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# To Be or Not To Be Political: An Investigation of Active Youth Citizenship Among Young, Educated Syrians in Beirut to Question International Development Discourse

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## Abstract

The international development sector confides in active young citizens around the globe to advance society. Mainstream development discourse therefore tends to transport an affirmative vision of active youth citizenship as individual obligation among highly educated youth. In the context of displacement, however, the realms of citizenship become contested. This article investigates how and why young, educated Syrians in Beirut engage in the refugee aid sector in Lebanon. By juxtaposing the subjective interpretations of their engagements with international development discourse, the study sheds light on substantive practices of active youth citizenship. The article draws on qualitative empirical data collected in Beirut in early 2016.

The research reveals that the engagements constitute instances of active youth citizenship. The respondents positioned themselves both as Syrian and global citizens, and understood their engagements as civil commitment towards fellow Syrians as well as towards the idea of universal human rights. It was striking that the engagements were still framed as apolitical, because 'being political' was assessed as either undesirable or thwarted within the local context. The depoliticising circumstances contradict what international development discourse purports, and jeopardise the efforts of young Syrians. The article therefore concludes that the interdependent international interventions towards the Syrian crisis disregard the potential that the legitimate gatekeeping role of young, educated Syrians bears for processes of reconciliation and inclusive development.


**Keywords:** Syria; Forced Displacement, Youth Citizenship, Refugee Citizenship, Identity, International Aid, Youth And Peacebuilding, Inclusive Development.

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İNCELEME / ARAŞTIRMA

# Politik Olmak Ya Da Olmamak: Beyrut'taki Genç, Eğitimli Suriyelilerin Aktif Genç Vatandaşlığı Üzerinden Uluslararası Gelişme Söylemini Sorgulayan Bir İnceleme

***Marieke Schöning****

## Öz

Uluslararası gelişme sektörü toplumun ilerlemesi için dünya üzerindeki aktif genç vatandaşlara güvenmektedir. Ana akım gelişme söylemi, böylece yüksek eğitimli gençler arasında bireysel bir zorunluluk olarak aktif genç vatandaşlığın olumlayıcı bir görünümünü aktarmaya eğilim gösterir. Ancak yer değiştirme durumlarında vatandaşlık alanları tartışmaya açık hale gelir. Bu makale Beyrut'taki genç, eğitimli Suriyelilerin nasıl ve neden Lübnan'daki mültecilere yardım sektörüne katılımlarını inceler. Uluslararası gelişme söylemine olan bu katılımların öznel yorumlamalarını sıralayarak bu çalışma aktif genç vatandaşlığın temel etkinliklerine ışık tutar. Makale 2016 yılının başlarında Beyrut'ta toplanan niteliksel gözlemsel veriye dayanır.

Araştırma bu katılımların aktif genç vatandaşlığın örnekleri olduğunu gösterir. Katılımcılar kendilerini hem Suriyeli hem de küresel vatandaşlar olarak konumlandırırlar ve katılımlarını Suriyeli hemşerilerine olduğu kadar evrensel insan hakları düşüncesine karşı da bir sivil adanmışlık olarak anlamaktadırlar. İlginçtir ki, bu katılımlar hala apolitik olarak çerçevelenmektedir çünkü yerel bağlamda 'politik olmak' hem istenmeyen hem de karşı çıkılan bir şey olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Bu politikadan uzaklaşma durumları uluslararası gelişme söyleminin ifade ettikleri ile ters düşmekte ve genç Suriyelilerin çabalarını tehlikeye sokmaktadır. Böylece çalışma, Suriye krizine getirilen bağımsız uluslararası müdahalelerin, genç, eğitimli Suriyelilerin meşru akış düzenleme rolünün uzlaşma ve kapsayıcı gelişme süreçlerini besleme potansiyelini göz ardı ettikleri sonucuna varmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Suriye, Zorla Yer Değiştirme, Genç Vatandaşlığı, Mülteci Vatandaşlığı, Kimlik, Uluslararası Yardım, Gençlik Ve Barış İnşası, Kapsayıcı Gelişme.

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## 1. Introduction

The 2011 uprisings throughout the Arab world saw a considerable number of youth taking up leading roles in calling for social justice and substantive rights in their respective countries, thus also in Syria (Khouri & Lopez, 2011; Abboud, 2016). These findings align with a common topos in international development discourse[1], which constructs young people as agents of change (Drummond-Mundal & Cave, 2007; Dunne et al., 2014; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2015; Staeheli & Nagel, 2012). Numerous governmental programmes and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have adopted the mandate to 'empower' youth so that they can and will embrace their responsibility and capacity to 'change the world towards the better' on a local and global scale. Based on findings that the more highly educated an individual is, the more likely it becomes that he or she will participate effectively in all types of political activities, training programmes often combine the promotion of 'active citizenship' with 'social leadership' to target elite groups – such as highly educated people (Campante & Chor, 2012; Mitchell, 2010). The international community hence places at least implicit hopes and expectations of ending the conflict and rebuilding a stable, prosperous Syria upon the nation's young, educated citizens – are they now inside or outside of the country.[2]

The affirmative vision of active youth citizenship as individual obligation described above induces specific tensions in the context of forced displacement. The de facto capabilities of the currently more than 5.2 million displaced Syrians to act politically – among them many of the young activists mentioned above – are highly restrained, as their access to participation is for the most part barred by persistent national and international governance along the lines of conventional 'Westphalian' citizenship.[3] Hannah Arendt (1968) has famously stated that it is not the loss of territorial, but political space that deprives refugees most gravely, since being a refugee entails the loss of citizenship status and as such the "deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective" (296). The authority of the nation state as the superior political community, that per se legitimates itself through the in- and exclusion of citizens and non-citizens, does not match today's realities, in which migrants, minorities and 'aliens' contest its exclusionary effects (Isin, 2002; Mehta & Napier-Moore, 2010). There is little evidence that the world will turn back to "an ideal of a state with a bounded and sedentary group of citizens", however the international governance of displacement is still guided by the premise of restoring conventional citizenship rights (Mehta & Napier-Moore, 2010, 236).

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[1] This study's understanding of discourse is grounded in Michel Foucault's earlier structuralist writings and follows Knight Abowitz' and Harnish's (2006) understanding of Foucault's conception of discourse "as a body of rules and practices that govern meanings in a particular area" (654; Foucault, 1966; 1969).

[2] The term 'citizen' can be based on both formal citizenship and subjective identifications as a Syrian citizen here, while the simple term 'educated' was preferred over 'highly educated' for reasons of readability.

[3] Population figures stem from the online Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and only refer to the region neighbouring Syria (UNHCR, 2017). Numbers are estimated to be considerably higher due to the incomplete nature of formal UNHCR registrations.

After this situation of contested citizenship has been outlined, it is important to note that citizenship can also be defined as practice or performance, as active instead of static, as "the political struggles over the capacity to constitute ourselves as a political subject" in relation to the polities to which we belong (Isin and Nyers, 2014, 8). As such, the concept of citizenship remains relevant regardless of its formal recognition. Kabeer's idea of 'horizontal' citizenship gains in significance when "state-conferred meaning of citizenship is blurred or ambiguous" because "horizontal solidarities among fellow citizens also define people's sense of who they are, where they belong, and what meanings of citizenship they carry" (Gaventa and Tandon, 2010, 25). A citizenship lens politicises all matters and processes of communal life through attaching the dimensions of participation and accountability (Jones & Gaventa, 2002).[4] Research on substantive dimensions of active citizenship in the context of displacement is relevant not only with respect to theoretical rigour, but also as a contribution to more receptive policy making for those directly affected.

This article approaches the friction between a discursive and a substantive side of active youth citizenship in an international development context through a qualitative study of the engagements of young, educated Syrians in the refugee aid sector in Lebanon. It draws on empirical data in the form of in-depth interviews and participant observations, collected during a fieldwork period in Beirut between January and April 2016. At its foundation lies the observation that many Syrian students or young professionals, whom are often based in Beirut, personally engaged in the provision of humanitarian aid to ease the plight of other Syrians. These engagements seem to be a new form of social solidarity among Syrian citizens, particularly remarkable given that earlier research depicts the clandestineness of Syrian civil society and reluctant civic engagement among youth before 2011 (Belhadj, 2013; Hinnebusch, 1995; Kawakibi & Kodmani, 2013).

The central question to this research therefore was if and how the engagements of young, educated Syrians in Beirut within the refugee aid sector could be classified as a form of active youth citizenship, and more importantly, how the research subjects themselves interpreted their actions. This aims to provide a deeper understanding of how questions of active citizenship unfold locally under conditions of displacement. By privileging the interviewees' interpretations, the research findings question some of the prevailing assumptions on active youth citizenship in international development discourse.[5]

## 2. Research Methodology

The study used an exploratory, qualitative research strategy in order to gain in-depth knowledge of the subjective perceptions of young, educated Syrians in Beirut, who are

[4] The terms 'engagement' and 'participation' are used interchangeably to signify behavioural contributions.

[5] This research design was inspired by Gabiam's (2015) study of how Palestinians in France reflected on the concept of statelessness.

active in and important to the international aid sector for refugees in Lebanon, but rarely noticed. The focus lay on what Geertz (1973) has called 'thick' understanding of the interlocutors' experiences and interpretations.

A general paucity in terms of empirical research on the opinions of young Syrians – in particular when it comes to politics – already renders such anthropological investigation relevant (Mitchell, 2010). Pearlman (2016) has rightfully recognised that the uprisings in 2011 opened up truly new opportunities to access "the reflections of ordinary [Syrian] citizens", formerly unattainable "due to their reluctance to speak about politics", despite the bitterness of this statement in light of the devastating war (21). While the amount of literature on citizenship is overwhelming, empirical studies of substantive active citizenship are rare (Kenny et al., 2015, 13). In that sense, little attention has been paid to "instances of participation as situated practices" (Cornwall, 2002, ii). Academic scholarship on understanding constructions of citizenship in the Arab world remains particularly scarce (Kiwan, 2014).

The research explores the relevance of the theoretical concept of active citizenship from the perspective of a purposefully sampled group of research respondents. The subsequent two paragraphs will briefly condense the underlying theoretical framework and provide details on the process of data collection and analysis.

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

A vast and growing body of literature is concerned with questions of citizenship. It is therefore crucial to define the central concepts for this research, namely the concept of active citizenship and the concept of citizen identity. The latter is closely intertwined with citizenship theory, and of particular relevance to this study. This is owed to the fact that 'identifications' emerged as a central foundation for the engagements under investigation from the data analysis. The section ends with the study's definition of the term 'refugee'.

The introduction already introduced the conception of active youth citizenship as individual obligation in mainstream international development discourse. This reflects a definition of active citizenship by Kenny et al. (2015). The authors view activism as one of two subsets of active citizenship, which is based in intention, method and outcome on the actors' awareness for the (violated) rights of a certain group. Activism consists in explicitly claiming these rights, and thereby tackling existing power relations. The defining factor does not lie in the activism's scope or ambition, but rather in a certain consciousness for the political demand. This runs contrary to the second form of active citizenship as obligation, or *civil commitment*. The authors elaborate that "this type of active citizenship is not about political activism but rather about preserving important assets and services in the community, generating social capital and encouraging social cohesion. [...] [These citizens] often avoid confrontation and 'things political'" (Kenny et al., 2015, 79). As a matter

of fact, this does not preclude classifying an action as a form of active citizenship, even if it is not outspokenly associated with political intentions. To clarify, Boekelo (2016) has written that "political activity is not a matter of consciousness (nor contention), but rather just that: an activity that affects the status quo. It's in the effects of the things people do that the political lies" (240). Active citizenship of this kind mostly takes place at the local level and focuses on concrete issues and interpersonal relations (Onyx, Kenny & Brown, 2012).

A phenomenon frequently studied in conjunction with active citizenship is that of voluntary engagement. This field of study offers insights into questions about what motivates people to engage as active citizens. The respective literature converges on the duality of altruism and self-interest (cf. Hardill & Baines, 2011). At the heart of the discussion lies the role social capital plays for volunteers and their communities (Kenny et al., 2015, 88f.). Social capital is basically built in individual or collective networks of mutual support, which can have 'bonding' or 'bridging' character (Putnam, 2000). Bonding ties exist between members of rather intimate communities and are essential for feelings of personal identity and belonging. Bridging ties relate to those connections outside of immediate proximity, which are often more formal, since they cannot rely on a great amount of trust yet. Kenny et al. (2015) locate volunteers as "network nodes" with bonding as well as bridging capabilities, which attests them a "vital gatekeeping role" (91).

Turning to questions of citizen identity, the idea of civil commitment refers to an inner moral duty of showing respect and solidarity towards fellow citizens. This sense of moral duty is only partly a deliberative process, but greatly based on one's identification with other 'fellow' human beings, which "establishes moral salience, the feeling that moves us beyond a generalized sympathy at the plight of others to a felt imperative to act to alleviate another's suffering" (Monroe, 2015, 100). Boekelo (2016) transfers this individual perspective into the broader political realm when he speaks of 'imagined moral communities' to signify different forms of citizen identifications beyond the nation state, expanding Benedict Anderson's (1991) influential idea. In short, individual citizen identity is a multilayered construct of multiple subject positions, mutually produced by our experiences of identity verification and discourses about belonging in society (cf. Mouffe, 1992; 1995). Identity befits a central role in understanding how individuals become active citizens through feeling morally obligated to enhance the lives of fellow citizens of the imagined moral communities they associate with.

With respect to the term 'refugee', the study does not define it in solely legal terms. Lebanon hosts the highest number of displaced Syrians per capita. In fact, given the historically close ties between both countries, the diversity in socioeconomic backgrounds among Syrians in Lebanon is vast, but rarely perceived from outside the region. Chatty (2015) has found that many Syrians in Lebanon do not identify as refugees, even when they were displaced by the conflict. The term 'refugee' therefore becomes fluid and situational in

the context of this research: It entails a combination of displacement and socioeconomic hardship, derived from the need to resort to the respective aid provision. This distinction was employed by the research respondents themselves, although many were likewise forced to migrate due to the war in Syria, emphasising the heterogenous composition of the Syrian population in Lebanon.

**2.2. Data Collection and Analysis**

The main method of data collection was semi-structured interviewing in an informal setting. In addition, participant observations were conducted to complement and enrich the interview data. Overall, eleven interviews with in total twelve respondents were included as primary sources. The observation data was recorded as field notes and proved useful as contextual knowledge to substantiate or repudiate claims made in interviews. Non-probabilistic, purposeful sampling was applied to identify suitable interviewees. Considering the size of Beirut and the scope of the research project, convenience sampling following the snowball or chain referral technique proved as most useful to collect enough data within the amount of time available.

In the end, the sample was composed as follows: Five interviewees were female, seven were male. Ten interviewees were between the ages of 21 and 28, while two – one man and one woman – were in their thirties.[6] Eleven of the twelve respondents were of Syrian nationality; one exception was made for a man of Iraqi nationality who had lived in Syria for much of his life. While two interviewees had already lived in Lebanon prior to 2011 for educational reasons, seven interviewees entered the country after the outbreak of the uprisings in Syria. One woman had already studied in Beirut before 2011 and had returned to Syria, but was forced to come back to Lebanon. I do not possess information about the duration of stay of two remaining interviewees. All interviews were conducted in English language in a one-on-one setting. A conversational style that would not direct my interlocutors too much was evaluated as beneficial. Research respondents were free to withdraw from the interview or bypass questions at any time.[7] The interviews usually lasted between 45 and 60 minutes; after this amount of time, the key issues were covered and fatigue set in on both sides.

The research analysis concentrated on interpreting the collected data in-depth, considering that "the larger the number of people, the less detail that typically can emerge from any one individual" (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011, 174). The inductive approach advanced

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[6] This research defines 'young' as the age group from 18 to 30 years, which extends the prevalent UN definition of youth that ranges from 15 to 24 years (UNHCR, 2013). The extension is justified by sociological findings of a prolonged phase of youth in the Arab World (cf. Kiwan, 2015). It is important to keep in mind that a definition by age cannot fully capture the qualitative dimension of 'youthfulness' (cf. Bayat, 2010). For this reason, two interviewees of 33 and 36 years of age were included because no distinction could be made between their lifestyle in comparison to that of other respondents.

[7] For further information about research ethics see the respective guidelines of the Amsterdam Institute for Social Sciences Research (2013).

successively from open to axial coding and reassembled the data through selective coding to distil research findings connected to existing scholarship on active citizenship. The interview data was analysed in terms of content rather than linguistic nuances. The latter did not seem fruitful, bearing in mind that the interviews were conducted in a non-native language. This insight also guided the stage of transcription. Obvious grammatical errors as well as filler words and sounds were edited out with an eye towards the reader. This by no means implies that respondents' grasp of the English language was weak. They were fluent and confident expressing when they struggled linguistically; the grammatical imperfections would have attracted more attention than warranted when written out.

Anonymity was a vital aspect to some interviewees, due to the unstable political situation and the far-reaching influence of the security apparatus. In several cases, they faced personal difficulties with respect to their legal status in Lebanon; it was therefore important to keep a low profile. All interviewees have received pseudonyms, borrowed from the novels 'Cinnamon' by Samar Yazbek and 'A hand full of stars' by Rafik Schami. The gender of all participants was maintained.

## 3. Empirical Findings

This section outlines the most relevant empirical findings about firstly why the respondents engaged, secondly how these engagements represent a form of active citizenship, and thirdly how the specific context challenges this political classification of the engagements.

### 3.1. Motivations to Engage

The motivations for young, educated Syrians in Beirut to engage in the aid sector for refugees from Syria were indeed characterised by a duality of self-interest and altruism, as the following quote illustrates:

> Habib: "As young Syrians, we have two choices. The first one is to start working with the Syrian refugees here in Lebanon; the second choice is to go out there and to – I mean to Europe – and just continue our studies or maybe have better circumstances. As long as we are here, we cannot stay here and be silent. We should do something and work for Syrian refugees here. And I think, most of us are motivated enough to do so. We all have this ideal and that's why we focus more on NGOs and what they are doing for Syrian refugees.
>
> Interviewer: So it is to help other Syrians?
>
> H: Yeah.
>
> I: But do you also have the feeling that you learn from the job?
>
> H: Yeah, of course.
>
> I: So it's also a way of – in a difficult situation – educating yourself and learning on a job?
>
> H: [*Mutters approvingly.*] Yeah."

The respondents evaluated their engagements as beneficial for themselves on a professional and personal level: NGO jobs allowed some interviewees to make an income despite the dramatic youth unemployment rates in Lebanon. Mostly unpaid, their engagements nevertheless enabled respondents to employ their skills and enhance their curriculum vitae with work experience. The engagement was perceived as a possibility to 'be useful' at a time when other professional and educational alleys were put on hold. In addition, networks were built through engaging, which was valued as potentially helpful for future professional ambitions. In terms of personal development, respondents expressed how their voluntary engagement enhanced their psychological wellbeing and had energising effects in a situation, when many of them struggled with feelings of depression seeing their future in limbo.

That said, regarding the question if the engagements could be a form of active youth citizenship, it proved as especially insightful to consider that interviewees were motivated by two forms of citizen identification and felt the obligation to act upon these: Firstly, respondents expressed strong feelings of belonging and connection towards fellow Syrian citizens, caused by the uprisings in 2011 and their repercussions. Chalil's answer to one interview question stands as an example for the general finding that all respondents expressed to be motivated to engage in the aid sector by feelings of personal connection to other Syrians, based on their common origin, culture, and language:

> Interviewer: "Why did you want to do something when you came? What was your main motivation?
>
> Chalil: Because they are my people. They are Syrian people that I help. It's my duty actually to do something, not sit aside."

Moreover, the importance of contributing to long-term reconciliation among Syrians was emphasised. The interviews demonstrated that the respondents recognised their individual potential to positively influence how Syrians interacted with each other and to foster peacebuilding processes through their engagements.

This first strand of citizen identification as a Syrian whose duty it is to help other Syrians was complemented by a second strand of motivation, grounded in broader humanitarian ideals that demand to help 'all human beings'. The interviewees stated to endorse the ideals of human rights and general solidarity with all those in need. The duality of these two layers of identity construction shows in the following quote:

> Interviewer: "And is it also a motivation for you to continue the project because you are Syrian?
>
> Aboud: It's not the main motivation, but yeah, of course. It's one of the motivations. Like, if someone came to me now and said, what's your motivation to do this, I

> wouldn't say because I'm Syrian – because this is something humanitarian. [...]It's definitely one of my motivations. I loved that I'm helping something that is related to my country, you know. Because it was so sad for me; it was just by luck that I wasn't one of them. Because I came from a normal background, and I just had a chance. Someone offered me a scholarship in [*name of a prestigious university in Beirut*], so I was in the same level, so that's why. That's one motivation why I kept up the work."

Maha's reflections on her choice to engage for Syrian refugees depict that she perceived the two motives as conflicting:

"I know this is rude to say, I hate this kind of nationalities thing, but there is some kind of connection. Like when I go to a house, a Syrian family, and when I visit them, they go like, 'oh, you're Syrian. Syrians are all for each other.' You know, there is this kind of understanding. I'm very privileged that I study in [*name of her university*] but I sort of understand also what you're going through."

Overall, the motivations for young, educated Syrians in Beirut to engage in the aid sector for refugees from Syria are characterised by a duality of self-interest (related to personal and professional benefit) and altruism (related to a binary form of identity construction, which can be understood as a double-layered, at times conflicting form of both Syrian and global citizenship). The upcoming paragraph assesses how the engagements can be seen as a form of active citizenship based on these findings.

### 3.2. The Engagements as Forms of Active Citizenship

The description of the interviewees' motivations to engage mirrors two ways of understanding voluntary engagement as 'unpaid labour' and 'serious leisure', following Rochester, Ellis Paine and Howlett (2010). The authors have however suggested a third way of understanding volunteering, namely as 'activism'. This idea leads us back to the concept of active citizenship as political practice.

In fact, most interviewees stayed clear of viewing their engagement as political. Only very few respondents candidly linked their engagement in the aid sector to a political stance. Therefore, it is insightful to take the theoretical input by Kenny et al. (2015) into account, who frame active citizenship as obligation and civil commitment. It has been stated earlier that it is typical for this form of active citizenship to "avoid confrontation and 'things political'" (79). Mariam interpreted engagements in the aid sector along these lines when she said, "these are just Syrians who think they want to help the others, who are better-off than the others, and they think it is their responsibility to help. It's not about political issues." When looking back at what motivated the research respondents to engage, many indeed expressed this sense of horizontal citizenship obligation to help fellow Syrians. This affirms the assumption that horizontal citizenship ties become especially

firm when conventional citizenship is in a blurred or ambiguous state, as in the context of displacement.

Overall, many theoretical features of active citizenship as civil commitment reappear within the empirical data: Respondents emphasised that they placed great value on interpersonal relations – like Maha who said, “I don’t like impersonal relationships basically, and I don’t like people feeling that someone is better than them. So when I go, I don’t just go and give them stuff and then leave. No, we have lunch, we talk, you know, I have connections with these families.” The interviewees concentrated on tackling concrete issues at the local level rather than advocating for abstract political claims. Moreover, social cohesion rather than – possibly dividing – political struggle was targeted as vital in the current situation. The diverse self-interested and altruistic forms of motivation furthermore coalesce on the accumulation of social capital, be they in the form of professional networks or nets of solidarity that foster a sense of Syrian community. Leena reaffirmed that it was seen as a matter of fortune to be spared from the hardship of those in need of aid, and that this imposed a moral duty to help, “you know, it’s like by chance, someone with a story they have. [...] So you have to help.” This echoes Monroe’s (2015) research result that identification with fellow citizens evokes active citizenship because it establishes moral salience.

Having said this, the foregoing section already alludes to the observation that this moral salience, this sense of civil commitment, is not exclusively reserved for fellow Syrian citizens, but also entails the notion of being committed to humanity in general. Two ‘imagined moral communities’ can thus be identified, illustrating the multilayered nature of identification in the case of this study. As the research respondents navigate both worlds – that of the educational elite in a globalised world as well as that of a currently somehow uprooted Syrian population – they manage a balancing act between at times incompatible subject positions. Engagement in this hybrid position requires the “dynamic process of active negotiation in relation to context” Percy-Smith (2015) ascribed to active citizenship (4).

The finding of ambiguous forms of identification is not negatively connoted, as it entails the ‘gatekeeping role’ suggested by Kenny et al. (2015). The interviewees are capable to accumulate different forms of bonding and bridging social capital, and established horizontal as well as vertical networks (although horizontal ties prove to be more relevant here, as bonds with fellow Syrian and global citizens). They would thus represent ideal young, active citizens with whom the international development sector could cooperate, as it aims to do according to mainstream discourse. Still, it emerged from the data that political reluctance and sentiments of disappointment, discord, and distrust prevailed with respect to the internationalised aid sector in Lebanon. The respondents’ general reluctance towards positioning their engagements as political, needed to be explored in light of the inherent political meaning of the concept of citizenship.

### 3.3. Active Citizenship in a Depoliticising Climate

As the introduction states, a citizenship lens politicises all matters and processes of communal life. To apply citizenship as an analytical category means to study political subjectivity, as citizenship revolves around "the ways in which the kernel of any political order – the political subject – is brought into being" (Isin & Nyers, 2014, 8). To the contrary, a general tendency among most of the interviewees to distance themselves from all things political was observed and thus employed as a starting point to reflect on the frictions between theory and empirical findings.

As a first reason, the frequent omission of the label political springs from the local context with restricted, in many ways dangerous, conditions for overt political engagement. A lack of accountability, arbitrary modes of governance and widespread corruption have severely harmed people's trust in institutionalised politics. Nadia stated, "I don't like politics; I don't hear news – because I was raised like this." Ismat described the omnipresent backdrop of fear in the Syrian communities in Lebanon, which is a reason for NGOs to emphasise to be not political: "People don't want to talk about that because they are afraid, either of one party in Syria, or parties here, or they're just afraid – khalas [*here 'enough'*] – we don't want to talk about this topic." These circumstances can explain why many respondents positioned themselves and their respective NGOs as apolitical. In general, 'being political' was equated with 'being politically affiliated', meaning association or dissociation with the existing political factions. The designation 'political' was almost exclusively ascribed to what can be understood as 'official politics', leading to the dilemma that being political implied to be somehow complicit in a nepotistic system, despised by many young, educated Syrians and Lebanese. In contrast to the quarrelling political system, respondents positioned their engagement and "humanitarian work" in general in a distinct sphere that is "not political" and "just humanitarian".

Nevertheless, a quote by Maha alleges political relevance to engaging with Syrian refugees: "In a big way it is political but I don't think they know it's political. I don't think that most people that are working with NGOs – like me – have the intention of it being political. Our intention is purely humanitarian." Mahmoud similarly stated:

> "People are actually not aware of the differences between saying your opinion and working [in] the civil society, working as an activist, especially if you are working directly with the communities. I mean, [...] you can't be working with the community and your political point of view is refusing part of your community, you know, so you better keep that aside and work with the community. [...] You got to put everything back because you're here to build, to build this community, to fix, to fill the gaps, and even to work on people accepting each other. If you want to work on doing change, okay, at the end, it will lead to political change at some point, we are going to change rules, but you can't enforce."

These statements corroborate the foregoing analysis of the engagements at hand as active citizenship because they show that even decidedly apolitical engagement influences the political processes. Despite his emphasis to 'put politics back', Mahmoud believes that his engagement can eventually effect political change. This resonates with Boekelo's (2016) perspective that "it's in the effects of the things people do that the political lies" (240).

In summary, two tendencies recurred throughout the interviews with respect to being political within the engagements. The first standpoint laid out above was more common and proposes that the engagement is and should be 'purely humanitarian', following the principles international humanitarianism. To the contrary, a small second group of respondents traced the humanitarian mission back to the roots of the uprisings in 2011, and highlighted the need for political struggle in the form of overt activism. But even this politically committed standpoint admits that engagement in the aid sector cannot be politically effective. This failure is in parts interpreted as stemming from patronising practices within the internationalised aid sector. Against its claims to be neutral, the aid sector was perceived to be entangled in politics.

What can be extracted from the interviews is that the majority of research respondents tended to not perceive the international humanitarian response to the refugee influx from Syria into Lebanon as 'neutral' and truly interested in supporting the Syrian people on an equal footing – both regarding the refugee population and Syrians engaged in the aid sector. 'Politics' – as broader geopolitical interests and inner-sector priorities guided by the international aid economy – were seen to play a decisive role. Power relations were clearly felt, but perceived to be ignored or withheld by the dominant actors in the aid sector, namely international donors and INGOs. It is however important to bear in mind that the internationalised aid sector was interpreted in a unanimous and unequivocal manner. Some of the interviewees also expressed gratitude for international efforts and commended fruitful examples of cooperation between local and international actors; both accounts even occurred within the same interview. Hence, this article does not aim to draw a frontline between international and local actors, or to demonise the international side. The research findings still reveal a distinct gap between what international development discourse preaches, and what the international actors in the aid sector for Syrian refugees are perceived to practice in Lebanon. Viewing that the boundaries between humanitarian and development aid blur in the case of this increasingly protracted displacement, and given that the funding for both approaches stem from at least partly identical donors, it has been found to be relevant and necessary to elaborate on the fact that the empirical findings question some of the assumptions on which international development discourse of promoting active youth citizenship bases itself. The upcoming discussion section tackles this paradox.

## 4. Discussion

To view the research respondents' engagements as instances of active citizenship implies that they acted as political subjects within the aid sector. It has been found striking that being political was nevertheless either avoided or perceived as restricted, also by certain practices within the internationalised aid sector, although fostering active citizenship serves as a strategy to realise participation, self-determination, and responsibility in the international development sector. Empowerment of the individual is even said to lie at the heart of development policies.

As a first point of critique, it can be stated that the experiences of young, educated Syrians with international aid practices for refugees from Syria in Lebanon were found to contradict these aspirations. The respondents felt restricted rather than empowered as political subjects, which for one hampered the practical effectiveness of international aid. Unequal power relations were secondly by-passed under the veil of a depoliticised narrative of global citizenship and humanitarianism. This promotes an incomplete, depoliticised version of active citizenship, namely one that solely expects from young Syrians to fulfil their (trans)national citizen obligations, without ensuring them their rights. The finding, that active citizenship as civil commitment, and therefore obligation, constituted the most prevalent manifestation of active citizenship in the case of this research can be taken as an indicator that young, educated Syrians are not sufficiently supported as active citizens in a holistic sense. The question thus needs to be posed to those shaping international development discourse if they effectively practice what they preach, or if the intertwined levels of humanitarian aid, development cooperation, and diplomacy rather impede each other on the ground.

The mismatch was further illustrated when respondents reported their perspectives on the aid sector as an economic space, in which profit overruled purpose. Such neoliberal absorption has also been criticised as a general problem in international development. In our case, the competitive climate blighted newly emerging signs of Syrian civil society, which rather demanded support on at par (instead of the ongoing brain drain caused by the current hostile conditions), given a decades-long lack of experience. Personal, negative experiences with international development actors can severely harm a trustful relationship between the international community and young, ambitious Syrians. It is surprising that this does not gain more attention, given that levels of trust towards Western actors have been found to be rather low in countries of the Middle East (Staeheli & Nagel, 2012). Moreover, given that the preceding empirical chapter detected that many respondents identified with the ideals of global citizenship, it can be assumed that the interviewees were sympathetic of the concept of liberal democracy, which was indeed advocated by many young Syrians during the uprisings in 2011. The scenario of alienated Syrian youth thus ought to be seen as moving in an entirely unfavourable direction

against the backdrop of international development discourse on active youth citizenship, also when recalling the alleged global fight against extremist ideologies. A chasm can be observed here in terms of what is being intended and what is being achieved. The 'gatekeeping role' of young, educated Syrians should be reason enough to include them in development efforts to a much greater extent.

Much of the theoretical literature agrees on the importance citizen identities play for active citizenship. Identification is even seen as the indispensable prerequisite of active citizenship. As a consequence, if the cultivation of citizen identity is prevented, authentic active citizenship cannot emerge. According to a pluralist, democratic conception of international development – which can be assumed, given the discursive elements of participation, human rights, and active citizenship – it ought to be a crucial concern of international interventions to foster the construction of multifaceted, self-determined citizen identities that still allow for political community in a context of diversity and conflict (cf. Mouffe, 1992; 1995). This was not found to be the case in the case under investigation. Both the workings of the commodified internationalised aid sector and the politically intricate circumstances at the local level dispersed political identity formation among young, educated Syrians. The international community therefore exerts a certain 'soft power' on those young Syrians it claims to empower (cf. Nye after Gaventa and Tandon, 2010, 8). This amplifies the difficulties of reconciling multiple layers of identification some interviewees raised.

## 5. Conclusion

This article firstly concludes that the engagements of young, educated Syrians in the aid sector for refugees from Syria in Lebanon under investigation can be seen as forms of active citizenship. The respondents identified with the refugee population and fulfilled their citizenship obligations as fellow Syrians – mainly in the sense of *civil commitment* – within the aid sector. More activist forms of active citizenship, based on an explicit struggle for rights, were less pronounced. The fact that the respondents referred to values of human dignity and rights, was interpreted as another layer of identification as global citizens. This dual identity assigns the respondents a hybrid, 'gatekeeping' role. The finding that the research respondents identified as global citizens practically demands that the international community as respective polity equally fulfils its obligations to guarantee citizens' rights which then correlate with the human rights framework.

A second conclusion derives from the complexities of *being political* in the research context. Being political is inherent in the concept of active citizenship, and does not necessarily demand political consciousness. The restrictions to the respondents' political subjectivity, exerted by local actors as well as the international aid community, however demonstrate that the active citizenship engagements under investigation are situated in a highly depoliticising context. It is argued that the dogma of seeming humanitarian neu-

trality and the dominance of economic reasoning within the aid sector obfuscate power structures and hinder multilayered identity formation as the basis of hybrid active youth citizenship.

This causes the dissemination of a depoliticised form of active youth citizenship, which leads to the third conclusion that current practices within the aid sector in Lebanon actually hamper what international development discourse aims to achieve, namely responsible and effective active youth citizenship. The current practices run contrary to the intentions to empower local actors, and leave young Syrians feeling powerless and disappointed.

The potential gatekeeping roles young, educated Syrians can take up in processes of peacebuilding and inclusive development are ignored, and even jeopardised. This can have detrimental effects in a context where levels of distrust towards international, often Western, agendas are already high, and anti-Western groups tout for attention. Distrust can further be amplified since exclusion feeds into the narrative promoted by the Syrian authorities that the counterparts for international cooperation are limited to themselves and terrorist groups; this ignores the legitimate efforts of Syrian civil society.

With respect to practical conclusions, the author suggests that influential actors in the field of international development should explicitly address the unequal power relations found in this study. Concretely, they need to seek a more holistic approach towards promoting active youth citizenship that includes monitoring of how other international interventions encroach on development intentions, and respective governance. In addition, the promotion of active citizenship cannot be framed as detached from local political context. The latter has to be taken into account and incorporated into programming, without being used as an excuse to deny global citizens their rights to active participation in the international community.

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