

From voice to encounter: Cultural relations through debating with young Jordanians

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Foreword

I am delighted at the release and publication of the first contributions to what I hope will be an important collection on cultural relations and the mission of the British Council. Not always easy to describe and at times even more difficult to measure, when you see cultural relations in action you know what it is about: working over the long term with individuals, communities and institutions in a spirit of mutuality.

Our mission is not only about what we do but also how we engage. This is what distinguishes a cultural relations approach from other forms of public or cultural diplomacy. It is about activities and opportunities, but it is also about how relationships are formed and nourished. And in our case as the British Council it happens in over 100 countries, working with the English language and through cultural engagement in the arts, education and skills.

This collection provides an overview and analysis of diverse examples of this distinctive cultural relations approach and how it is used to further the British Council's charitable objects, and how the approach benefits both the UK and the people with whom we work. The ways of working apply whether convening the global leaders of international higher education, or building partnerships with civil society organisations or artists within a single country. The cultural relations thread also applies across the British Council's largest programmes, including those such as English language teaching which deliver income.

Over the past decade the British Council has been consolidating its activities in order to increase the commonality across different countries and regions. Yet a cultural relations approach will always necessitate some variety, because mutuality involves degrees of exchange, co-production and adaptation to local needs. An example in this collection shows how in 2016 within Shakespeare Lives, a global programme celebrating the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, and operating to consistent global production values, a small, country-based arts investment in Nigeria saw the production and touring of a locally relevant Shakespeare play performed in Nigerian Pidgin.

The collection also reflects on the long view and includes two contributions which draw on historical investigation to understand the British Council's role over many decades in Myanmar (Burma) and the Soviet Union/Russia, drawing on deep scholarship of post-colonialism and the Cold War respectively. It is to be applauded that the editors and authors allow such critical reflection, avoiding the risk of self-congratulation and enabling organisational learning and growth.

Reading these contributions together as a collection reminds me that while all these different areas constitute cultural relations in their own right, together they add up to more than the sum of their parts. Hard work in one area leads to networks and builds the trust that enables the British Council to undertake activities in different areas and with diverse kinds of partners.

It is not always easy to quantify cultural relations or the impact of an individual institution like the British Council over the arc of time and geography. Today, great effort is put into evaluating both the programmatic and organisational impact of our work. Yet the methodologies to assess the effects of multiple decades of engagement are still developing. Friends made, understanding gained and trust increased are things we know to be important. Proving their worth is harder.

Historical investigation helps, but in the end, as Martin Rose says of cultural relations in his essay in this collection: 'It has been said of diplomacy that its success can be measured by wars not fought ... The same might be said of the British Council, though it operates at a more human level with individuals and communities rather than nations.' Seen in this way, cultural relations is as much about the absence of negatives as the presence of positives. Cultural relations delivers the calm, reflective response as well as the bustling, creative one. This collection, authored by both well-known scholars and authoritative practitioners, shows both. And it does so in a way that I hope you find to be accessible, enlightening and compelling. I commend it to you with enthusiasm.

Sir Ciarán Devane
Chief Executive, *British Council*

Preface to the Cultural Relations Collection

The British Council is often viewed as an organisation that ‘does’, and it does a great deal, but it is also a ‘thinking’ and learning organisation and in recent years has begun to increase its investment in commissioning, using and sometimes undertaking research. It does so for three key reasons.

As an organisation that provides thought leadership in cultural relations it is important that the British Council contributes to, demonstrates and shares a thorough understanding of cultural relations, and of how this approach contributes to the United Kingdom’s attraction and trusted connections in international relations. It does this, for example, through regular studies on the influence and measurement of soft power that track perceptions of the UK, particularly among young people across the world.

Second, we commission and undertake research as trusted expert practitioners in the thematic areas in which we work: in the arts, international education, English language teaching and assessment, and activities undertaken largely with young people in communities and civil society organisations, such as through the Active Citizens Programme. In each of these areas we convene informed debates based on the provision, sharing or curating of new knowledge, in many cases disseminated in well-regarded publications and series.

A third reason is to increase the evidence and understanding for ourselves and others of what works to generate cultural relations impact and why. We seek to demonstrate engagement of the highest standard to supporters and partners, while also building our capacity as an organisation to benefit from using research and evidence, both our own and work by others’, in order to make strategic decisions, engage global stakeholders, and exchange knowledge. Together, each of these research areas contributes useful new knowledge to further our charitable purpose through generating new insights and understanding in areas relevant to our work, in turn enhancing our ability to influence policy or to impact debates.

This cultural relations collection arose out of an early initiative when the British Council first established the small research team that would become part of the new global function led from the Research and Policy Insight Directorate. In commissioning a series of in-house and external studies it had three key aims. The first was to clarify our understanding of cultural relations as an encompassing venture that permeated all our work, whether specific to a sector or not and whether income generating or not. Here the contributions on English language and on assessment are particularly illustrative. The second aim was to provide an opportunity to country offices and regional teams, through a competitive bidding process, to commission research on initiatives that were able to illustrate a cultural relations approach in action at a local level. The fascinating contribution on Shakespeare in Nigerian Pidgin stems from this call. A third aim was to grapple with the challenges of understanding and demonstrating impact when reviewing the British Council’s work in an area of activity or in a country over a long period of time. The contributions on science diplomacy and on Myanmar fit here and demonstrate the richness of reviewing cultural relations over time, alongside the challenges of making assessments across the long arc of history.

This cultural relations collection has provided an opportunity to show the work of the British Council in its rich diversity, linked by this common thread and demonstrating that as with the best partnerships, mutuality in approach often produces things that are not what were originally designed, which are often better as a result and that sometimes grow in ways over which no individual or organisation has control.

Dan Shah

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Editor's note

Young Arab Voices (YAV) was a debating programme initiated in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011. It was a joint initiative of the British Council and the Anna Lindh Foundation, funded by the British government's Arab Partnership Fund. The programme had both a domestic and a regional profile in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan, the focus of this contribution. YAV was informed by the view that a soft-skills focus helps 'foster a culture of dialogue, enhances critical thinking, increases resilience to radicalization, and even strengthens effective social and political engagement' (Knox & Donaldson, 2016).

An evaluation, commissioned by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office towards the end of the YAV programme, examined how debate and intercultural interactions changed the way young people thought about other cultures and people from different backgrounds. This evaluation concluded that YAV – among a number of youth programmes at the time – was one of the most successful examples of a skills transfer and training initiative (Spencer & Aldouri, 2016).

A focus on debate was considered particularly relevant given the context in 2011: the rise of extremism, the influx of refugees alongside unemployment, a lack of freedom of expression, and poor education, all of which served to threaten security and stability in the region (Aldouri, 2016). Debating encourages skills in argumentation, communication and understanding, while the debating process can also entail addressing difficult issues – as was the case with YAV. The debating format allowed controversial and conflictual positions to come to the fore, and participants and audience members were steered in the direction of understanding and problem-solving. YAV was a real success, although there were lessons to be derived. The strong platform it provided, as well as the learnings, informed a larger and more ambitious successor programme, Young Mediterranean Voices (YMV), largely funded by the European Union and co-ordinated by the Anna Lindh Foundation.

Debating, one of the oldest democratic traditions in the world, involves deliberation in the public sphere and entails the exercise of public reason, usually among equals (Habermas, 1990). Problem-solving occurs through the debating format when opposing arguments and public reasoning lead to new perspectives or novel solutions. Deliberation is widely posited as a central pillar of democratic reasoning, and the habits of public reasoning and problem-solving were aptly displayed throughout YAV and form the basis of YMV.

This contribution to the cultural relations collection focuses on the impact of YAV in Jordan. It draws on responses to YAV derived from selected participants and those the programme touched, interviewed through processes of evaluation and review. These interviews revealed both resonance and dissonance. Cultural resonances included recognition of the value of debate, but acute awareness of context (Lim, 2002, pp. 69–87). For example, although the debating format followed the British parliamentary structure, the execution included employing Arabic as the language of debate, while also reflecting Jordanian cultural practices in the debating format. Topics ensured a fit with the relative pluralism of Jordanian politics in the context of the Arab world historically. Dissonance came from the suspicions regarding any foreign entity operating in Jordan, and the history of colonialism, which continues to inform intercultural interactions.

This contribution shows how the YAV programme navigated intercultural adaptation and exchange, with participants being trained in a format that both fitted and challenged conventional cultural practices and, in the process, impressed and sometimes influenced the country's decision makers.

Introduction

This contribution to the British Council's cultural relations collection draws on two well-timed and constructively critical evaluations of Young Arab Voices (YAV), a programme of debate and dialogue that was initially conceived as a way of engaging young people in the wake of the Arab Spring or Arab Awakening of 2011. At the time, tensions ran high and the potential for protracted youth violence was feared across many countries in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region. There was also broad recognition that many young people in the region had to look forward to unemployment, limited opportunities and widespread apathy when the heady days of youth protest came to an end. YAV was a response to this and an attempt to engage young people through debate and dialogue as a way of enhancing their voice and fostering their engagement in constructive encounter.

One evaluation report was specifically focused on the work of YAV in Jordan. It was commissioned from the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) by the British Council in Jordan and was conducted by Floresca Karanàsou, one of the co-authors of this essay (INTRAC, 2017). It followed an evaluation that reviewed YAV across the whole MENA region. The latter was conducted by Chatham House on behalf of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) of the British government, one of the original and major funders of YAV through its Arab Partnership Fund.² Both studies informed subsequent discussions on the future of YAV and related programmes in the region and, together with a number of other evaluations of internationally driven youth-focused interventions at the time, fed into the recasting of YAV into its successor programme, Young Mediterranean Voices (YMV). In what follows, the introduction and experience of YAV in Jordan is reviewed as well as the responses of young Jordanians to the programme. The last sections discuss the lessons learned from YAV and the design and roll-out of YMV.

²As mentioned by Diala Smadi, Programme Manager, British Council, Jordan, it was also funded by the Open Society, and other organisations contributed financial and further resources. These included the League of Arab States, the European Union, the Soliya-UN Alliance of Civilisation Media Fund, the International Debate and Education Association, BBC Arabic, and (in some countries) ministries of education and ministries of youth (3 April 2017).

Young Arab Voices

Young Arab Voices was an intervention that used debating as a vehicle through which young people in selected countries of North Africa and the Levant could raise their voice, hone their debating skills and gain the confidence to make themselves heard. Working through partnerships with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and educational establishments (both universities and schools), YAV set up debating clubs and forums and provided them with a set of training tools for debate. There are many forms of debate and types of debating competition around the world. YAV was based on the UK's English-Speaking Union's (ESU) 'Mace', the oldest and largest debating competition for schools in England and one that has been widely adopted globally. Mace aims to hone students' debating skills in an enjoyable, competitive environment and, working in teams, for students to enhance their speech-writing, public speaking and critical thinking skills.

YAV was devised by the British Council, a cultural relations organisation, and the Anna Lindh Foundation, which was established to promote understanding through dialogue. It operated in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia, working with people aged between 18 and 28 years old (British Council, 2013). Its workplan comprised three elements: debating, capacity building, and mobility and exposure. This third component aimed to provide opportunities to attend events in other countries and provide exposure to existing well-established debating cultures: one of YAV's expressed outcomes was to promote 'regional and international collaboration', pursued through 'exposure, support, advocacy, events, conferences, meetings' (British Council, 2013). Between its inception in 2011 and 2015–16, YAV carried out more than 107 debates of varying sizes and upwards of 142 training sessions, which trained more than 3,740 young debaters (British Council & Anna Lindh Foundation, YoungArabVoices.org, p. 3). Its success is testified to by the fact that it was followed by a successor programme, YMV. However, lessons were also learned from this early initiative. In the following section we discuss the progress of YAV in relation to a single country, Jordan, where, between 2011 and 2015, the programme reached thousands of young people (British Council, Jordan, *YAV Jordan Highlights*).

Jordan: YAV and youth programmes

Jordan is considered to be a relatively stable country in what is often a volatile region. Nevertheless, like other countries in MENA it was rattled by the events of the Arab Spring. Jordan is not alone in facing a youth bulge: 70 per cent of the population is under the age of 30, and 22 per cent of those young people are between 15 and 24 years old. Employment prospects are limited and political and economic power remain in the hands of the older generation. Across the region, establishment bodies were shaken by what was a predominantly youthful uprising and they cracked down. In Jordan, new laws restricting the publication and communication of news, and modifications to existing laws on political affiliation were put in place to enable the government to respond to arising stability/security-threatening factors (Abu-Rish, 2017).³ An earlier measure dating back to 2008 insisted any NGO must obtain approval from the government before receiving foreign funding, stating the source, amount and purpose of such funds (Carothers & Brechenmacher, p. 8). This had a significant impact on Jordanian civil society organisations (CSOs). It was in this broad context that YAV was conceived and began to operate. It is important to bear in mind, particularly when drawing comparisons with Young Mediterranean Voices that these reactions were time-bound and that the broad national context has relaxed considerably. Indeed, Jordan's Ministry for Youth is currently a partner in the successor programme, YMV. Additionally, the ambitious youth strategy issued recently by the ministry demonstrates the willingness to invest in young people's skills and future (Jordan Ministry of Youth, 2019).

YAV was just one of a number of internationally funded programmes targeting young people in the region at the time. Nor was YAV the only debating programme in the country. Although YAV broke new ground, its take up in 2011 and 2012 led other organisations to establish similar debating ventures. These included programmes falling under the aegis of the All Jordan Youth Commission of the King Abdullah Fund for Development and the Princess Basma Youth Resource Centre (JOHUD), which provided young trainees with debating skills as part of a variety of other training. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) also worked with debating but provided additional resources with a view to helping young people undertake advocacy, while the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) helped them establish their own social initiatives in their communities. While these comparator programmes put much emphasis on reaching youth across the whole country, they differed from YAV in that none offered opportunities for their participants to interact with non-Jordanians, a key feature of YAV. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) also developed a debating training manual based on the British Council's Mace debating format, and translated it into Arabic with examples drawn from the local context.

³In 2014, the 2006 Anti-Terrorism Law was amended to include acts of terrorism aimed at 'disturbing the public order', which was broadly interpreted as a crackdown on freedom of speech.

Both internationally and in the national context, working with young people was becoming an increasingly popular and crowded field. The Jordanian government put together a coalition of Jordanian organisations to work on the implementation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2250 (UN, 2015). Focused on youth, peace and security, this resolution urged member states to increase the representation of young people in decision making at all levels. Furthermore, prior to the adoption of the UNSC resolution, under the sponsorship of the Jordanian Crown Prince, Jordan organised a Global Forum on Youth and Security, in August 2015. Together these activities and interventions reflected a more engaged and inclusive attitude towards young people in Jordan and this was something that facilitated the development of the more ambitious YMV.

The role of the British Council in Jordan was particularly important early on. Between 2006 and 2009, it had run a programme on public diplomacy through partnerships with NGOs, which among other things provided young people with an opportunity to develop their understanding of debating. This was followed by a further British Council project run in co-operation with the Jordanian Ministry of Education that developed debating in Jordanian schools. Over a period of six to eight months, the schools' programme trained teachers and conducted debates in 24 schools across Jordan, with the English-Speaking Union providing the trainers and training materials. The British Council analysis indicated that it was *older* young people rather than those of school-going age who would benefit most from opportunities to debate with each other. Moreover, it was thought that they would also be more likely to be heard by decision makers. As a result, the British Council decided to focus on debating partnerships with NGOs and universities, and the idea of a youth debating programme across the MENA region as a whole took shape.

Cultural relations and debate

In its original format, YAV was developed in line with the United Kingdom's foreign policy priorities for the MENA region, and as is clear from the evaluation conducted by Chatham House, providing alternatives to youth radicalisation was one of the preoccupations. Yet, YAV was also a British Council programme and was conducted with the organisation's cultural relations approach squarely front of mind, alongside the Anna Lindh Foundation's focus on constructive dialogue. It is worth reflecting a moment on the role of debate and its compatibility with a cultural relations approach. Debating speaks to two major pillars of intercultural communication, namely cultural relations and cultural diffusion, each of which is briefly reviewed.

Cultural relations

Cultural relations lie at the core of the mission of the British Council. They are often seen as a key part of 'soft power': the ability to attract and co-opt, to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 1990, pp. 153–171). Rivera (2015, p. 11), defines cultural relations as 'the mutual exchange of culture between peoples to develop long-term relationships, trust and understanding for the purpose of generating genuine goodwill and influence abroad'. According to Rivera, the outcomes of cultural relations are 'greater connectivity, better mutual understanding, more and deeper relationships, mutually beneficial transactions and enhanced sustainable dialogue between states, peoples, non-state actors and cultures'. The practice of cultural relations has often been seen as elite-to-elite cultural contact. However, more recently it has come to be understood much more as people-to-people contact and engagement, often outside state control (Rivera, 2015, p. 7). The proponents of YAV were keen for it not to be seen as an elite project, and in Jordan a central tenet of YAV was to extend opportunities beyond elite enclaves in the urban centres and to make it available to young people across the country.

The role of British Council is significant in that it has a long-standing history of engagement in Jordan and is trusted both by government and elites as well as by the general public, including more marginalised groups. By offering training in debate, the intention was to continue in a vein of widening participation, and to promote opportunities in debate and for ongoing dialogue and engagement on the part of a broad range of young Jordanians.

Cultural diffusion

There are many forms of debate, some specific to particular cultures and countries. As such, debate brings with it cultural predilections and influences that in turn can lead to changes in people's perceptions, whether participants or audiences. According to Spencer-Oatey (2012, p. 13), an innovation such as the introduction of a debating culture is said to be most likely to be diffused into a recipient culture if:

1. it is seen to be superior to what already exists
2. it is consistent with existing cultural patterns
3. it is easily understood
4. it is able to be tested on an experimental basis
5. its benefits are clearly visible to a relatively large number of people.

So, while the British Council and the Anna Lindh Foundation were both committed to working in the spirit and practice of reciprocity and mutuality, the values of the organisations necessarily place a normative value on reasoned argument and dialogue. As such, the promotion of debate is not neutral. It was with this in mind that the evaluation by INTRAC, commissioned by the British Council, sought to understand how the YAV debating programme was received and interpreted by young Jordanians themselves.

The fact that YAV was funded in part by the FCO meant YAV was perceived not simply as a vehicle for cultural diffusion but also as serving British foreign policy interests in the MENA region. This was despite an expressed aim of providing skills and opportunities that could empower young people to play a more active and engaged role as citizens in their countries. Was this perception justified? British Council reports aimed at UK domestic audiences did reinforce this view. For example, following the first iteration of YAV, the British Council's 2015–16 Annual Report referred to the Middle East as a place of strategic importance to the UK and, as such, it regarded its own work in the MENA region as helping '...to make the UK safer and more secure [...] through programmes to address the causes of extremism and provide alternative pathways for young people' (British Council, 2016). The Chatham House evaluation undertaken for the FCO in 2016 was even more explicit. It comprised a brief stocktaking of YAV across the whole MENA region, relying on interviews and focus group discussions with YAV participants, programme alumni, and trainers, as well as insights from key stakeholders and observers of the programme over its five years of existence. The aim was to inform the design of follow-up programmes as well as other youth-oriented initiatives in the MENA region. A foreign policy rationale undoubtedly permeated this evaluation:

External assumptions made about the risks of youth radicalization – above all, affiliation to groups such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – often fail to reflect the more commonly expressed desire of many young people to seek ownership and agency in shaping the future of their communities and societies as active and constructive citizens (Spencer & Aldouri, 2016).

As evidence from the INTRAC evaluation report showed, a foreign policy interest was identified by many of those who were interviewed. Although lacking subtlety, this nevertheless was generally regarded with pragmatism. Indeed, many of the aims of YAV coincided with those of the Jordanian government and, once conditions settled down and the policy environment could be loosened, it joined as a funding and delivery partner for the successor programme in Jordan, YMV.

Moreover, as we shall see, while the aims and intentions of YAV may sometimes have seemed to some like cultural diffusion, a process whereby ideas and tools from one culture are applied, adapted and reproduced in another, an underlying commitment to mutuality, and a spirit of shared learning and reciprocity informed the programme in action and, as such, a cultural relations approach underpinned the majority of YAV encounters. Most particularly, learning from YAV infused the evaluations and informed successor activities.

Intercultural interactions in YAV: Opportunities and challenges

This section analyses the cultural relations aspects of the YAV initiative in Jordan, drawing on the INTRAC evaluation report. Although the evaluation did not specifically focus on cultural relations, many of the responses were nevertheless directly relevant to understanding the cultural relations approach adopted, while also providing a rich source of data on cultural diffusion. Evidence for the report was collected primarily through semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion conducted in the capital city, Amman, between 25 February and 2 March 2017. There were 26 interviewees, drawn from a wide range of stakeholders including members of YAV's National Advisory Group (NAG).⁴ The NAG was a 15-member committee formed in 2016 to advise British Council project staff on the nature and progress of the debating competitions, developing new ideas and partnerships, and target groups. It comprised a selection of YAV ambassadors, former YAV participants who had become trainers or adjudicators and continued to be involved with YAV either formally or informally. The focus group discussion specifically included five YAV participants who were not NAG members.

In a relatively crowded field of youth programmes, YAV shared with a number of other youth-oriented programmes in the country the desire to create opportunities for interaction among Jordanians of different genders and social backgrounds. A unique aspect of YAV was the additional opportunity it afforded some participants for transnational cultural interaction, both Jordanians with non-Arabs: notably debaters from the UK, as well as Jordanians with youth from other countries in the region. YAV held two MENA regional debating competitions per year where eight to ten Jordanians participated as debaters or adjudicators. Further, three Jordanian trainers were sent to a regional workshop in 2015 to join other Arab YAV trainers in compiling a training manual. The UK Week afforded visits to the UK for a few Jordanians, with some also attending a training of trainers (ToT) event in Greece.

Interactions between Jordanians and non-Arabs

A key objective of YAV was to promote interaction between the people of Jordan and the UK. Opportunities were limited but appreciated by those who were able to participate. A NAG member who was one of the few interviewees to have attended the UK Week in 2014 was travelling internationally for the first time in his life. He spoke of this experience as the trigger for building a large network of friends and contacts around the world and for a dawning recognition that there were 'bigger things in life than what we know'.⁵ He recalled proudly how during that trip he learnt to navigate himself and his group of fellow visiting debaters around the London public transport system and said he felt respected by British people. That this international exposure gave him confidence and a desire to grow is evidenced by the fact that he increasingly engaged outside Jordan and conducted subsequent debating training for a Danish NGO.

More broadly, however, the appetite for international opportunities and the desire to interact with non-Arabs among young Jordanians exceeded the ability of the programme to respond. For some there was understandable disappointment, despite other opportunities to meet British people during British Council events held in Jordan, for instance a web-café and a debating event hosted by the television journalist Tim Sebastian.

⁴ In addition to NAG members, nine of whom were men and six were women, interviewees were project staff; former staff of the Anna Lindh Foundation; members of the boards or senior staff from partner organisations; one former partner, government officials responsible for youth-related work; politicians; an academic who participated in YAV debates and the managers of two youth programmes run by foreign institutions in Jordan.

⁵ Interview 22 February 2017.

Interactions between Jordanians and other youth in Arab countries

There were more opportunities for Jordanians to interact in various ways with people from other Arabic-speaking countries, with twice-yearly regional debating competitions as well as a training of trainers event in another participating country. The opportunity to interact in various ways with young people from elsewhere in the region was greatly appreciated by respondents. Many interviewees spoke of how such encounters expanded their networks of contacts and friends and led to more interactions with fellow YAVers. Social media facilitated advice on debating formats, training techniques, mistakes to avoid, the sharing of video or book recommendations, and updates on debating activities. Greater knowledge about other Arab-speaking people from the region made some YAVers feel closer to other youth, recognising over time how little they knew about each other's countries.

Some participants had not been outside Jordan before they went to Tunisia with YAV, but developed friendships across the Arab world. One participant who became a debating trainer went to Egypt, Greece and Morocco. In Jordan itself, others experienced interaction with non-Jordanian visiting participants for the first time, building contacts that were enduring. One participant said he felt a sense of 'constructive jealousy' when he realised how much more his fellow YAVers knew about politics, religion and culture than he did himself. Another reported spending a lot of time talking with Egyptians, Algerians and Moroccans about their respective countries, and discovering how little they in turn understood about Jordan and its culture.

Thus, the networking opportunities created by YAV benefited some YAVers both socially and professionally. One in particular, a networker extraordinaire, formed a huge network and he found common ground on which to talk and meet with people, not only for debating but also in his work as the founder of two CSOs. Another was asked to train staff in a civil society organisation in Egypt and has begun to do research on human rights for an international monitoring organisation through an Algerian lawyer in her network.

Interactions between Jordanians of different social backgrounds

YAV was successful in terms of gender balance and it appears that 55.3 per cent of the trainees were women (British Council, G4 YAV). This compares favourably for example with the percentage of Jordanian women MPs in the parliament at the time, where a 20 per cent quota system for women was adopted. However, the experience of participation or training was not identical for young women and men. One female trainer reported being very conscious of being a young woman when she trained in the governorates or more provincial areas of Jordan, especially if the trainees were older than her. She chose a style that did not come across as forceful. She also adapted certain exercises when she was training in the south of Jordan, where for example, there were objections to an icebreaker that required women and men to mix.

Social interaction within Jordan, which contains many different cultures, was also an important part of YAV in Jordan. The most obvious contrast was that between the capital city, Amman and the governorates, which are relatively marginalised. There are distinct cultural identities apparent in different localities, and in rural areas there are few opportunities for young people to interact with youth from other parts of Jordan. One informant spoke of how students tend to go to universities in their own localities and in this way, even at this stage of life, they do not get the chance to mix with other Jordanians from different governorates.⁶

To foster such interaction, YAV Jordan chose partners according to the breadth or nature of their outreach within Jordan, ensuring that many trainings and debates took place outside Amman and covering participants' travel costs. Partner organisations also took diversity into consideration when they put debating teams together, whether in universities or small towns.⁷ The fact that Arabic was the main language of communication in the project also helped make it accessible to Jordanians outside the remit of the English-speaking elite.

⁶ Interview with Jordanian government official.

⁷ Interview with manager of a partner organisation, Amman, 2 March 2017; interview with chairman of a partner organisation, Amman, 1 March 2017.

As such, YAV has provided opportunities for young men and women in Jordan to meet and work with other Jordanians they had not encountered before. A NAG member reported meeting MPs, staff from other NGOs and, like another member who worked on debating events with women's unions, municipality staff and political party members across the country. He visited different parts of Jordan for the first time, establishing friendships and professional contacts from different areas.

These interactions changed some YAVers' views about 'the other'. For example, one participant said he had not realised how diverse Jordanian society was, while another began to think about refugees in a different way. YAV interactions also made them more tolerant of different views. A female participant reported beginning to develop 'partial acceptance' of political views she had not accepted before. This was a direct result of meeting people with different ideologies: some Islamists, some pro-government and some from the opposition. That said, another participant reported finding having to deal with different kinds of Jordanians not to be easy. He bemoaned a 'fossilised mentality' that led to the rejection by some of YAV's ideas. Nevertheless, he maintained relationships with YAVers of different political and religious beliefs. 'I aspire to a secular society,' he said, 'but some friends see it as something wrong. I give them my ideology in small doses.'⁸

Adapting debating to the Jordanian context

Since the Mace debating model first travelled from the UK to the MENA region in 2011 and 2012, this particular practice of debating was adapted numerous times to suit the local context. Adapting training to the needs of the trainees is nothing new, but here the adaptation went beyond a mere translation of manuals on debating practice produced in the UK from English to Arabic. It also involved translation into the local culture. This adaptation took many forms. The content or style of the training was changed to reflect the trainer's

approach or target groups. Some YAV trainers, for example, provide training in debating, others in advocacy, focusing on particular topics, or making it specific to the concerns or membership of particular organisations. In the process, they developed their own manuals, finding examples from the local context to illustrate points and techniques. They themselves decided whether or how to approach locally sensitive topics. For example, a trainer reported making the decision that to discuss gay rights in Jordan would not be appropriate.

There were a number of YAVers who found it difficult to discuss religion in public or during training. One said that debating topics which approached Christian–Muslim relations in Jordan as 'co-existence' or in terms of 'ethnicity' were problematic, saying, 'they are all parts of Jordanian society'. In addition, the British parliamentary debating format is grounded on a political model which is different from the Jordanian system. In response, a NAG member said: 'I am trying to transfer not the political system, but the ideology of democracy.'⁹ A focus group discussion participant believed that an important element of YAV's success was precisely because it did not clash with Jordanian customs and norms.¹⁰ A leader in a Jordanian partner organisation pointed out that YAVers had managed to ground the notion of debate in local culture. 'Even in cultural old texts they find references to the whole notion of arguing and debating, being civil in discussions and demonstrating their points of view.'¹¹ Here we begin to detect a challenge to any implied assumption that debating was the preserve of the British or any other particular culture. One of the trainers pointed out that the British Council did not object to adaptations: "If you have better materials, we don't have a problem." This established mutual trust between us. We felt that they did not come as instructors. "This project is for you, be our guests and do with it what you see fit".¹²

⁸ Interview member of NAG, 25 February 2017.

⁹ Interview with a member of NAG, Amman, 28 February 2017.

¹⁰ Focus Group Discussion, Amman, 1 March 2017.

¹¹ Interview with vice-president of a partner organisation, Amman, 27 February 2017.

¹² Interview with a member of NAG, Amman, 28 February 2017.

These examples show how YAVers have adapted their debating training over time through a process whereby ideas and techniques have been reinterpreted and reworked, and then cascaded by way of YAV training both within and beyond the project itself. Along the way, new ideas and tools were developed. The fact that YAVers were adapting debating to their environment, testifies to a certain sense of ownership. What this also illustrates is that in cultural relations terms, it is not only the content – what is promoted or exchanged – but how the engagement takes place that matters. The mutuality of engagement, the trust and the ‘letting go’ and going with partners’ insights and suggestions formed part of the success of YAV and other similar debating models in Jordan.

Grounding the project in Jordanian society

The predominant use of Arabic as the language of communication in both debating and training was a key factor in the programme’s take up. Most of the YAV interviewees could not speak English well or at all, in part a good indicator that the project has managed to penetrate Jordanian society beyond the elite.

Another factor that added to YAV’s credibility in Jordan was that its activities were carried out by Jordanian partner organisations, albeit funded by the British Council. It was the partners who selected the trainees/debaters and hosted the debates. Some informants also believed that the British Council’s good reputation in Jordan as a cultural and educational institution helped YAV be more acceptable to Jordanians. According to one

partner organisation head: ‘When you attend the events you see very familiar faces from the British Council [...] the staff look like us, they don’t look different. They speak the language.’¹³ For others it was particularly important that YAV was run by the British Council and not the embassy, and for others that it was funded by a British rather than an American organisation. Above all, what grounded the project and sealed it within the society was that it met a need and the project’s aims coincided with what its partners and beneficiaries wanted to achieve. As discussed below, criticism against foreign-funded projects is common and requires a degree of nuance when considering the reception of foreign organisations working with youth in Jordan.

Another important factor had to do with the values of tolerance and respect for the opposing point of view as something that was universal, human and not specific to a single culture.¹⁴ Some were at pains to explain how such values were also grounded in Jordanian or Islamic traditions. One focus group discussion participant argued that the Qur’an encouraged debating in a civil manner. A woman MP for an Islamist party saw these values as part of a local tradition, which had been forgotten but that needed to be revived.¹⁵ A partner organisation leader saw these values as part of The Amman Message (2004), which explained what Islam is and what it is not and which was endorsed by the Jordanian king.

¹³ Vice-president of a partner organisation, as above.

¹⁴ This was the consensus of the focus group discussion.

¹⁵ Interviews with vice-president of a partner organisation, as above; director of a government department, Amman, 2 March 2017; a member of parliament, Amman, 28 February 2017; researcher from the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, Amman, 2 March 2017; chairman of a partner organisation, Amman, 26 February 2017; and a former MP and YAV participant, Amman, 26 February 2017.

When discussing the YAV experience through the lens of culture, many informants tended to look at it in binary terms, contrasting the ideal of a 'culture of debate' with the prevailing culture in Jordan and perhaps the wider Arab world. This was expressed in various ways. Some spoke of the tendency in their society of wanting to talk more than to listen, and of not respecting different opinions. A senior staff member at the British Council observed a tendency in Jordan towards accepting information without questioning it and without knowing how to search for clarification or verification. Addressing this tendency, by no means confined to the Jordanian context, was an important objective of YAV and advancing critical thinking skills was broadly recognised as a key success factor of the programme. The chair of a partner organisation spoke of the patriarchal character of Jordanian political culture: the prime minister was regarded as a father figure and cannot be questioned. The leader of a youth programme funded by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Amman also spoke of youth not being used to a culture of public debate and communication beyond their immediate family and friendship circles. As interviews and focus group discussions suggested, there were perceptions of a disconnect between the culture of debating and its presence, role and acceptance in Jordanian culture. However, there is a danger in the stereotyping of any description and particularly in ascribing features to a particular 'culture', given that different societies may exhibit multiple cultures of communication and debate. A culture of debate should not be connected unproblematically to 'defined social groups' (Spencer-Oatey, p. 9). Instead, culture should be regarded as something that can mutate. It is precisely because culture is mutable that it makes debate so rich in possibility.

Perceptions of foreign organisations

Despite the cultural adaptation of the Mace debating style and methodology, as well as YAV's ability through its partner organisations to reach out to young Jordanians within and beyond the capital Amman, it was inevitable that there would be some limitations to the programme as well as room for improvement. It was in this learning spirit that the INTRAC evaluation was commissioned by the British Council, combined with a sincere wish to understand the reception of YAV among young Jordanians themselves. Of importance here was a desire to understand the impact of YAV as a programme funded by a foreign government, albeit through trusted organisations such as the British Council and the Anna Lindh Foundation.

Most YAV participants faced, at one time or another, questions or criticisms over participating in a foreign-funded project. Some of their critics saw hidden agendas behind such a project. Suspicion over foreign activity exists not only in Jordan but all over the Arab-speaking world, and there are historical reasons for this. These have to do with the legacy of colonialism as well as recent foreign policy interventions in the region, for example with regard to Iraq or Palestine. The Chatham House evaluation report on YAV, for instance, pointed to YAVers' 'considerable scepticism and cynicism' over the fact that youth projects were funded by Western governments ultimately for their own security reasons – to counter radicalisation and violent extremism (Spencer & Aldouri, 2016, p. 19).

The director of a former partner to YAV pointed out that projecting the logos of the British Council, the Anna Lindh Foundation and the EU in public debates organised by YAV – a visibility requirement commonly required by foreign-funding bodies – put Jordanians off attending such events.¹⁶ During his organisation's debates, which were funded by YAV, he objected to projecting the funders' logos and used instead the brand of *Diwaniya*.¹⁷ While other YAV partners found this understandable, they argued for greater visibility and transparency with regard to foreign funding, rather than disguising it, in such projects and public events.

¹⁶ Interview with director of a former YAV partner, Amman, 2 March 2017.

¹⁷ *Diwaniya* means a reception hall and the gatherings held in it.

In Jordan, the label ‘foreign-funded organisations’ (*munadhhamat tamuil ajnabi*) can be ‘a very negative cliché, because everybody realises that [...] people don’t pay money just for the sake of paying money.’¹⁸ Any programme that is foreign-funded is vulnerable to this sort of criticism – not only YAV.¹⁹ According to a former MP, in the previous parliament three MPs attacked foreign-funded youth programmes as a form of cultural invasion and a manipulation of young minds.²⁰ ‘But over the past years, [these attacks] have not succeeded,’ argued a senior staffer at the National Democratic Institute. ‘No programme has closed down or left the country. These are temporal attacks, ineffective and unpredictable.’²¹

In any case, NGOs were not the only recipients of foreign funding; the Jordanian government also received resources for youth programmes aimed at, among other things, combatting violent extremism. A board member of Transparency International’s partner organisation in Jordan, and a YAV partner, pointed to research on national integrity systems in Jordan, which found that people’s perception of the integrity of civil society in Jordan was higher than their perception of the integrity of parliament at the time.²² Of course, criticism of foreign-funded projects did not necessarily imply an absolute rejection of everything foreign. Some of it was nuanced and differentiated according to the foreign policies in the region of different international governments, or different implementing organisations or types of projects. Rejection of funding from certain foreign governments was sometimes also the default policy position of certain NGOs in Jordan and across the rest of the region.

¹⁸ Former MP and YAV participant, as above.

¹⁹ Vice-president of a partner organisation, as above.

²⁰ Former MP and YAV participant, as above.

²¹ Interview with a senior programme officer for MENA, National Democratic Institute, Amman, 2 March 2017.

²² Vice-president of partner organisation, as above.

Young Mediterranean Voices and learning from YAV

The new successor programme, Young Mediterranean Voices (YMV) is a regional initiative connecting youth networks, civil society, educational institutions and policymakers across the Southern Mediterranean and Europe (the European Commission is now a major funder), which builds directly on YAV. As such it brings the experience of Arab youth-led debate to other parts of the Euro-Mediterranean region and will provide opportunities to open doors for young influencers to shape policy and media narratives. The British Council is a co-founder of YMV along with the Anna Lindh Foundation, which co-ordinates it. The programme has been developed in partnership with the Centre for Mediterranean Integration (CMI), Friends of Europe, the World Leadership Alliance-Club de Madrid, the Mediterranean Academy for Diplomatic Studies (MEDAC) and Soliya. The programme is funded by the European Commission and co-funded by the government of Finland, the British Council and World Bank Group. The rationale for YMV is articulated as follows:

Building on more than five years investment in the field, as well as established networks, pioneering methodologies and independent research, the overall objective of Young Mediterranean Voices programme is to: 'Empower young people to enhance a culture of dialogue, to contribute to public policy and shape media discourses, and to create a shared understanding with peers across the Mediterranean on how to address issues of common concern to their communities' (British Council & ALF, 2018–20).

The pursuit of YMV is a clear endorsement of the value of debate as a vehicle for reaching young people. As the INTRAC and other reports on YAV demonstrated, the enthusiasm and positive responses of those individuals who participated is resounding. However, YMV differs in emphasis from YAV in two key respects. First, there is greater attention paid to addressing policy through advocacy, and the modalities to successfully reach decision makers are part of the design. Second, in YMV there is recognition that while YAV was successful for those who participated, there remain vast numbers of young people who languish in apathy. For example, although in the case of Jordan YAV successfully reached out beyond Amman to the governorates, it was by no means a mass programme.

In response, for YMV a key focus is on encouraging young people in broader communication, and specifically in the positive and effective use of social media:

Based on the analysis and evaluation carried out on joint programming, and our understanding of the needs of young people, we concluded that young people feel disengaged from political, economic, social and cultural opportunities for participation [...] The prevailing presentation of young people in the media leads to further alienation as they are often stigmatized and problematized as an unemployed burden or worse still as possible threat to national security and stability, vulnerable to violent extremism. There is a disconnect for many young people who engage with each other through social media but do not know which sources are reliable or which they can trust or depend (British Council & ALF, 2018–20).

One of the aims of YMV, therefore, is to equip young people with the skills to enable them to contribute towards a more positive narrative about young people that does not simply comprise a negative presentation of unemployment, apathy or extremism.

The intention in YMV to actively engage in public policy dialogue with decision makers was also clearly articulated from the outset. Reflecting on the Jordanian experience, which took place during a period of restrictions following the wake of the Arab Spring, it can be said that the broad impact of YAV on the country's policymaking process and government engagement was underplayed. The main YAV approach towards influencing policymakers in Jordan at the time was to invite them to public debates, either as participants in the debate itself or as patrons and members of the audience.²³ YAV public debates, which were organised by YAV partner organisations, attracted parliamentary candidates, ministers and ex-ministers, heads of municipalities and well-known public figures. During the year 2015–16, for example, there were eight large public debates in which ten per cent of the audience were policymakers and key public figures (British Council, Jordan, 2016). YAV was not alone in reaching out to the authorities. Partner organisation leads and NDI senior staff saw how impressed government officials were by the way

²³ DIALA SMADI, British Council programme manager, Jordan, phone interview, 31 January 2017.

youth performed in the debates they attended,²⁴ and other youth programmes such as the NDI's Ana Usharek ('I participate') programme and the FES's Young Leaders initiative also attracted government officials to debates and discussions with young people.

People had different motivations for attending. Two government officials were interviewed for the INTRAC research, and both provided positive feedback on the project, even though one was less familiar with it. Both felt that what YAV offered was something that was much needed in Jordan, arguing that: 'We work on the same path.'²⁵ A director in the Ministry of Culture saw YAV as part of what King Abdullah had termed the 'comprehensive approach' to tackling extremism – combining security tactics with a 'soft' approach. All recognised that it was important for young people to be listened to by the authorities and for youth to talk about how they saw situations, government policies, their present challenges and the future, 'even if they are opposed to us'.²⁶ This illustrates the important role YAV played in connecting young people to policymakers and, more indirectly, points to its wider societal impact.

It should also be pointed out that a number of influential people, including those in government, did not always share this enthusiasm or believe in the need for youth debate. This view saw it as encouragement for young people to become unruly and out of control.²⁷ People outside government in Jordan, including YAV partners, were also more circumspect and varied in their views on how the government regarded YAV or programmes like it. There were those in government who appreciated and supported such initiatives, but there were some who did not like them. Nonetheless, it was an opportune moment to advance youth programming in Jordan. The Crown Prince of Jordan was leading a global youth initiative supported by the United Nations and he had established his own foundation, an umbrella organisation for youth initiatives.

Was this engagement with government effective? There is evidence of YAV having contributed to one successful campaign run by its partner organisation, Rasheed. YAV trained Rasheed staff in debating, and three public debates were organised in universities on the issue of modifying the regulations governing the funding of political parties for electoral campaigning.²⁸ A few years previously, a former partner of YAV, Leaders of Tomorrow, through their *Diwaniya* debates and media involvement, had managed to generate enough controversy over a proposed policy to ban narghileh (hookah) smoking in public places that the policy was softened.²⁹ However, there is little further evidence to suggest that YAV had any direct or significant impact on the policy environment in Jordan, nor evidence that policymakers took the opinions of youth expressed in public debates into consideration in their policies. To influence policymaking, more would be needed than securing the presence of decision makers in debates. It would require an advocacy strategy and the dedication of further resources – both on the part of YAV funders, and in terms of the project itself – to pursue specific issues over a long period of time, to achieve or measure success. However, a strong platform for dialogue and debate was established upon which the more ambitious YMV could build, with efforts to overcome some of the limitations of YAV being factored into the design of the new regional programme, YMV.

Lastly, the scope of the new programme also has an international component, but this time constituting a 'Euro-Mediterranean' dimension. Activities created and delivered in – and reaching out from – the South towards Europe in the north form Euro-Mediterranean regional 'youth partnerships'. The intercultural dialogue generated will result in what a YAV graduate described at one of the consultative meetings in Thessaloniki in November 2015, saying: 'Debating in YAV is not just another training programme, it is a state of mind' (Anna Lindh Foundation, 2015, p. 13).

²⁴ Vice-president of partner organisation, as above; senior programme officer for MENA, National Democratic Institute, as above.

²⁵ A director in the Ministry of Culture, Amman, 2 March 2017.

²⁶ A director in the Ministry of Culture, as above.

²⁷ Interview with chairman, partner organisation, Amman, 1 March 2017.

²⁸ Member of YAV NAG, as above.

²⁹ Diala Smadi, 31 January 2017.

Conclusions: From voice to encounter in Jordan

This contribution to the cultural relations collection draws on evaluations of YAV, with particular regard to Jordan, showing how debate and intercultural interactions changed the way young YAVers in Jordan thought about other cultures and people from different backgrounds. The research conducted by INTRAC largely highlighted the educational role that YAV played, and in particular the development of critical thinking and communication skills. It taught participants how to research and build arguments and how to articulate and present them persuasively. It also developed understanding and appreciation of difference, and helped participants to develop as engaged and proactive human beings. As such it emphasised the individual opportunities seized, skills learned and passions formed during debate, including for activities beyond debate. In this it concurs with a previous study of YAV conducted at a regional level: the 2016 Chatham House report (Kemp et al., 2014, p. 8).

Based on interviews and focus group discussions, the Jordan-specific study also found that the YAV experience helped the Jordanian YAV participants adjust their views on politics and society, and become active citizens in various ways. However, in reviewing the views of young people reached or touched by YAV, three broad categories were identified. First, there were those who saw youth engagement programmes such as YAV as an opportunity to add an activity or achievement to their portfolio and curriculum vitae or resume. Second, there were those who remained suspicious of what they deemed to be parachute programmes funded by foreign entities that aimed to mould young people in Western ways, or to appease the Jordanian government by allowing a 'sanctioned' youth space. A third group saw debating as a means to an end, namely advocacy, with the aim of influencing and bringing about change in their societies, and there were some in Jordan who did seek to influence policymakers. We also saw YAV respond, for

example, with the change to include a training module on advocacy³⁰ and again, in 2016, when YAV MENA brought together YAV Ambassadors from the whole region for capacity building on how to engage policymakers.³¹ The bar for success in terms of YAV was that it helped create a space for dialogue to happen, rather than directly creating any form of policy change. The latter is a complex process that happens slowly.

From a cultural relations perspective, increasing opportunities for young Jordanians to meet, debate and collaborate with young people from outside Jordan was a key part of programme design, although the scale of international encounters beyond the MENA region was relatively small, largely for reasons of resources. Nevertheless, the development of cultural relations rests upon reciprocity. This is as valid for transferring debating skills to Jordan as it is for the British Council to encourage learning about Jordanian culture. There was significant evidence of reciprocity and mutuality in interactions between Jordanian YAVers and YAVers from other countries, and also between Jordanian YAVers from different backgrounds. Opportunities were missed for developing a genuine exchange between Jordan and the United Kingdom, which was an objective of the programme and would have allowed for greater mutuality to develop. Resource constraints meant such opportunities were limited, beyond relations with the British Council in Jordan and its immediate network. In the words of someone from the Ministry of Culture in Jordan:

Britain, the West in general, the US, also [need] to understand our values, requirements and needs. What we hear about some countries in Europe [...] against immigration and refugees. There are groups targeting Islam [...] We cannot just stand by. This is why it is in the interest of the British Council to spread British culture but [also] in the other direction to transfer what Arab societies need. The same for other [foreign] cultural institutions.

³⁰ Interview with YAV trainer and adjudicator, Amman, 25 February 2017.

³¹ Diala Smadi, as above.

The YMV programme fits squarely within the European Union's 'neighbourhood' policy framework and as such is part of Europe's cultural relations framework. Yet YMV shows evidence of listening to feedback from YAV and emphasising the necessity of two-way dialogue and mutual learning. In addition, there are now far greater resources for international engagement than before, as well as opportunities to communicate more extensively and effectively digitally, through social media. Second, the design shows genuine efforts to respond to criticisms of one-way traffic and influence by ensuring modalities for real mutuality and reciprocity, generated through international and regional activities and partnerships initiated in and delivered from the South. While YAV may not have given way to a successor programme that directly enhances the influence and attraction of the UK, the British Council can be proud of its contribution to the development and nurturing of YAV and a further programme, YMV, both of which were built on the practices of mutual respect and reciprocal undertaking that inform and underpin a cultural relations approach.

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