainable benefits.

These limitations appear to be compounded by perceived governmental neglect and mismanagement. Allegedly, the local authorities do not take responsibility for the development of additional youth resources in Sumel, nor exert the necessary effort to encourage international and local organizations to expand their reach to this area. Access to existing spaces is seen to be laden with political expectations, as the authorities are believed to be chiefly preoccupied with bolstering the membership of their respective political parties. Meanwhile, governmental assistance and support for youth-led projects and initiatives is reportedly difficult to come by. These dynamics have fed into a perception that the local authorities do not pay attention to the youth, nor prioritize their needs. This may help to explain why 63% of survey respondents state that they do not avail themselves of existing youth resources in Sumel.

While the provision of better youth resources in Sumel is important, the most salient need identified by the youth is ‘better livelihood opportunities,’ selected by 40% of survey respondents and heavily emphasized by FGD participants. According to informants, Sumel has an inflated number of unemployed graduates, a demographic that continues to expand each year due to the growing number of students graduating from universities and other educational institutions. High unemployment has reportedly been exacerbated by the aforementioned neglect of Sumel relative to Duhok, which has translated into reduced job opportunities for the youth and an ailing local economy. It is also worth mentioning a perception among host community youth that available jobs in the private sector are predominantly awarded to “foreign workers,” such as IDPs and refugees, who are willing to accept meager wages (FGDs:2020; IOM, 2019). Additionally, as Muslims dominate the center of Sumel, Christians and Yazidis from this area are often forced into the peripheries in search of jobs. Women appear to be disproportionately impacted by the dismal labor market, due to mobility restrictions arising from the conservative tribal culture and the concentration of available opportunities in Duhok. This is particularly pronounced among Yazidi women, who are largely relegated to working in the public sector in Sumel.

Sumel’s youth also identified a critical need for ‘better educational and personal development opportunities’ (40%), which emerged as a higher priority among female respondents. Despite an allegedly high number of graduates in this area, several informants highlighted that youth remain in dire need of vocational trainings, as well as courses on computer literacy and the arts. A notable segment of the youth in this area are believed to have developed a special interest in literature, including novel and poetry writing.

Sumel seems to have very few youth figures that have risen to prominence and had an impact on the local society. In the field of entrepreneurship, Mohammed Yousif, Iyas Khalil, Islam Mohammed, Zeravan Ose, and Shakir Ismael Zuber have been mentioned. Notable social media figures include Sarbast Khalid, Hozan Ismael, Yasir Sami, Dler Kamal, and Yonis Tawfiq. Other names, emerging from the field of arts, include Dyar Arwati, who has published novels, and Halkawt Idres Abid, who specializes in cinema. Jasim Mohammed is a popular

sports figure who plays for the Iraqi national football team. Finally, in leadership, Saeed Khwaja was the only name offered by youth informants.

## Agency

Most young informants argued that, in Sumel, the process of governance takes place without robust youth involvement. There appear to be a number of political, cultural, and economic factors that constrain the agency of Sumel's young people when it comes to participation in decision-making. From a political perspective, the dominant political parties have made it their sole prerogative to govern through a patronage system, which prioritizes formal party members and their familial relatives. Informants argue that the political parties have entirely monopolized decision-making and governance processes. To reach power or be included in the local governance in Sumel, membership within the dominant political party is believed to be a prerequisite. This arrangement has not only prohibited the participation of an increasingly independent youth constituency, but has also concentrated power in the hands of a select group that does not consider the voices of the youth.

Culturally, youth must also contend with the ubiquity of tribalism and its multifaceted impacts on participation in Sumel's local governance. Tribalism, according to one key informant, engenders a social and political system that delegitimizes youth interests while advancing those that reinforce tribal and traditional practices. As a result, existing power structures only cater to the youth constituency when a synergy can be detected between their demands and the ambitions of powerful tribes. The influence of these informal power brokers on formal institutions also means that tribal affiliation and support often dictate who has access to professional and political opportunities in Sumel.

Likely due to these influences, former governance models have not established a precedent of including youth constituents in the decision-making process. A general lack of communal support for youth participation and a pervasive perception that youth are not mature enough to be given such an opportunity form additional cultural barriers to robust youth inclusion.

Tribalism and other conservative cultural dynamics further constrain the agency of young women in Sumel. Due to the continued salience of traditional norms in this area, the socially sanctioned role of women tends to be shaped around housework and domesticity. Despite some ostensible inroads in expanding women's mobility, women's access to employment and youth-related activities continues to be significantly restricted, especially in comparison to their male counterparts. Inclusion in leadership positions is a particularly difficult prospect, as women are commonly believed to be mentally and religiously deficient, and therefore unfit for governance. Consequently, the vast majority of available positions in the local government are reserved for male candidates, inherently limiting female participation in decision-making. According to informants, if women come forward to advocate for their rights or request better inclusion and representation in the government, they are quickly labelled and shamed by the community.

Another factor distorting the agency of Sumel's youth is the poor economic status of this area. Aggravated by the recent economic crisis, the local economy in Sumel has been wavering, motivating the youth to prioritize securing an income rather than engaging in local governance.

Other challenges noted in the qualitative data relate to political and religious fragmentation within the youth constituency. The youth are believed to be divided across many political fronts, which may impact their ability to advocate for their own inclusion in a cohesive and unified way. Furthermore, informants observe that young

people from religious minority groups often remain within confessional boundaries, seemingly unable to transcend ideological barriers to lend additional heft to the collective voice of the youth.

Despite varying degrees of political and tribal affiliation, the data reveals a widespread feeling of marginalization among Sumel's youth. Research participants stressed that all youth are marginalized as a result of the alleged disregard the authorities have shown for this demographic contingent. However, there are several youth components who reportedly suffer from compounding categories of marginalization. These include unemployed graduates, females, members of the Yazidi and Christian religious minority groups, and intellectuals. Unemployed graduates are believed to be marginalized due to a nearly non-existent private sector; the institution of rigorous and demanding employment requirements that are difficult for local youth to meet; and an abundance of foreign workers saturating the market. While women's inclusion may be prioritized within international organizations or universities that reserve dedicated spaces for top female graduates, women have less freedom of choice in employment opportunities overall, as well as less mobility. Yazidi women are considered to be doubly marginalized in this regard, due to the heavily tribal and conservative nature of their community. Meanwhile, the dominance of the Muslim community in the city center has reportedly made it difficult for Yazidis and Christians to find jobs, effectively pushing them to both the literal and metaphorical margins of Sumel. Finally, intellectuals are believed to be marginalized, as the predominantly tribal nature of Sumel is perceived to ostracize this component of the society.

## Contribution

The overwhelming majority (93%) of surveyed youth from Sumel believe that youth should be included in the process of governance. While 50% of respondents report that youth *are* being included in Sumel's governance, the totality of the surveyed population from this area describe current efforts to secure youth inclusion as being either unavailable (40%), limited or inaccessible (30%), lacking in quality (17%), or not inclusive and representative (13%). A possible explanation for this seeming disparity, given inputs from qualitative data, is that youth with strong political and tribal ties may be included in the local government, while access to robust participation remains unattainable for the whole.

According to research participants, the KDP is the sole political party with power in Sumel. This has granted the KDP substantial control over the local government. Some respondents argue that the KDP has made membership within the party an essential prerequisite to participation in local governance. In the words of an FGD participant: "[P]olitically, you need to go through the political parties in order to get into government and authority, and the political parties often prioritize their relatives and their members" (FGD:2020). These dynamics, informants argue, have effectively limited youth participation to membership in the political party student unions. Even youth ensconced within this fold, however, remain doubtful about whether their views are ever escalated to decision-makers, or whether solutions to their problems are ever implemented.

In addition to affiliation with the KDP, membership in a major tribe is also important to securing inclusion in local governance. This has meant that some tribes, like Kochar, wield enormous power during elections and can influence the formation of local government. It also means that those who do not belong to sizable tribes, nor benefit from their protection and support, remain disproportionately marginalized from the decision-making process. It is a common belief among study participants that the KDP and tribal leaders work in concert to advance their own interests, a factor that is believed to significantly impact the legitimate and meaningful participation of youth in the local governance of Sumel. Moreover, this sociopolitical amalgam is considered to generate an environment where skilled and qualified candidates are frequently excluded, as they are less likely to accept patronage or consent to leveraging their connections – commonly referred to as *wasta* in the

local Kurdish jargon – to serve the interests of the political parties and the demands of the tribes. Such practices are so enshrined in Sumel, young informants explain, that refusing them decreases popularity.

Meanwhile, outside of formal participation in the local governance, there appear to be very few mechanisms for sharing youth grievances and priorities with the local authorities in Sumel. Some youth contend that there are no such mechanisms, while others believe that available mechanisms are limited and conditioned on political affiliation. Youth also claim that official and political authorities are difficult to access, and that parliamentarians disappear once they are elected. This presents a major stumbling block for youth who wish to engage in Sumel's governance or hold their local authorities accountable for failed promises. Despite these obstacles, youth continue to explore alternative means to convey their needs, grievances, and priorities to local decision-makers. In the absence of other viable mechanisms, social media platforms, such as Facebook, are often used for this purpose. Taking to the streets in protest appears to be too hazardous a route in Sumel.

The challenges delineated above appear to have had a deleterious impact on youths' self-reported levels of personal investment and engagement in local politics. Survey data suggests that only 10% of Sumel's youth feel 'very invested and engaged' in local politics, while the majority feel somewhat invested and engaged (53%) or not at all (37%). Nevertheless, the majority of Sumel's youth<sup>14</sup> report that they understand local governance mechanisms in their area, while half of survey respondents also express confidence in those mechanisms. These numbers, which suggest both an interest and a residual belief in the governance system, offer a promising foundation for stemming the tide of youth disengagement and building robust patterns of integration for Sumel's youth.

In the face of extant challenges and barriers, youth have identified a number of needs that are critical to enhancing their involvement in local governance. Some have cited systemic and structural needs, including the need for the political parties to cease practicing coercive policies and adopt democratic behaviors instead. Many have noted the centrality of adequate job opportunities to facilitating youth inclusion. Others advocated for reforming the educational system in Sumel, which has reportedly failed to equip youth with the skills and qualifications commensurate to the demands of the job market; the cultural, linguistic, and academic capacities necessary for participation in governance; and the requisite knowledge and strategies to counter backward conceptions of tribalism, sectarianism, sexism, and political nepotism in order to affect changes in their community. In the interim, providing 'more mechanisms for participation' was identified as an important priority by youth constituents.

## Enabling Environment

The majority of research participants from Sumel concur that the relationship between the local authorities and the youth leaves much to be desired. There is a pervasive perception among informants that the local authorities engage with the youth in an exploitative or manipulative fashion, mobilizing them in the service of personal or political interest while failing to support them financially and psychologically. The authorities have an obligation to attend to the needs of youth and provide the resources that would enable them to flourish. However, in the absence of viable mechanisms to communicate youth grievances and priorities, Sumel's young people have no way to demand accountability from their government institutions. Perceptions of governmental neglect and political disregard have eroded the trust of youth constituents in their representatives. Only 32% of survey respondents from this area report trust in their local authorities, while

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<sup>14</sup> Reported by a majority of FGD participants and 67% of survey respondents.

only 27% characterize the interactions between local authorities and the youth as positive.<sup>15</sup> As a result of these dynamics, most interlocutors describe the relationship between the two as weak, poor, or even non-existent.<sup>16</sup>

Data on the relationships between youth and the broader community in Sumel is mixed. Some youth participants perceive a great deal of harmony on this front, claiming that the community encourages the youth to fight for their rights, improve their levels of education, build their careers, and contribute to society. Others identify an increasing lack of faith in Sumel's youth, asserting that community members expect the youth to generate income, which, due to the economic environment, is becoming an increasingly difficult task. Unmet expectations in this regard have fostered dismissive attitudes towards the youth and presumptions of laziness.

In terms of relations among Sumel's youth, the survey data shows positive trends. Around 90% of survey respondents concur that they enjoy positive relationships with other youth in their community, a sanguine perspective that remains largely stable across categories of ethnicity (84%) and religion (80%). While still considerable, reports of positive relationships with youth of the opposite gender garnered the lowest number of responses (70%), which may be reflective of the conservative tribal society in Sumel and its lackluster integration of young women. Finally, 80% of survey respondents report that youth from different identity groups collaborate to achieve shared objectives in Sumel.

## Summary

- The most critical need identified by Sumel's youth is 'better livelihood opportunities' (40%), followed by 'better educational and personal development opportunities' (40%), which emerged as a higher priority for female respondents.
- Barriers to youth participation in local governance include: the apparent necessity of political patronage, which effectively marginalizes an increasingly independent youth constituency; tribalism, which dictates access to the governance system and delegitimizes youth interests; a lack of communal support and cultural precedent for youth participation; a belief that women are mentally and religiously deficient, and an expectation that they will remain devoted to domestic roles; economic deprivation; and political and sectarian schisms within the youth constituency, which impact their collective ability to advocate for youth inclusion in a cohesive way.
- The primary mechanism for youth participation in governance is membership in the political parties, although membership in a major tribe is also considered to be a prerequisite for inclusion.
- All youth respondents from Sumel describe current efforts to secure youth inclusion as either unavailable or inadequate. *More mechanisms for participation* may be the single most important factor in enhancing youth involvement in decision-making.
- Outside of the formal governance apparatus, youth use social media platforms to share their grievances and priorities with the local authorities.

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<sup>15</sup> 40% describe this interaction as negative or non-existent, while 33% consider it to be neutral.

<sup>16</sup> A study conducted by Youth4Peace among youth from Sumel, Domez, and Duhok in 2017 revealed similar findings, with host community youth from this area reporting "no functional relationship with the government and no understanding of how to develop the relationship" ([https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-04/5.%20FGD\\_Iraq\\_Megan%20Kelly.pdf](https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-04/5.%20FGD_Iraq_Megan%20Kelly.pdf)).

## Sheikhan

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Sheikhan falls within the cluster of disputed territories whose governance is contested between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Federal Government of Iraq, and is listed, by turns, as being part of both the Duhok and Ninewa governorates. A portion of this district is also located within the KRI's politically defined Yellow Zone, and is considered to be a KDP stronghold. Sheikhan is a largely conservative, tribal area, inhabited by Kurdish and Arab components, as well as Yazidis, Assyrian Christians, and Muslims. This area is rich in natural resources, and boasts plentiful oil fields. In Sheikhan, those who are considered to be young typically range in age from 14-40 years old. Youth constitute the largest demographic component in the district; the median age of Sheikhan's residents is 20-21 (IOM, 2018).

### Assets

Sheikhan reportedly has very few formal institutions, organizations, and spaces dedicated to the youth. The overwhelming majority of surveyed youth claim that there are no youth groups (81%) or spaces (75%) available in this area. Notable exceptions include the Sheikhan Youth Center, a governmental organization, and the Lalish Cultural Center, which is primarily for Yazidis. Besides these, Sheikhan has a handful of politically oriented resources, such as the Women Union Center and student unions affiliated with the various political parties. Individual informants also mention the existence of the Scholars Union, People's Youth Church, and The Youth Group. Several of these entities have offered beneficial activities for Sheikhan's youth, including recreational opportunities and, occasionally, special technical trainings on tailoring, teaching, and other topics.

The minimal presence of youth-specific resources in Sheikhan appears to be, at least in part, a result of the economic crisis, which caused the government to shutter a number of formal groups and institutions dedicated to the youth. However, youth informants also allege that local and international CSOs, which traditionally play a more active role than the government in implementing youth activities, have failed to appropriately prioritize the youth of Sheikhan. Meanwhile, the few resources that do exist are not always equally accessible to all of the district's young people. Some organizations restrict their services to youth beneficiaries within a given age bracket. Others cater exclusively to specific identity groups within the larger youth demographic, feeding into perceptions of relative disparity and deprivation among Sheikhan's diverse religious components. Women generally have less access to social and recreational resources due to the religious and tribal norms that remain salient in this area.

According to survey data, 78% of youth respondents from Sheikhan do not take advantage of these resources. Instead, most choose to gather informally, either in schools or cafes. Some have chosen to form their own organizations, focused on literature, charity (e.g. Esviny), or displacement issues, to supplement available institutional resources. There is also a Facebook group called Qazay Sheikhan (i.e. District of Sheikhan), and it is likely that others are available on social media as well. In the absence of financial support from the government and CSOs, however, the capacity of Sheikhan's youth to self-organize remains limited. Overall, research participants concur that the depletion and inefficacy of available resources in Sheikhan has impeded youth development, and that more dedicated groups and youth-specific spaces are needed in this area to provide recreational, social, and educational opportunities for the youth.

The most critical need identified by Sheikhan's youth, however, is 'better livelihood opportunities' (47%). Many of Sheikhan's young people are unemployed. This is due, in part, to the dire economic situation and overreliance on public sector employment that is common across Kurdistan, but it is also exacerbated by Sheikhan's status as a disputed territory, which disincentivizes local and international investments and reduces available job opportunities. Local youth are not well represented in Sheikhan's numerous oil fields and refineries. Allegedly, available jobs in the oil industry are allocated through government appointment and generally go to those with significant personal connections. Meanwhile, entrepreneurship has been hampered due to the high cost of procuring a business license in Sheikhan, which makes it untenable for economically deprived youth. As a result of these dynamics, youth who have graduated since 2014 have found it very difficult to build professional careers, leading to high rates of unemployment and low financial capacity among this demographic.

Additionally, Sheikhan's youth need 'better educational and personal development opportunities' (34%), a demand that was particularly pronounced among Yazidi respondents. Many of Sheikhan's youth are reputed to be well-educated and highly skilled; some are even in possession of Masters degrees or PhDs. However, educational certificates are not always representative of academic achievement, and notable deficiencies remain. In particular, research participants contend that Sheikhan's youth need additional opportunities to develop their computer literacy and IT skills; arts and music; and command of multiple languages, including English, Arabic, and Kurdish. Other resources for self-development, including enhancement courses and general vocational trainings, would also be beneficial. Perhaps most saliently, all interlocutors concur that youth need further education on equality, countering violence and conflict, forgiveness, and coexistence in order to build the soft skills that would better equip them to interact healthfully with other members of Sheikhan's diverse community. In the estimation of youth informants, these various needs do not differ by gender, sect, or ethnicity.

Despite these limitations, some of Sheikhan's youth have risen to positions of prominence. Perhaps most notably, the mayor of Sheikhan is a young person who has been tasked with overseeing the administration of the district. Figures active in media and social media include Barzan Sleman, Elyas Abdullah, Sherzad Khudida, Sameer Khalid, and Karam Saeed. Other young leaders include Bayar Bibo Haji, Farhad Elyas, Saeed Hussein, Azad Barakat, Sheikh Pasha, Azad Murad, Miron Akaram, Sheikh Sameer Khalid Sharo and Dilovan Sleman. Sepan Sleman is a businessman. Each of these names were offered by FGD participants and key informants, which may be reflective of stronger connections and greater levels of access than is normative for youth from this area. 100% of survey respondents claim that there are no young public figures in Sheikhan.

## Agency

When it comes to participation in the decision-making process, the agency of Sheikhan's youth is constrained by several factors. The first factor is structural. In this area, the general prerequisites for participation in governance tend to revolve around one's level of education and financial capacity. However, limited educational access and attainment in this area has contributed to high rates of illiteracy, insufficient professional experience, and inadequate skills among Sheikhan's youth. Meanwhile, due to widespread and persistent unemployment, the youth of Sheikhan also have very low financial capacity. Both are critical deficiencies that weaken self-confidence and impede youth participation in governance.

There are also administrative barriers to youth participation in the decision-making process. Sheikhan's status as a disputed territory and its dual administration have created a convoluted governance apparatus. Criteria for inclusion in that apparatus reportedly differ between the central and regional governments, creating

confusion among the youth and disincentivizing participation. As a result of these dynamics, youth responses regarding their personal understanding of local governance mechanisms were, predictably, mixed.

In addition to facing structural and administrative barriers, Sheikhan's youth are also disempowered by sociocultural dynamics that inhibit their participation in the decision-making process. The prevalence of cronyism in this area, as in other areas of Kurdistan, means that political and tribal entities have a great deal of influence in determining who has access to power. This dynamic effectively excludes youth without status, connections, money, or political affiliation from meaningful participation in governance. Sectarianism is also rampant in Sheikhan, posing an additional challenge to equitable access for Sheikhan's youth. The multicultural and ethnoreligious milieu in this area has introduced a degree of competition between disparate identity groups, all of whom believe themselves to be disproportionately disenfranchised and deprived of opportunities to participate. Finally, traditional, conservative cultural norms, both tribal and religious, do not typically prioritize youth inclusion in leadership and decision-making positions, and may even portray youth as "competition" or a "threat" (KIIs:2020). These norms also place additional constraints on the agency of young women, whose freedom and movement are restricted, and who are prohibited from taking positions in government.

While informants argue that all of Sheikhan's youth are marginalized, there are some components which suffer from compounding categories of marginalization. Chief among these are women. Due to the continued salience of entrenched traditions and norms, women have limited mobility; less access to social and recreational resources; fewer job opportunities; and inadequate support. Unemployed and economically deprived youth are also highly marginalized and vulnerable. In the absence of viable strategies to transform their circumstances, these youth reportedly spend most of their time on their phones, or smoking and playing cards in the cafes. Minorities may be collectively disadvantaged by their limited numbers, although members from each of Sheikhan's diverse ethnoreligious groups believe that adequate, equitable resources and opportunities have not been secured for their particular component. Finally, youth without "Wasta," status, connections, and political affiliation are also considered to be marginalized.

## Contribution

In a survey administered to youth in Sheikhan, the vast majority of respondents either agreed (38%) or strongly agreed (47%) that youth should be included in the process of local governance. While 60% of respondents believe that youth *are* being included in that process, available opportunities for inclusion do not appear to be adequate. Youth respondents from Sheikhan believe that current efforts to secure youth inclusion in governance are either inaccessible (38%), unavailable (31%), lacking in quality (25%), or not representative (6%). 'More mechanisms for participation' and 'greater access to existing mechanisms for participation' emerged as equally important priorities for enhancing youth inclusion.

There appear to be two primary mechanisms through which the youth of Sheikhan can be included in the local government. One is through the normative process of employment. Qualified youth, such as those with an educational background in administration and management, can occasionally be integrated into the governance system by landing a job in the public sector. Alternatively, youth may choose to pursue formal inclusion in governance via the second mechanism: the electoral process. Several of Sheikhan's young people have reportedly become members of the Duhok Provincial Council through this mechanism. However, there appear to be serious limitations to the accessibility and efficacy of this approach. First, public elections are only held for certain positions. Allegedly, many governmental openings are never disclosed to the broader public and are, instead, filled privately. Second, candidates from outside of Sheikhan are often brought in to

govern the area, which removes the opportunity for the district's qualified and well-educated young people to ascend to positions of prominence. Third, local residents who do manage to ascend via the election process are generally those who have the support of a political party. This effectively rules out the participation of the politically unaffiliated while shaping electability around the strength of one's political connections rather than essential qualifications.

Youth outside the formal governance apparatus in Sheikhan utilize various strategies to communicate their grievances and priorities to local authorities. A primary way they approach this communication is through social media. However, this is typically little more than a stop-gap measure in the absence of more sustainable alternatives, and its efficacy may be circumscribed by fear of retribution. "The youth cannot face expressing their grievances to the government or the authorities here, because they expect a negative or inappropriate reaction and they fear for their lives" (KII:2020). As there are no independent spaces or platforms through which youth can safely express dissenting opinions in writing, they often resort to using anonymous Facebook accounts to communicate their grievances. Messages disseminated in this way may never reach the appropriate decision-makers.

The youth of Sheikhan may also attempt to secure traction on their objectives by visiting the political party offices or escalating their grievances and suggestions through the political party youth organizations. However, there is no guarantee that these inputs will be subsequently conveyed to the local authorities. Furthermore, even if youth suggestions are delivered to the local administration, these suggestions may not make it past the mayor or district head. This is a problem because, as one key informant explains: "The reality is that the strategies and policies and visions are not created by the local governance here" (KII:2020). Youth appear to be growing frustrated and disillusioned with this mechanism, as the political parties have not been effective in channeling youth concerns to the top decision-makers, or inspiring concerted, substantive action on youth priorities.

Besides these avenues, there do not appear to be any dedicated mechanisms, liaisons, or institutions through which Sheikhan's youth can express their grievances and priorities to the local authorities. The youth have recognized their need for a space where they can engage with government officials directly, and there is now a youth-led movement to establish a Youth Council in this area.

Demand for inclusion is increasing among Sheikhan's youth, who are eager to participate in the process of decision-making. Facilitating their sustainable inclusion may require systemic changes, such as pursuing a resolution of Sheikhan's status as a disputed territory and instituting safeguards against sectarianism and gender discrimination in the governance process. In the interim, however, youth participation may be enhanced through the provision of jobs and ample educational opportunities. 91% of survey respondents from this area believe that more capacity-building and skills development are necessary to equip Sheikhan's youth to meaningfully contribute to local governance.

## Enabling Environment

There is a consensus among local leaders that the overall environment in Sheikhan is "very unstable." Sheikhan falls within the cluster of disputed territories whose governance is contested between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Federal Government of Iraq. This brings with it a significant degree of administrative complexity and confusion. Additionally, Sheikhan is incredibly diverse in terms of both ethnicity and religion, and includes Kurdish and Arab components, as well as Yazidis, Assyrian Christians, and Muslims. While many of these components have managed to coexist peacefully, perceptions of relative

disenfranchisement between the various communities have the potential to undermine social cohesion and harmony in this area. Finally, Sheikhan is marked by a profound disconnect between the needs of citizens and the government's capacity or commitment to provide for those needs. Sheikhan is a rich area with plentiful oil fields. Despite this, deficient infrastructure, service delivery, and livelihood opportunity have led to deprivation among its constituents. This disconnect appears to be exacerbated when the government institutes bureaucratic procedures and regulations which are detrimental, rather than beneficial, to the larger public.

*"The current situation is really unstable [...]. It might explode at any time, but I don't know when."* (KII:2020)

Despite Sheikhan's potential volatility, 76% of surveyed youth report having positive relationships with other youth in their community. This pattern remains relatively stable and consistent across categories of religion (76%), ethnicity (69%) and gender (78%), and is further corroborated by the fact that 78% of respondents claim that, in Sheikhan, youth from different identity groups collaborate to achieve shared objectives. This may indicate that perceptions of relative disenfranchisement and deprivation between the Christian, Yazidi, and Muslim communities are less salient among Sheikhan's young people than among their adult counterparts.

The relationship between Sheikhan's youth and the wider community also appears to be predominantly, though not exclusively, positive. Most informants concur that community members view the youth as an essential part of society, as the fundamental core of the workforce, and as creators of change who have the capacity to promote development in an area that desperately needs it. Reportedly, members of the community are also understanding of the difficulties faced by the youth, and the fact that their desire for personal improvement is not matched by requisite institutional support. As a result, the relationship is marked by care and mutual respect. However, several youth informants qualified these observations by explaining that the attention and care of the community is not equitably distributed, as young women tend to be less valued and accepted than their male counterparts, as well as more restricted. Additionally, the advent of social media has introduced new dynamics and tensions in the relationship between the community and its youth, as members of the current generation have adopted ideas that are antithetical to the opinions held by their elders.

Quantitative data also reveals several positive trends in the relationship between youth and the local authorities in Sheikhan. Among surveyed youth, 50% express confidence in their local governance mechanisms, and claim that interactions between the local authorities and the community as a whole are positive. A majority of respondents also report trusting their local authorities (60%) and feeling trusted by them (53%). However, responses on the interaction of local authorities with Sheikhan's youth varied significantly, with 38% respondents characterizing that dynamic as positive and 35% describing it as negative or non-existent.

This variation also appeared in the qualitative data. A handful of informants describe the relationship between youth and the local authorities as "optimistic" and relatively strong. Official rhetoric would seem to indicate that the government believes the youth are important; that their voices should be heard; and that they should be enabled to come forward and spearhead change in the community. The personal experiences of individual youth appear to corroborate this, as several informants claim that the government cares about the youth, treats them well, and shows them respect when they visit public institutions.

However, key informants contend that the relationship between the government and the youth is actually quite opportunistic and unidirectional. While the government reportedly solicits the enthusiasm and support

of the youth for its programs, it simultaneously neglects to address their grievances. In reality, key informants contend, “the youth are ignored” and “almost forgotten by the government” (KIIs:2020). Such sentiments are also echoed by the youth, who claim that the government has failed to support them, stem rising unemployment due to Covid-19, and provide opportunities to influence local decision-making. These dynamics, in which the government remains largely unresponsive to the needs of Sheikhan’s youth, have prompted research participants to describe the relationship between the two as “unhealthy,” “very weak,” and ineffectual (KIIs:2020; FGD:2020).

## Summary

- The most critical need identified by Sheikhan’s youth is ‘better livelihood opportunities’ (47%), followed by ‘better educational and personal development opportunities’ (34%), a demand that was particularly pronounced among Yazidi respondents.
- Barriers to youth participation in local governance include: deficient educational access and attainment; low financial capacity and high unemployment; a convoluted administrative apparatus and variable criteria for inclusion; political cronyism, sectarianism, and tribalism, which reserve opportunities for those with the right constellation of social identities; and cultural precedents that do not prioritize youth inclusion and prohibit the participation of women in decision-making.
- The primary mechanisms for youth participation in governance are public sector employment and the electoral process. Those outside of the formal governance apparatus may channel their grievances and priorities to the local authorities over social media or via the political party organizations.
- All youth respondents from Sheikhan describe current efforts to secure youth inclusion as either unavailable or inadequate. *More mechanisms* and *greater access to existing mechanisms* for participation emerged as equally important priorities for enhancing youth involvement in decision-making.

## Halabja

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Halabja is one of the four governorates of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). It gained the status of a governorate in March 2014, after splitting from Sulaymaniyah province. This idyllic area endured a crippling blow when the Baathist regime launched a chemical attack in 1988, choking thousands to death and leaving many more permanently impaired (Hiltermann, 2008). The psychological and physiological repercussions of these harms spiral through to the present. Halabja governorate shares a border with Iran and is endowed with many natural beauties, including mountains, waterfalls, orchards, and parks, making it an attractive tourist destination. In addition to tourism, many of Halabja’s residents also engage in agricultural enterprises. The most popular of these is cultivating pomegranates, which are celebrated in an annual festival. In terms of inhabitants, Halabja is predominantly populated by Sunni Muslims with a religious minority of Kakaies, who have been sharing space alongside the Muslims of Halabja for quite some time. In Halabja, colloquial definitions of ‘young’ may encapsulate an age range of between 18-50.

## Assets

In the absence of sufficient and independent youth-dedicated spaces, cafes have reportedly become a common attraction for the youth in Halabja. Spaces that are sponsored by the authorities tend to disappear due to inadequate funding, while those perceived to have political leanings are largely avoided by the youth,

a sizeable demographic segment that is growing increasingly displeased and hopeless. Despite these serious flaws, some youth groups and spaces have still surfaced in Halabja. Book clubs seem to have found comfortable footholds in this area. Book Friends, The Power of the Youth, the Conference of the Book Readers, and the Garden of Mira are youth-led groups dedicated to reading and discussing books. Tantamount to these clubs, though focused on the intellect and education, are Hazhan Center and Gulistan Organization, which enjoy some popularity among the youth as well. Besides these groups and centers, the student unions of the various political parties also engage in youth-based activities within educational settings. Additionally, the youth of Halabja can utilize the Youth Development Center and the governmental Halabja Youth Center as independent spaces in which to hold meetings and conferences. Other organizations that consider youth among their target beneficiaries include Bareen, Rwanga, Macos, Shnroy Music Group, and Nwe Organization.

However, a preponderance of youth survey respondents claimed that there are no youth groups or spaces in Halabja. Qualitative data shows that 74% of surveyed youth believe that there are no youth groups in this area, while a resounding 82% state that there are no dedicated youth spaces. Moreover, 82% of surveyed youth report that they do not use the available youth resources in Halabja. Given how ubiquitous informants' expressions of displeasure and dissatisfaction were regarding available resources, these numbers should not be surprising.

Some youth participants also believe that an ongoing rivalry for political dominance and a precedent of Islamic militancy and extremism in this area have generated a perception among international organizations that Halabja is not safe. As a result, most of the relevant youth organizations avoid establishing offices in Halabja, further exacerbating the dearth of available resources. Additionally, youth argue that, in a bid to increase public support, the political parties make sizable contributions to the youth groups and spaces that they sponsor, thereby contributing to the politicization of the youth in Halabja; stemming the emergence of independent youth organizations; and marginalizing a growing segment of the youth constituency who do not wish to be affiliated with the political parties.

While the youth of Halabja are credited with generating the pressure that effectively transformed the administrative status of the city into a governorate, they appear to be facing numerous challenges emanating from perceived governmental neglect and disregard. The local and the regional governments are equally blamed for failing to address the needs of the youth, who are reportedly hobbled by high rates of unemployment and poverty, inadequate youth spaces, and a dearth of educational, developmental, and recreational facilities. Based on the survey, 53% of participants ranked 'better livelihood opportunities' as their most critical need, followed by 'better educational and personal development opportunities' at 29%. It is worth noting that this general pattern of need did not vary by ethnicity or gender in Halabja.

According to the youth, one strategy that could potentially increase job opportunities in Halabja is internationalizing the border crossing and using it for large scale imports and exports. The current border crossing reportedly remains underdeveloped due to unhealthy political rivalries in the domestic sphere and a commensurate competition for power between local stakeholders. Additionally, youth believe that international and local civil society organizations should consider opening more offices in Halabja. Doing so, they argue, will not only increase the impact of those organizations and help them to better understand dynamics in Halabja, but will simultaneously create more jobs for the youth.

In the interim, the KRG's ostensible neglect of this area and a troubling constellation of unmet youth needs have purportedly caused the youth to move to bigger cities, including the neighboring city of Sulaymaniyah, or to migrate abroad. These factors have also, according to youth informants, contributed to a reduction of

patriotic and nationalist sentiment among those who remain, giving rise to widespread public apathy and a damaged sense of self-worth among Halabja's youth.

In terms of prominent youth, none of the survey participants provided any names, but the qualitative data did yield a few. In business, mention was made of a young woman named Shanga Hmaza, who manages Rost Café. Mamosta Rebeen, Rebeen Najmaddin, Shkar Nazdar and Shadya Mutsam were mentioned as active young leaders. Additionally, Niga Hama Shareef was noted as a prominent figure within the field of social media.

## Agency

Halabja, like the rest of the KRI, is characterized by a poor system of governance in which youth are not adequately represented. The youth of Halabja reportedly face numerous political, contextual, and personal barriers that inhibit their ability to participate in the process of decision-making. In terms of political barriers, youth informants argue that access to positions of power within the local government is exclusively reserved for those with political support, rendering political affiliation more salient than qualifications and credentials when it comes to securing governmental employment. This has, in their estimation, invariably meant a disregard for independent youth and the chronic appointment of unfit personnel to local offices.

Contextually, a violent history marked by chemical attacks, radical militancy in the form of Ansarulislam, national turmoil arising from the IS invasion, and a tumultuous Middle Eastern 'neighborhood' have enshrined heightened levels of fear that compel the youth to accept the status quo and refrain from demanding change. In this vein, one of the community leaders noted: "The reality is [...] just like being in a minefield, where you only think about your own survival" (KII:2020). Additionally, each of these events has taken a toll on the infrastructure of the area, retarding development in Halabja relative to other large population centers in the KRI. Furthermore, the government is believed to have stalled or neglected the process of reviving Halabja city because neither of the main political parties, the PUK and the KDP, have assumed dominance in this area.

The agency of the youth is further constrained by a lack of requisite personal and educational capacity, which inhibits their ability to enact change and effectively demand rights and entitlements. Youth argue that the education system in Halabja has failed to inculcate the required knowledge and skills that could assist the youth in overcoming challenges and barriers. At the same time, the youth believe that there are many capable and skilled young people who want to bring about change, but they have been left without any backing or support by relevant stakeholders.

From the perspective of youth informants, the entire youth demographic is marginalized. This view is predicated upon a belief that both the regional and local governments have no vision for the youth. It is also bolstered by sociopolitical dynamics that award employment and entry to governance on the basis of political affiliation. It is often argued that, without the backing of a political party, the youth are likely to remain jobless and poor. These conditions, along with restrictive social norms and traditions, have made life especially difficult for women. In addition to women, persons with disability and the Kakaies are also considered to be among the most marginalized groups in Halabja. While the needs of the disabled are allegedly not satisfied by the authorities, the Kakaies reportedly experience discrimination in their daily interactions with the Muslim majority, contributing to a perception that religion may be a barrier to their participation in the local government. Kakai informants argue that Muslims in Halabja might not accept a non-Muslim to rule over them. Though this contention is readily denied by Muslim youth, it is reported that Muslims refrain from engaging with Kakais in the trade of food products due to Islamic restrictions on processing food.

## Contribution

The survey data reveals that a significant majority of respondents, 70%, concur that youth should be included in the process of local governance in Halabja. Notably, Halabja is one of the few areas in Kurdistan, if not the only area, where a young female occupies the city's mayoral office. Nevertheless, 50% of survey respondents also believe that youth are not actually included in the process of local governance in Halabja. Youth argue that political affiliation is a prerequisite to participation in the process, and that serving the interests of political parties has taken priority over serving the needs of the youth constituency. This state of affairs appears to have generated a reluctance to engage in local governance among the youth, as youth participation in the local administration is perceived to be nominal at best. This may explain why 38% of surveyed youth believe that there are no efforts to include youth in local governance, while another 35% view current efforts as not inclusive or representative.

The repercussions of such dynamics are manifold. Of note is a significant degree of dissatisfaction with the current status of youth inclusion in Halabja's governance. Over half of youth survey respondents, 59%, expressed dissatisfaction with their level of inclusion in the decision-making process. Another sizeable percentage of respondents, 56%, stated that they do not feel personally invested nor engaged in local politics. These figures suggest an alarming prevalence of both discouragement and disengagement among the youth in this area. Despite multiple protests, strikes, and activist campaigns, residents of Halabja have reportedly not witnessed significant changes. The result, according to community leaders, is an increased level of apathy and inaction across Halabja, especially among the youth. This is particularly damaging given the pervasive belief that highly skilled and qualified youth are increasingly choosing to leave Halabja, contributing to a widespread local brain drain.

Outside of membership in the political parties, there appear to be no established, formal mechanisms to secure youth participation in local governance. In the absence of such mechanisms, the youth of Halabja use alternative methods to convey their grievances and priorities to the local authorities. Two methods, in particular, stand out. The first is consultation and participation with 'Halabja Group', an informal entity which conveys youth needs to authorities. The other is via a consortium of civil society organizations which acts as a conduit between the youth and the local authorities. The consortium reportedly organizes regular meetings with local officials, through which youth grievances and needs may be escalated. This consortium was not mentioned by any of the youth informants, however, but highlighted by a political leader. Other informal methods for drawing attention to youth priorities include using social media and staging public protests, though the latter is becoming increasingly difficult not only in Halabja, but across the KRI. Available data indicates that there are no formal mechanisms dedicated for this purpose, and calls into question the efficacy of informal strategies as well. Among youth survey respondents from this area, 65% believe that there are no viable mechanisms through which Halabja's youth can channel their grievances to the local government. Overall, informants appear to feel despondent about the way authorities deal with the youth dossier in Halabja, which has enervated their belief in their own capacity to affect change.

Against the backdrop of these deficiencies, a confusion in power distribution between the centers and the peripheries allegedly complicates the authorities' ability to fulfil youth demands. A local political leader argues that decision-making power does not lie within the boundaries of Halabja, as the process of decentralization in Kurdistan has yet to materialize. Even if the youth were able to leverage sufficient pressure on the local authorities, he contends, the local government would not be able to meet youth needs. The system of governance in Halabja largely relegates power to the political parties, which are based in either Erbil or

Sulaymaniyah. Notably, youth and the community leaders agree that rivalry between the two main political parties has incapacitated local governance in a way that has rendered youth affairs secondary at best.

To better facilitate youth inclusion in local governance and decision-making, it is likely that systemic and structural changes, such as electoral reforms that shift the locus of power from the political parties to the public, will be required. In the interim, however, several critical needs must be addressed. First, given the prevalence of financial deprivation among Halabja's youth due to the economic crisis and protracted unemployment, subsistence needs, such as securing a source of income, must be prioritized. Second, Halabja's youth require assistance and support to overcome the spirit of fear that has disincentivized participation and curtailed their ability to advocate for their rights. This support could be delivered through an increased journalistic and media focus on this area; the provision of educational, personal development, and mentorship opportunities that bolster confidence, capacity, and relevant skills; and mediation of the generational divide, to raise awareness among older community members about the needs of the youth. Third, Halabja's youth identified a need for 'better knowledge of political and governmental processes,' as exactly half of survey respondents claim that they do not understand the local governance mechanisms in their area. Finally, given the shortcomings of current efforts to include youth in the governance of Halabja, noted by an astounding 100% of survey respondents, providing 'more mechanisms for participation' also emerged as vitally important in enhancing youth involvement in the local government.

## Enabling Environment

Among Halabja's youth, 59% of survey respondents claim that they enjoy positive relations with other youth in their community. This trend holds true across the categories of religion and gender. Despite the sense of marginalization reported by Kakaies in the qualitative data, 59% of survey respondents state that they have positive relationships with youth who ascribe to other religions and sects. 65% of respondents report the same with youth of the opposite sex. Responses indicating positive relationships with youth from other ethnicities were heavily mixed, however, which may be reflective of the relative ethnic homogeneity of this area. Interestingly, despite the generally positive pattern in youth relationships across this area, only 41% of survey participants agreed that youth from different identity groups collaborate to achieve shared objectives.

While some community leaders argue that the local administration of Halabja enjoys a favorable relationship with the youth, this view is readily opposed by youth informants themselves, who are often quick to describe their relations with the local authorities as non-existent, weak, or even poor. These characterizations are based on a common perception that governmental officials are either inaccessible or unwilling to meet with the youth, given their failure to deliver on previous promises. This situation has created a troubling disconnect between the youth constituency and the local leadership, and generated frustration and pessimism among the youth. While Halabja's young people may need to exercise some personal responsibility in building strong ties with the authorities, the onus of initiating that relationship is believed to fall squarely on the shoulders of the government, which has allegedly been complacent in the face of these dynamics.

A corollary of this reported situation is a decreased level of trust between local authorities and the youth. In response to questions designed to ascertain levels of trust, 59% of youth survey respondents stated that they do not trust the authorities in Halabja, while 56% mentioned that they do not feel trusted in their interaction with the authorities. Furthermore, 71% of respondents also described the interaction of local authorities with the youth constituency as either negative or non-existent.

Regarding the relationships of youth with the wider community in Halabja, responses seem to vary. Some community leaders, as well as a portion of youth participants, argue that the larger community views the youth with hope and optimism, believing them to be agents of change in possession of exceptional talents and capabilities. Most youth informants seem to have a different opinion, however. They argue that there is a prevalent perspective in the community that frames the youth as purposeless and incapable of bringing about change. This is reflected, they argue, in the popular supposition that Halabja's youth choose to waste their time in cafes and hookah bars instead of generating an income.

## Summary

- The most critical need identified by Halabja's youth is 'better livelihood opportunities' (53%), followed by 'better educational and personal development opportunities' (29%). This pattern of need did not vary by gender or ethnicity.
- Barriers to youth participation in local governance include: the necessity of political patronage and support, which disproportionately marginalizes unaffiliated youth; a violent local and regional history that instills fear and compels youth to accept the status quo; the slow progress of development in Halabja; and deficient personal and educational capacities among the youth constituency.
- The principal mechanism for youth participation in local governance is membership in the political parties. *More mechanisms for participation* emerged as a critical factor in enhancing youth involvement in decision-making.
- Halabja's youth also highlighted the need for *better knowledge of political and governmental processes*, as 50% of respondents report that they do not understand local governance mechanisms.
- Youth primarily use informal avenues, such as external pressure campaigns, to convey their grievances and priorities to the local authorities; even so, 65% of youth respondents believe there are no viable mechanisms for this purpose.
- Halabja has a high percentage (56%) of youth respondents who do not feel personally invested or engaged in local politics, as well as a high percentage (59%) who do not trust their local authorities.

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