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Social and Political Participation of Youth in Baalbek

This Participatory Action Research (PAR) study on the social and political participation of youth in Baalbeck was led by the Trainer, Mrs. Farah Ahmad Rayya. It was a collective effort by youth from Baalbek, who contributed their experiences and perspectives throughout all stages of the research. Their participation ensured that the findings genuinely reflect the realities, challenges, and aspirations of young people in the city.

These participants, with their unique perspectives and experiences, enriched the study with their invaluable contributions. The research team consisted of:

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The study examined the barriers that limit youth engagement in social and political life, understood how these obstacles affect their daily experiences and opportunities, and identified practical solutions to enhance their participation. The research also aimed to highlight the potential of youth as active contributors to community development and to propose recommendations that support a more inclusive and empowering environment for young people in Baalbek.



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Acknowledgment

This research would not have been possible without the dedication, collaboration, and passion of many individuals and organizations. We sincerely thank the youth researchers who participated in the Leaders Academy Program in Baalbek. Their openness, commitment, and willingness to share their experiences were at the heart of this study and were essential to deepening our understanding of youth participation in social and political life.

We are profoundly grateful to the professionals, educators, political and social activists, and civil society representatives who generously contributed their time, knowledge, and perspectives during interviews and discussions. Their insights enriched the research and strengthened the accuracy and depth of its findings.

Special thanks are extended to USPEaK and the U.S. Embassy in Beirut for their support of youth leadership, civic engagement, and community research. Their continuous investment in empowering young people was instrumental in the development and successful completion of this study.

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Finally, we are grateful to our families and friends for their patience, support, and encouragement, which sustained us throughout this journey.

Key Terms and Abbreviations

PAR – Participatory Action Research

A collaborative research approach that involves participants directly in analyzing issues and generating solutions.

Youth Participation

The involvement of young people in social, civic, and political activities that influence community development and decision-making.

Civic Engagement

Active participation in community or public affairs through volunteering, community service, or involvement in local initiatives.

UNSCR 2250 – United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security (2015)

It recognizes the essential role of young people in peacebuilding and calls for their inclusion through participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and reintegration.

Political Participation

Youth engagement in electoral processes, municipal activities, political events, decision-making, or public advocacy.

CSOs – Civil Society Organizations

Non-governmental actors that support community development, awareness campaigns, and youth empowerment.

FGD – Focus Group Discussion

A moderated group conversation is used to explore participants' opinions, experiences, and insights on a specific topic.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgment	Page 2
Key Terms and Abbreviations	Page 2
I. Introduction	Page 5
Background of the Issue	Page 5
Problem Statement	Page 6
Significance of the Study	Page 7
Purpose of the Research	Page 7
Research Questions	Page 7
Research Objectives	Page 7
II. Methodology	Page 8
Research Design	Page 8
Data Collection Tools	Page 9
Community Survey	Page 9
Semi-Structured Interviews	Page 10
Focus Group Discussion (FGD)	Page 12
III. Ethical Considerations	Page 14
IV. Findings and Analysis	Page 15
Interviews	Page 15
Interviews Analysis	Page 16
Focus Group Discussion	Page 17
Survey	Page 19
V. Conclusion	Page 34
VI. Recommendations	Page 35
VII. References	Page 38



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Social and Political Participation of Youth in Baalbek

“Democracy is not a spectator sport. It requires the participation of every generation.”

Ronald Reagan

Leaders Academy Program III Participatory Action Research (PAR) - 2025



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I. Introduction

Background of the Issue

Youth participation is recognized globally as a cornerstone of democratic development and community empowerment (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006). However, in many marginalized regions, young people lack structured opportunities to engage in social and political life. In Baalbek, youth often express frustration due to limited access to leadership programs, civic spaces, and decision-making channels.

Baalbek, located in Lebanon's Beqaa region, faces long-standing social and economic challenges, including high unemployment, political polarization, and limited public services (World Bank, 2024).

Youth in Baalbek represent a significant portion of the population but continue to face deep and persistent social, economic, and political challenges that limit their ability to participate meaningfully in public life. The region suffers from long-standing structural marginalization, limited public services, and scarce economic opportunities—factors contributing to widespread youth unemployment, migration, and growing social frustration (Central Administration of Statistics [CAS], 2022). Lebanon's broader economic collapse, political instability, and the pressures of displacement and war have further restricted youth access to opportunities and weakened trust in institutions (UNICEF Lebanon, 2023; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2021).

These challenges are intensified by entrenched power structures and social norms that often restrict youth engagement and decision-making roles, particularly in areas where political polarization and patronage are dominant (Harb, 2010; International Alert, 2019). Research shows that Lebanese youth possess strong motivation, creativity, and community-oriented values when provided with supportive environments and genuine opportunities for involvement (Chaaban et al., 2016). However, civic and political systems frequently fail to provide such pathways, leaving many young people—especially those unaffiliated with political groups—feeling unheard, undervalued, and disconnected from public life (Youth Policy Lab, 2020). Limited access to information, a lack of leadership opportunities, and the absence of safe, non-partisan spaces for expression further widen the gap between youth and local governance (UNESCO, 2020; Mansour-Ille & Shilue, 2022).

This growing disconnect threatens not only the well-being of youth themselves but also the social and political future of Baalbek, where inclusive development requires young people's meaningful participation in shaping community priorities.



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Problem Statement

Although youth in Baalbek possess significant potential, creativity, and motivation to contribute to their community, they continue to face deep and persistent structural, social, and political barriers that severely limit their participation in public life. The region's long-standing marginalization, coupled with high unemployment, political polarization, limited public services, and weakened institutional performance, has created an environment in which young people feel disconnected, discouraged, and increasingly hopeless about their future. Many youth report experiencing depression, frustration, and a sense of stagnation, spending long hours in coffee shops or informal spaces due to the absence of accessible youth-friendly hubs, civic platforms, or opportunities for constructive engagement.

These challenges are exacerbated by limited awareness of civic rights and responsibilities, scarce leadership opportunities, and an absence of safe, neutral, and non-partisan spaces where youth can express their views freely. As a result, many young people remain uninformed about how decisions are made at the municipal or national level, and they lack the means or confidence to engage in local governance or influence community priorities.

In border-adjacent regions such as Baalbek, the situation is further complicated by a dual reality. While state institutions struggle with limited resources, security pressures, and public mistrust, local dynamics involving informal armed actors, smuggling routes, and narcotics trade undermine stability and reduce the state's ability to maintain authority. Youth must navigate between formal governance structures and informal power networks, leaving them caught in a cycle of disengagement and exclusion. This dynamic also contributes to strained relationships between communities and government security institutions, where mistrust, miscommunication, and the absence of positive civilian-military interactions deepen the disconnect. Addressing youth participation in Baalbek, therefore, requires acknowledging both the need for rights-based, accountable institutions and the importance of empowering youth and communities to respect and positively engage with state structures.

Despite these obstacles, research consistently shows that when youth are provided meaningful opportunities, they can drive innovation, promote peace, and contribute to community well-being. This aligns with UNSCR 2250, which affirms youth as essential partners in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, civic engagement, and decision-making. However, in Baalbek, the lack of such opportunities leaves young people feeling unheard, undervalued, and unable to influence the policies that shape their lives.

Without targeted interventions to address the root causes of disengagement—including structural exclusion, limited access to information, the lack of youth-friendly civic spaces, socio-economic stressors, and the weakening of trust in institutions—youth contributions remain largely overlooked. This disengagement threatens not only the aspirations and well-being of young people themselves but also the broader social, economic, and political resilience of Baalbek, where long-term stability and inclusive development depend on the meaningful participation of its youth.



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Significance of the Study

This study aims to deepen the understanding of how youth in Baalbek experience participation and what prevents them from engaging more actively. The research is significant because youth empowerment has proven to contribute to peacebuilding, social cohesion, and local development (Hart, 1992). By identifying the gaps and opportunities, the study supports stakeholders—including local authorities, NGOs, and community leaders—in designing more inclusive programs.

Purpose of the Research

This Participatory Action Research (PAR) was conducted from October to December 2024 as part of the Leaders Academy III Program, funded by the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and implemented by USPEaK. The research was led by 21 young men and women from Baalbek, all committed to understanding and addressing the barriers that limit youth engagement in social and political life.

PAR was intentionally selected because it prioritizes collaboration, empowerment, and community-centered inquiry. It allows participants not only to study a problem but also to become actors in generating solutions (Aziz et al., 2011; McIntyre, 2008). As youth researchers, participants collectively identified the issue, analyzed its root causes, engaged with stakeholders, and co-created actions that reflect their lived realities and aspirations for greater involvement in local governance. This approach ensures that the research agenda is grounded in the perspectives and experiences of those most affected by limited participation—a central principle of participatory methodologies (Heron & Reason, 1997; Watts et al., 2013).

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main barriers preventing youth in Baalbek from actively participating in social and political life?
2. How do young people in Baalbek perceive their role, rights, and responsibilities within their community and local governance?
3. What strategies and community-driven solutions can enhance meaningful youth participation in Baalbek's social and political processes?

Research Objectives

General Objective:

To explore the barriers and opportunities for meaningful social and political participation among youth in Baalbek.

Specific Objectives:

1. To assess youth perceptions of participation.
2. To identify social, political, and economic factors affecting engagement.
3. To explore existing youth platforms and their limitations.
4. To propose strategies that enhance youth leadership and participation.



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II. Methodology

This PAR approach was selected because it places youth at the center of inquiry, empowering them to investigate issues affecting their lives and enabling collaborative interpretation and action. The research aimed to understand youth experiences, challenges, and opportunities regarding social and political participation in Baalbek, particularly within the context of ongoing economic hardship, political instability, and security-related displacement in Lebanon.

A mixed-methods design was adopted, combining semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion, and participatory reflection tools. This combination allowed triangulation and a rich understanding of the systemic, social, and psychological factors influencing youth participation.

Research Design

The research followed the core principles of PAR: participation, reflection, collective analysis, and action. A team of 21 youth co-researchers from the Leaders Academy Program contributed to all stages, including brainstorming the problem, designing tools, collecting data, analyzing findings, and forming recommendations. This collaborative model strengthened ownership, enhanced validity, and ensured that the final outputs truly reflected youth voices and lived realities.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across different community sectors influencing youth engagement: youth themselves, civil society organizations, educators, activists, and political actors.





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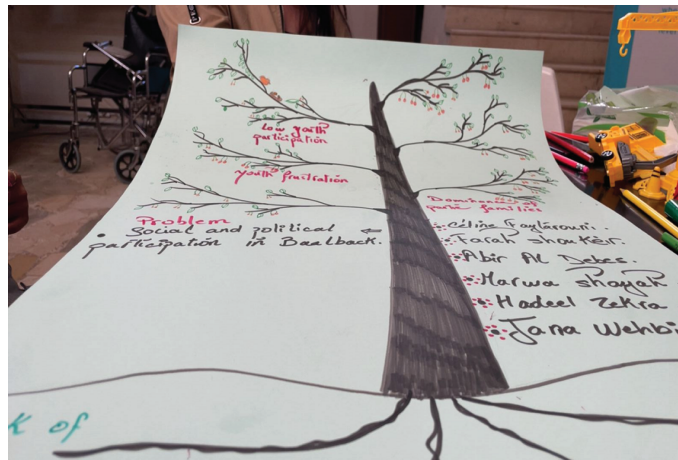
Data Collection Tools

2.1. Community Survey

Youth researchers developed a structured survey to measure:

1. Awareness of social and political participation
2. Perceived barriers
3. Opportunities for engagement
4. Trust in institutions
5. Attitudes toward youth representation

The survey included both closed- and open-ended questions and was distributed online and in person to reach diverse geographic and socio-economic groups across Baalbek.





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2.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders who play a direct or indirect role in youth social and political participation. The purpose of these interviews was to obtain expert insights, identify institutional gaps, and contextualize the experiences gathered from youth.

Interviews were conducted with four main groups:

a. Educators and Psychologists

Educators and mental health professionals provided insights into the psychosocial challenges youth face, including the effects of unemployment, insecurity, stress, and marginalization. They highlighted how these challenges influence young people's motivation, confidence, and readiness to participate in community or political life.



b. NGO Directors and Civil Society Representatives

Representatives of local NGOs offered perspectives on youth programs, community engagement opportunities, and structural barriers, including limited resources, lack of municipal coordination, and the economic crisis's impact on youth empowerment initiatives.

c. Youth Political Actors & Former Candidates

Interviews with previous municipal election candidates and youth involved in political academies shed light on the realities of political engagement in Baalbek. They discussed the challenges of representation, social pressure, gender bias, and political polarization, as well as the limited avenues available for youth to transition from activism to formal politics.



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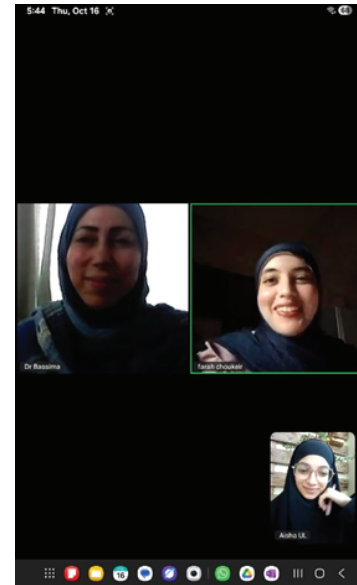


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d. Local Stakeholders

Community leaders provided insight into how youth are perceived in governance structures. They discussed institutional gaps, the lack of youth councils, limited communication channels, and systemic barriers that prevent youth from influencing decision-making.

A semi-structured format allowed flexibility while ensuring all key themes were addressed. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in a confidential environment to encourage open and honest dialogue, mirroring the standards used in similar PAR studies.





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2.3. Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

A focus group discussion was conducted to gather diverse community perspectives on youth political participation and to explore both personal and structural barriers affecting engagement. The FGD brought together:

- Non-winning candidates from previous municipal elections,
- A woman who successfully won a municipal seat,
- Youth participants enrolled in political academies,
- Moreover, several social workers are actively involved in community development and civic engagement.

This diverse composition ensured that the discussion captured firsthand political experiences, gendered perspectives, youth insights, and social-sector observations.



The FGD followed a semi-structured guide that explored themes such as:

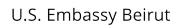
Obstacles to youth political engagement , challenges in campaigning and representation, gender dynamics and community expectations access to mentorship and institutional support, and recommendations to enhance youth participation in governance.

Participatory Reflection Tools

Youth researchers used reflective journaling, mapping activities, and observation notes throughout the study. These participatory tools helped document:

1. Power dynamics
2. Social patterns
3. Barriers and opportunities visible in everyday life
4. Changes in youth perspectives during the research process

Such reflective practices enhanced the depth of the qualitative analysis (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

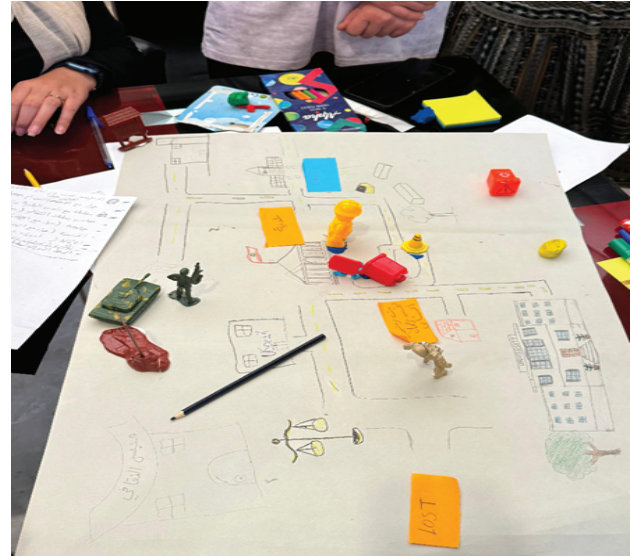


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Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

Survey results were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends in youth awareness, participation levels, and perceptions of barriers. These numerical findings provided measurable indicators supporting the qualitative insights.

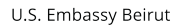


Qualitative Data

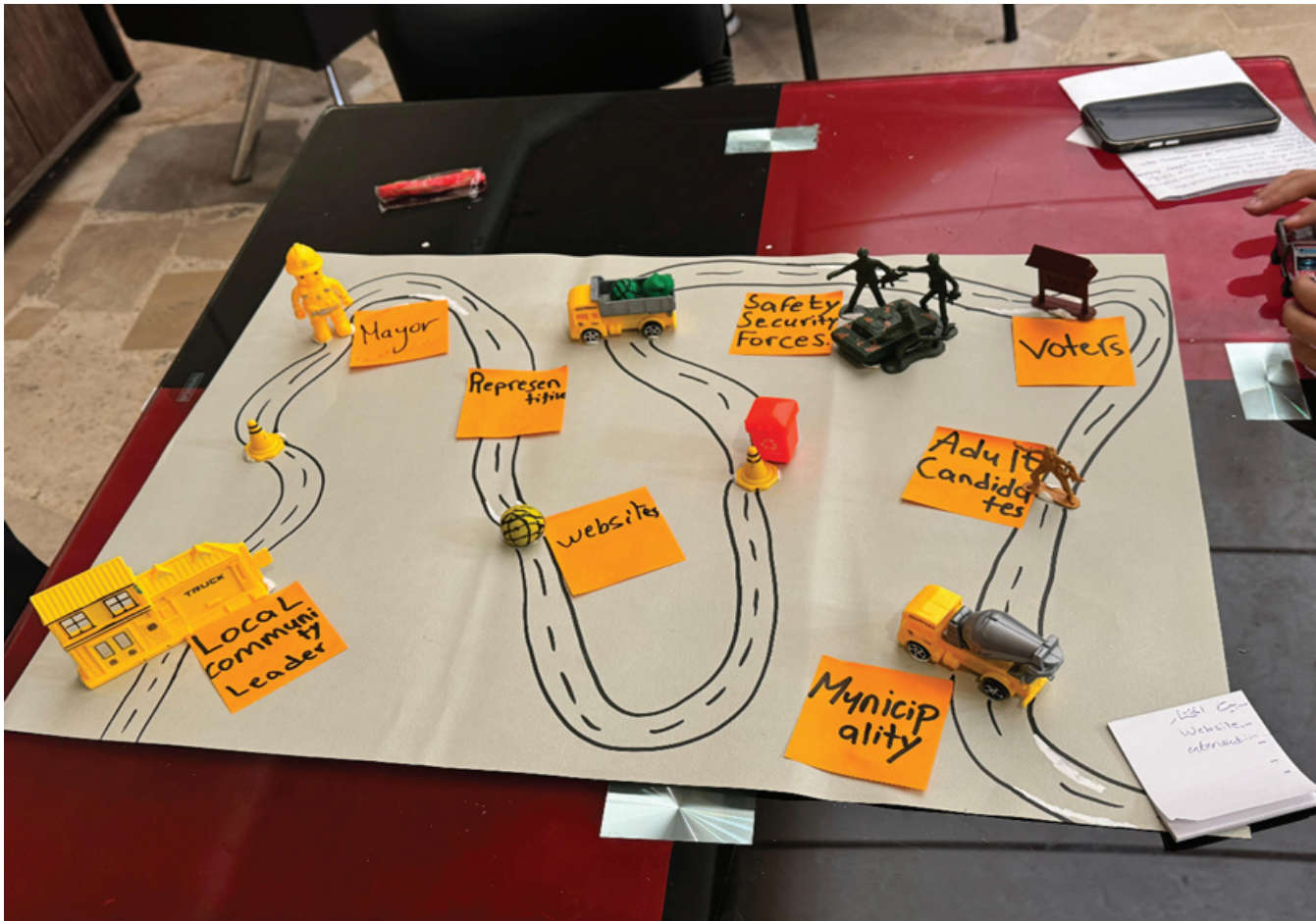
All interviews and focus group data were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic cod-ing approach. Analysis occurred in several steps:

1. Initial open coding
2. Grouping codes into categories
3. Identifying major themes
4. Reflective validation by youth researchers

This collaborative analysis ensured that interpretations were grounded in participants' lived experiences and avoided researcher bias.



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III. Ethical Considerations

The research followed strict ethical guidelines:

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants
- Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured
- Participants had the right to withdraw at any time
- Sensitive information was securely stored
- Interviews and FGDs were conducted in safe environments

Given the ongoing insecurity in Lebanon, additional precautions were applied to protect youth researchers and participants from political or social risks.

Conclusion

The PAR methodology created a participatory and empowering environment for youth to analyze their own challenges regarding social and political participation. The mixed-methods approach—combining surveys, interviews, group discussions, and reflective tools—generated a rich, holistic understanding of the systemic, psychological, social, and institutional factors shaping youth engagement in Baalbek.



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IV. Findings and Analysis

Interviews

During the research, interviews were conducted with professionals representing diverse sectors—including education, psychology, university administration, and community development—to explore the realities of youth social and political participation, leadership challenges, and civic engagement in Baalbek. These interviews provided in-depth perspectives on the social, institutional, and cultural factors shaping youth involvement in community life.

Dr. Bassem Shukair, principal of the Lebanese University, Faculty of Science – Baalbek -, a specialist in youth education and political sociology, offered a comprehensive view of the structural barriers that limit youth engagement. She emphasized that young people in Baalbek often face marginalization due to the economic crisis, political fragmentation, and the lack of safe civic spaces. Dr. Shukair explained that many youth possess leadership potential but lack mentorship, institutional support, and platforms that value their voices. She highlighted the importance of participatory learning, community-based initiatives, and long-term youth development programs that promote agency, critical thinking, and collective action.

Dr. Maria Mokhaiber, a psychologist, discussed the psychological dimensions of youth participation in social and political life. She explained that many young people in Baalbek experience stress, demotivation, and emotional fatigue due to economic instability, academic pressure, and limited opportunities, all of which reduce their willingness to engage in community initiatives. Dr. Mokhaiber noted that mental health directly affects leadership capacity, social engagement, and decision-making. She stressed the importance of integrating psychosocial support into youth programs, building resilience, strengthening self-worth, and creating peer support environments where youth feel valued and heard.

Ms. Rawan Yaghi, founder and director of USPEaK, highlighted the role of NGOs in shaping youth leadership and civic engagement. She explained that youth thrive when given opportunities to develop communication skills, advocacy tools, and leadership experience. Yaghi noted the challenges that youth face in underserved areas, including digital inequality, economic hardship, and limited access to training programs. She emphasized that sustained investment, quality education, and experiential learning are essential in helping youth transition from passive recipients to active community leaders. She also discussed USPEaK's work in empowering youth through English training, community service, voter education, and civic awareness.

Mrs. Layla Saykali, principal of Manner School in Baalbek, focused on the school environment as a foundational space for developing leadership and civic responsibility. She noted that students in Baalbek are competent but often burdened by family responsibilities, financial stress, and social pressures. Saykali emphasized that effective youth engagement requires supportive school cultures, extracurricular opportunities, and collaborations with community organizations. She stressed that early exposure to leadership roles, teamwork activities, and student-led initiatives increases confidence and long-term participation.



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Mr. Ali Alaadeen, principal of CNAM University in Baalbek, provided insights into the university context. He highlighted economic barriers, political sensitivities, and the lack of institutional ex-tracurricular programs as key obstacles to student participation. Alaadeen discussed the need to integrate civic engagement into university curricula, encourage student clubs, and strengthen partnerships with NGOs and community actors. He emphasized that university students are eager to participate but often lack structured pathways to express their leadership and contribute meaningfully to society.

Dr. Housein Zaiter, principal of MIS School in Baalbek, emphasized the importance of early leadership development and interactive learning. He explained that students need opportunities to take initiative and build self-confidence through hands-on activities. Zaiter observed that Lebanon's ongoing crises—economic collapse, displacement, and regional instability—have affected students' motivation and emotional well-being. He stressed the importance of school-based initiatives, parental involvement, and community engagement to support youth during difficult times and encourage active participation in positive community change.

Mr. Ali Debis, an engineer and a previous candidate, discussed youth participation from a community-based perspective. He highlighted the influence of traditional norms, family expectations, and community attitudes on youth engagement. Debis noted that many young people possess strong leadership potential but are discouraged by social pressures or limited opportunities. He emphasized the need for accessible training programs, community recognition, and supportive networks that empower youth to contribute to local development.

Interviews Analysis

The interviews collectively offer a multi-dimensional understanding of youth participation in Baalbek. They reveal that youth engagement is shaped by a complex interplay of psychological, social, economic, and institutional factors.

A central finding across interviews is that **youth possess strong interest and potential**, yet face **significant structural barriers**. Economic instability, political polarization, social norms, and limited institutional resources constrain their ability to participate in leadership roles fully. Interviewees from schools and universities emphasized the importance of creating supportive environments that nurture leadership skills, resilience, and confidence from an early age.

The perspectives of psychologists and education specialists highlight the **critical role of mental health and emotional support** in youth participation. Stress, uncertainty, and lack of motivation significantly affect the youth's willingness to engage. This reveals the need for integrated psychosocial support within youth programs, enabling young people to develop healthy self-esteem and decision-making capacities.



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Interviewees also pointed to the **essential role of NGOs and civil society organizations**, particularly those like USPEaK, which provide training, mentorship, and civic education. These organizations fill significant gaps left by formal institutions and create safe, empowering spaces for youth to grow and lead. However, they require stronger collaboration with schools, universities, and community institutions to maximize impact.

Furthermore, the interviews underline the **need for systemic reforms** to enhance youth participation. This includes reforming educational curricula, strengthening student clubs, improving community outreach, and fostering partnerships that connect youth with opportunities. Cultural barriers and social expectations also play significant roles, underscoring the need for community-wide awareness efforts to shift attitudes and encourage youth leadership.

Overall, the interviews demonstrate that while challenges are significant, the potential for youth leadership in Baalbek is substantial. With proper support, mentorship, and institutional cooperation, young people can become key drivers of positive social and political changes in their communities.

Focus Group Discussion

A focus group discussion was conducted with three youth participants—**Bassam El Zein, Hadi Awada, and Khadija Al-Zoukra**—all of whom were either candidates or delegates in the most recent municipal elections in Baalbek. The participants are also part of the **Political Academy**, a component of the Leaders Academy program implemented by USPEaK and funded by the U.S. Embassy. Their experiences offer valuable insights into youth and women's political engagement, barriers to participation, and the influence of civic training programs on shaping emerging leaders.

Hadi Awada, a young activist, explained that his motivation to participate as a permanent delegate stemmed mainly from the training he received through USPEaK. He described the program as transformative, stating that it shifted his perspective on elections and public life, providing him with the tools to analyze political behavior on the ground in a critical way. His involvement with the "Baalbek Madinati" list deepened his understanding of electoral processes, enabling him to distinguish between transparency and manipulation in local politics. Despite facing mockery and social pressure—both from relatives and the wider community—Hadi emphasized that family support enabled him to carry out his role with confidence.

Bassam El Zein, a candidate in the same municipal elections, highlighted his intention to bring change to Baalbek and challenge the dominance of traditional political and familial structures. His candidacy was driven by a desire to introduce a developmental approach to municipal work, rather than reinforcing political influence. Initially, Bassam faced skepticism and ridicule from the community, as many doubted the legitimacy of young candidates. With time, however, community members began to support the youth-led initiative. Bassam stressed the importance of youth leadership in reshaping local governance and the need to dissociate municipal work from political rivalry. His experience also reflected the significant role of political and social discouragement in limiting youth candidacy.



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Khadija Al-Zoukra, whose experience as a female candidate differed significantly, described both societal and political barriers. Although she had a long history of community service and was initially supported by a local slate, she later encountered manipulation, exclusion, and patriarchal attitudes that questioned women's political presence. After withdrawing her candidacy a day before the elections, she still received 840 votes without campaigning or deploying delegates—demonstrating strong community recognition of her leadership. Khadija's account sheds light on the gender-based challenges faced by women in Baalbek, where patriarchal norms and political pressure continue to limit female participation.

Participants collectively identified significant barriers to youth involvement in public life, including a lack of confidence, limited support networks, entrenched political traditions, and limited trust in young leaders. Economic hardship and political polarization further exacerbate these challenges, restricting participation and discouraging new candidates.

In discussing possible solutions, the group emphasized the importance of strengthening civic education, fostering a sense of belonging to the city rather than to political factions, and implementing supportive policies to increase women's representation. They highlighted the role of schools, teachers, and community institutions in cultivating confidence and leadership skills from an early age. Participants also reflected on the need for sustained mentorship, stronger legal frameworks, and community-wide encouragement to ensure that youth and women can effectively contribute to public affairs.

The focus group offers critical insights that complement the individual interviews conducted. Across all accounts, a consistent pattern emerges: **youth in Baalbek are motivated to participate in social and political life, but systemic and social barriers significantly hinder their engagement.**

Several key points match directly with the interview findings:

1. Influence of Civic Programs

Participants repeatedly credited the **USPEaK Political Academy and Leaders Academy** for equipping them with the knowledge and confidence needed to participate in elections—an insight echoed by multiple interviewees, including Rawan Yaghi and university educators. These programs play a central role in building youth political awareness, improving leadership skills, and challenging political apathy.

2. Social Resistance and Traditional Norms

Similar to insights shared by Ms. Layla Saykali, Dr. Bassema Shukair, and the CNAM and MIS principals, participants described community resistance rooted in traditional family structures, political polarization, and lack of trust in youth leadership. Khadija's experience particularly echoes findings from Dr. Zaiter and Dr. Maria Moukhaiber regarding the psychological and social constraints imposed by patriarchal expectations and community stereotypes.



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3. Gender-Based Barriers

Khadija’s account strongly reinforces earlier interviews highlighting gender inequality in public life. Like other experts noted, women in Baalbek face emotional pressure, patriarchal attitudes, and social gatekeeping that limit their participation—even when they possess strong qualifications. Her experience illustrates how systemic and cultural barriers intersect, confirming interview findings from USPEaK’s director and the Lebanese University administrators.

4. Importance of Confidence and Support Systems

The focus group highlighted that youth often struggle with self-confidence and lack support from family or local institutions—an issue emphasized by Dr. Maria, who linked low confidence to psychological stress, fear of failure, and community pressure. Participants consistently noted that supportive environments—including family, schools, and organizations—are essential for overcoming these barriers.

5. Need for Structural Reform and Youth Inclusion

Echoing experts such as Ali Debis, Rawan Yaghi, and Dr. Bassema Shukair, the participants stressed the need to reshape public life in Baalbek by engaging youth in policy discussions, encouraging new faces in municipal leadership, and challenging inherited political practices. Their experiences highlight the need for institutional reform, civic education, and youth representation at all levels of local governance.

Survey

A total of 106 youth participants from Baalbeck completed the survey, providing critical insights into their social and political participation. Understanding their demographic profile is essential to contextualizing these findings.

Demographic Overview

The following demographic profile provides a foundation for understanding the experiences and perspectives of the youth who participated in the study. All participants are Lebanese youth aged 18–35 from Baalbek City.

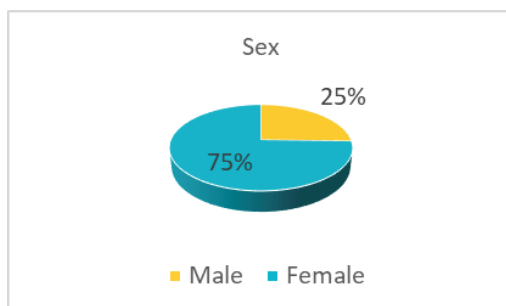


Figure 1

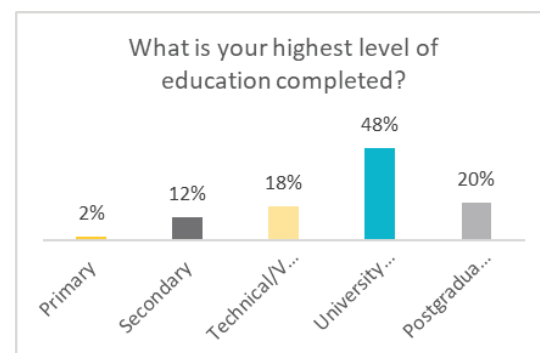


Figure 2



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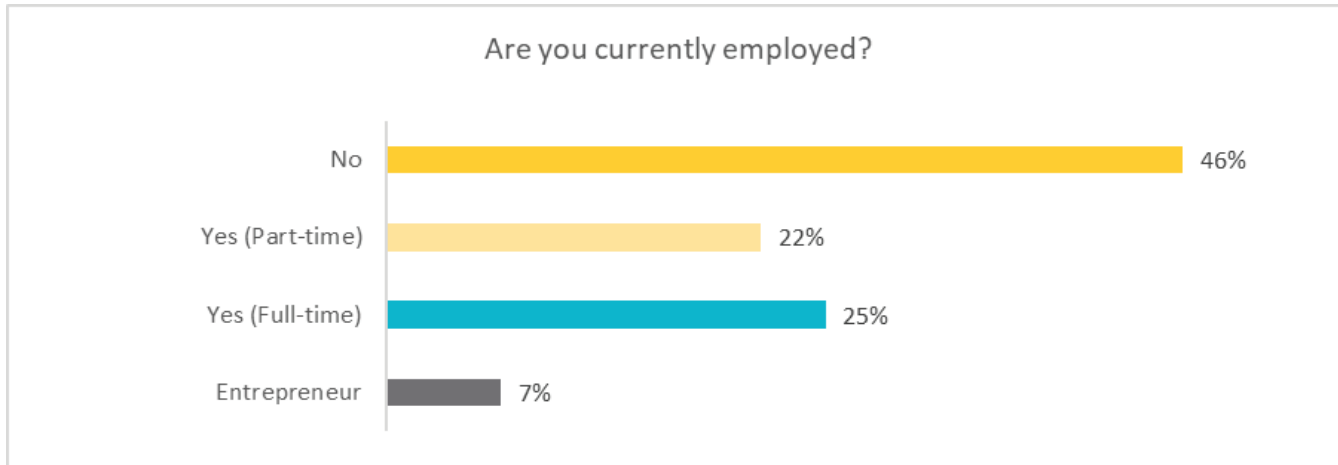


Figure 3

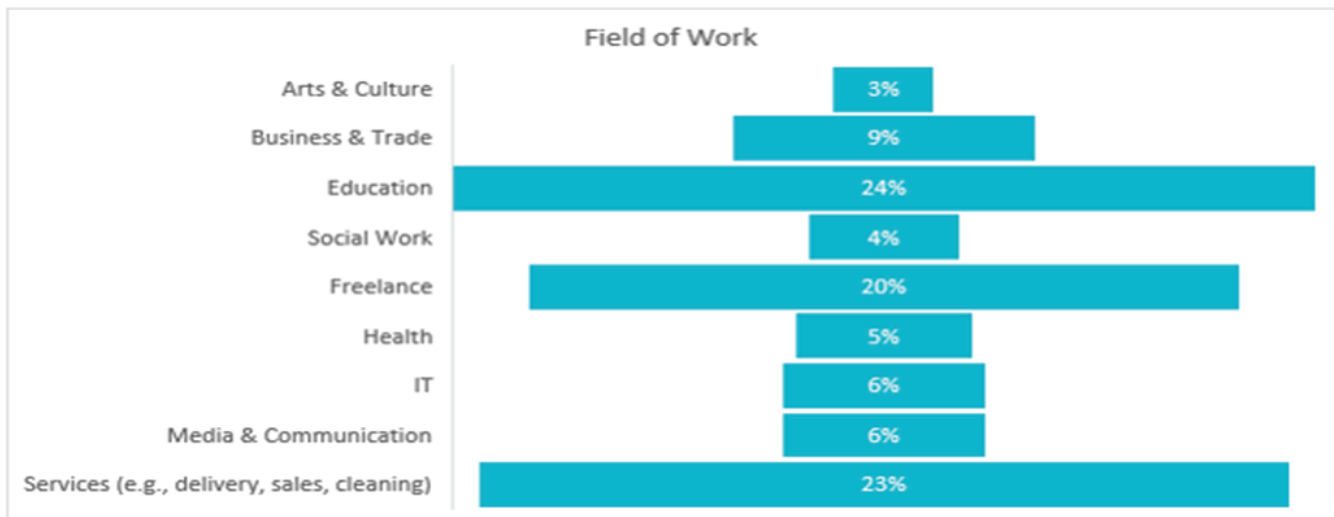


Figure 4

Of the 106 survey participants, **75% were female and 25% were male**, as illustrated in **Figure 1**. This gender distribution suggests that women were more actively engaged in the research process, which may reflect their higher visibility and participation in civic initiatives, community pro-grams, and public discussions.

Educational levels varied considerably among respondents. As shown in **Figure 2**, **48%** of participants reported holding a university degree, making it the largest category. This was followed by individuals with **post-graduate degrees (20%)**, **technical education (18%)**, **secondary school education (12%)**, and a smaller proportion who completed **primary education (2%)**. Respondents also represented a diverse set of academic disciplines, including **political science, banking and finance, computer science, engineering, business, law, and social work**, indicating multidisciplinary youth engagement in the study.

Employment status also revealed notable patterns. According to **Figure 3**, **46% of respondents were unemployed, 22% were employed part-time, 25% were employed full-time, and 7% identified as entrepreneurs.** This distribution underscores the economic challenges young people in Baalbek face, with limited access to stable employment. At the same time, the presence of young entrepreneurs suggests a growing tendency toward self-generated income as an alternative to traditional employment.

In terms of occupational sectors, participants reported involvement in a wide variety of fields. As reflected in **Figure 4**, respondents worked in **art and culture (3%), business and trade (9%), education (24%), social work (4%), freelancing (20%), healthcare (5%), information technology (6%), media and communication (6%), and service-sector jobs such as sales, delivery, and cleaning (23%).** This distribution indicates that education and freelancing represent two significant areas of youth employment. Meanwhile, the exceptionally high percentage in service-sector jobs reflects the structure of Baalbek's local labor market, where specialized opportunities remain limited and many youth rely on lower-income service roles for financial stability.

Social Participation

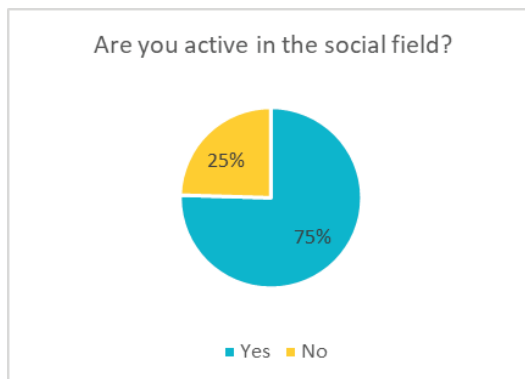


Figure 5

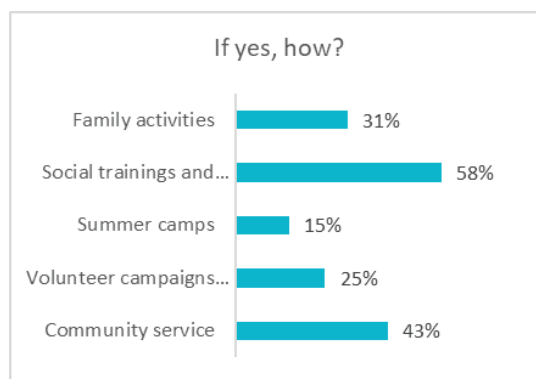


Figure 6

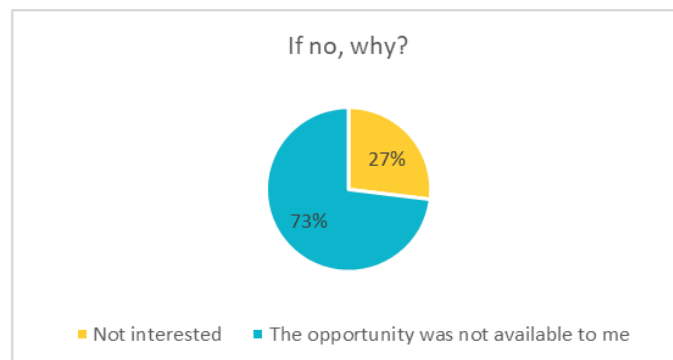


Figure 7

The distribution of social participation shown in **Figure 5** indicates that only **25% of respondents** reported being active in the social field, while **75% reported non-participation**. This notable imbalance suggests that the majority of young people in the sample are not currently engaged in structured social or community initiatives. The low participation rate may reflect broader regional challenges, such as limited access to civic programs, insufficient institutional outreach, or a lack of inclusive community platforms.

Among those who reported being socially active, **Figure 6** shows a wide range of activities. The highest engagement was observed in **social trainings and workshops (58%)**, followed by **community service (43%)**, and **family-related activities (31%)**. Participation in **volunteer campaigns (25%)** and **summer camps (15%)** was lower than in comparison, suggesting that respondents tend to engage more in learning-oriented or service-based initiatives than in seasonal or informal activities. This pattern aligns with earlier findings on respondents' educational back-grounds, suggesting that youth with greater academic exposure may be more inclined toward structured developmental activities.

In contrast, **Figure 7** identifies the reasons behind non-participation in social activities. A relatively small proportion (**27%**) stated that they are not interested, whereas an overwhelming **73% attributed their non-engagement to the lack of available opportunities**. This indicates that the primary barrier is not a lack of motivation but limited access to appropriate programs or platforms. Such a distribution highlights a structural gap in the Baalbek region's civic and social landscape, where youth interest is present but the enabling environment remains insufficient.

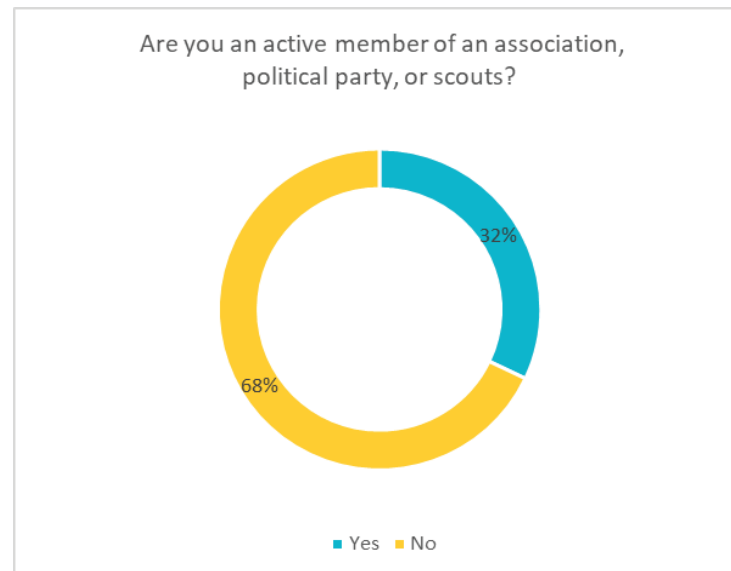


Figure 8



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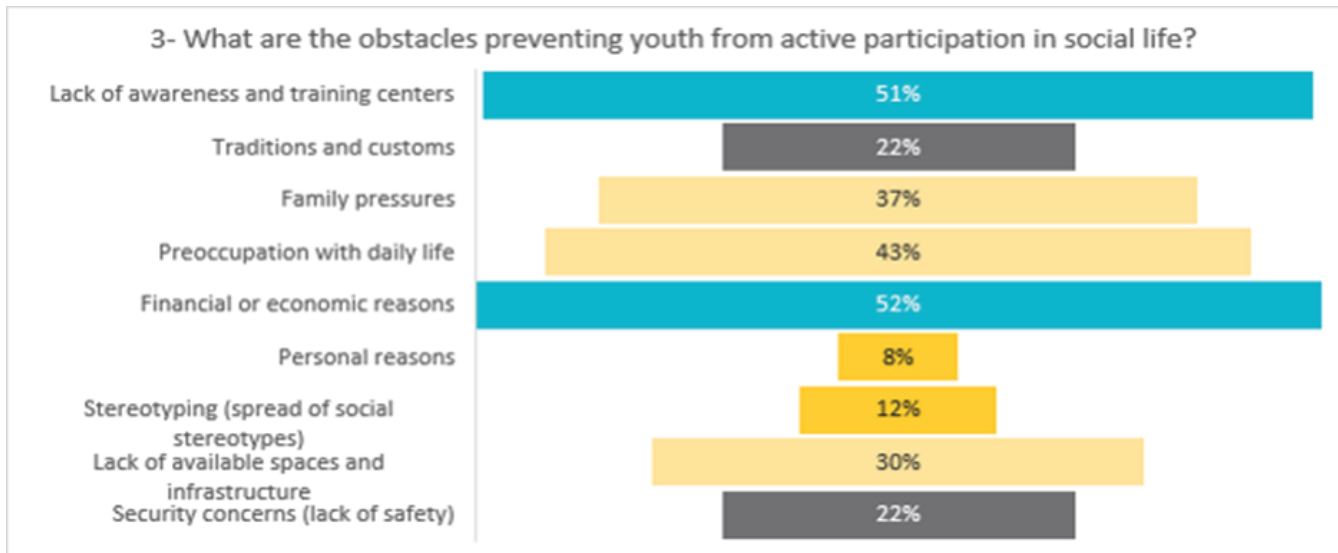


Figure 9

The distribution shown in **Figure 8** indicates that only **32% of respondents** reported being active members of an association, a political party, or the Scouts. In contrast, a significant **68% are not affiliated** with any organized group. This finding underscores limited structured civic engagement among youth in Baalbek, suggesting that organizational participation remains relatively low despite the presence of various community and civic institutions. This low affiliation rate reinforces earlier observations of restricted youth involvement in formal social or public life structures, suggesting broader systemic challenges that hinder sustained engagement.

The obstacles preventing youth from active participation in social life, presented in **Figure 9**, highlight a complex interplay of structural, economic, familial, and cultural factors. The most prominent barriers include **financial and economic constraints (52%)** and the **lack of awareness and training centers (51%)**, both of which are consistent with the economic hardship and limited institutional infrastructure documented in regional assessments. Additionally, **preoccupation with daily life responsibilities (43%)** further restricts youth capacity to engage, reflecting the economic pressures that necessitate prioritizing work and survival over civic involvement.

Other significant barriers include **family pressure (37%)**, **lack of available spaces and infrastructure (30%)**, and **security concerns (22%)**, indicating that household dynamics, insufficient community facilities, and the region's unstable environment also play influential roles. Cultural elements, such as **traditions and customs (22%)** and **stereotyping (12%)**, demonstrate how social norms and perceptions may discourage participation, particularly for women or youth perceived as challenging traditional hierarchies. A smaller proportion (**8%**) attributed their non-participation to personal reasons, suggesting that individual preferences or psychological factors also contribute, though to a lesser extent.



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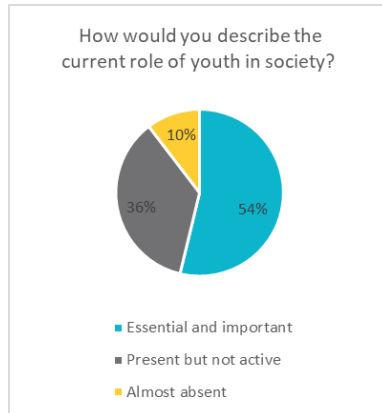


Figure 10

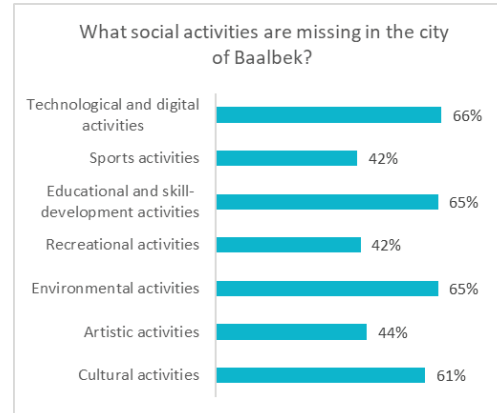


Figure 11

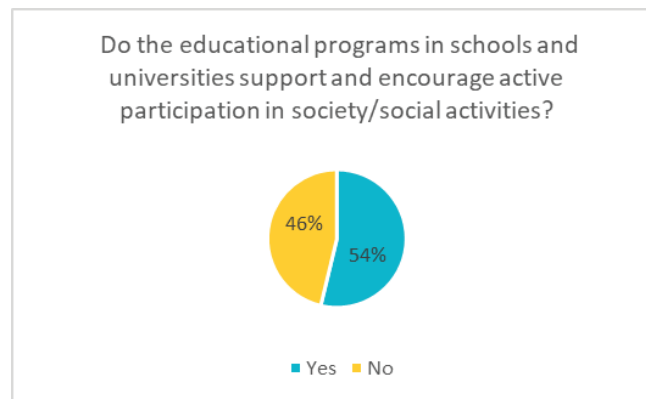


Figure 12

As illustrated in **Figure 10**, respondents expressed varying perceptions regarding the current role of youth in society. A majority (**54%**) described the role of youth as essential, indicating strong recognition of their potential influence on community development and decision-making. In contrast, **36%** stated that youth are present but not active, reflecting limited engagement despite their visibility. A smaller proportion (**10%**) perceived youth as almost absent, suggesting that structural or societal barriers may still restrict youth involvement in public life. These findings point to a recognized but underutilized role of youth within the Baalbek community.

Figure 11 highlights the types of social activities that respondents believe are missing in Baalbek. The most frequently identified needs include **technological and digital activities (66%)**, **educational and skill-development programs (65%)**, and **environmental activities (65%)**. These results underscore an apparent demand for programming aligned with modern competencies, sustainability, and market-relevant skills. Additionally, respondents noted gaps in **cultural activities (61%)**, **artistic programs (44%)**, **sports activities (42%)**, and **recreational opportunities (42%)**. The broad distribution across these categories suggests that youth lack diverse and accessible spaces for learning, creativity, and social engagement. These missing activities may contribute to earlier findings of low youth participation, underscoring the need for inclusive, dynamic community-based initiatives.

In **Figure 12**, respondents were asked whether educational programs in schools and universities support and encourage active participation in society. The responses were almost evenly split, with **54% reporting “yes”** and **46% reporting “no.”** This division indicates a mixed perception of the role of educational institutions. While a slight majority believe that schools and universities contribute positively to civic engagement, nearly half of the respondents feel that current programs fall short. These findings may reflect inconsistencies in extracurricular offerings, differences between educational institutions, or a need for more structured civic education and participatory learning approaches.

Political Participation

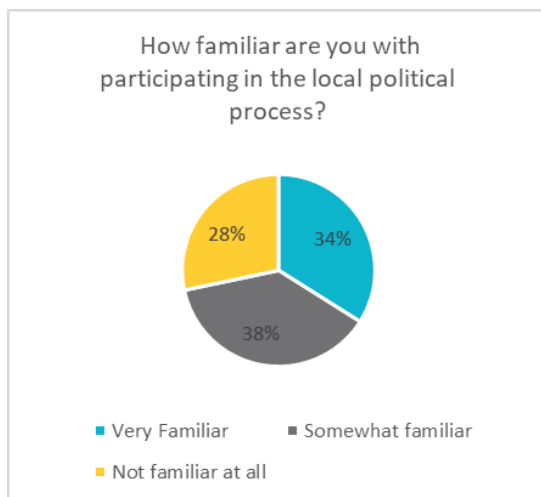


Figure 13

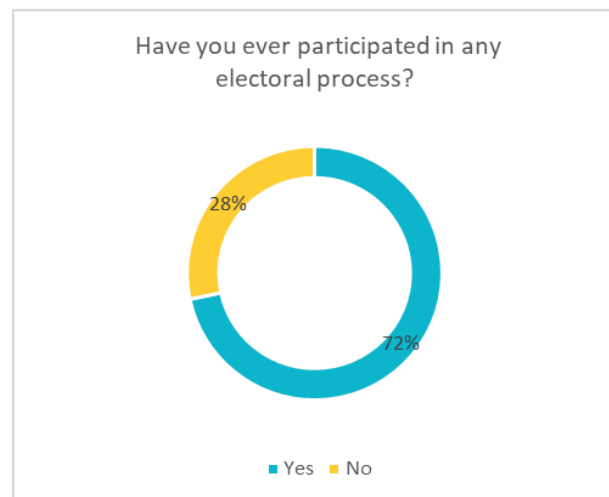


Figure 14

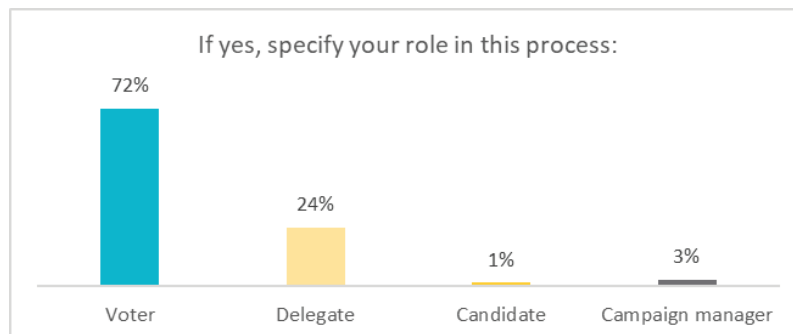


Figure 15

As shown in **Figure 13**, respondents reported varying degrees of familiarity with local political participation. A combined majority expressed some level of understanding, with **34% indicating they are “very familiar”** and **38% stating they are “somewhat familiar.”** This means that **72%** of the respondents possess at least a basic awareness of civic and political mechanisms in their municipality. Meanwhile, **28% reported being “not familiar at all,”** highlighting a significant knowledge gap that may act as a barrier to meaningful political involvement. These findings suggest that while general awareness exists, there is a clear need for more structured political education and community-based training to strengthen youth political literacy.

In **Figure 14**, respondents were asked whether they had ever participated in any electoral process. A substantial **72% reported “yes,” whereas 28% indicated they had not participated.** This relatively high participation rate reflects a willingness among youth and young adults to engage in electoral practices, even in the face of documented obstacles such as political polarization, financial constraints, or low confidence in public institutions.

Among those who had participated, **Figure 15** provides a detailed breakdown of their roles. The majority (**72%**) reported voting, demonstrating that electoral engagement is most commonly exercised through traditional voting. Additionally, **24 % served as delegates**, indicating deeper involvement inside polling centers and political lists. **3% of respondents identified roles such as campaign manager, and 1% reported running as a candidate.** These results show that while most youth engagement remains at the voter level, there is emerging participation in more active and influential capacities such as campaigning, election monitoring, and candidacy.

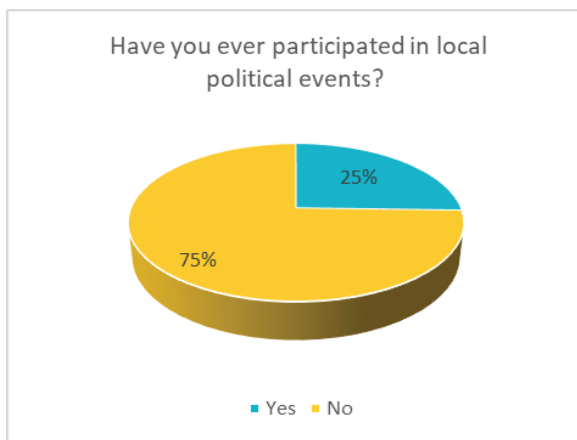


Figure 16

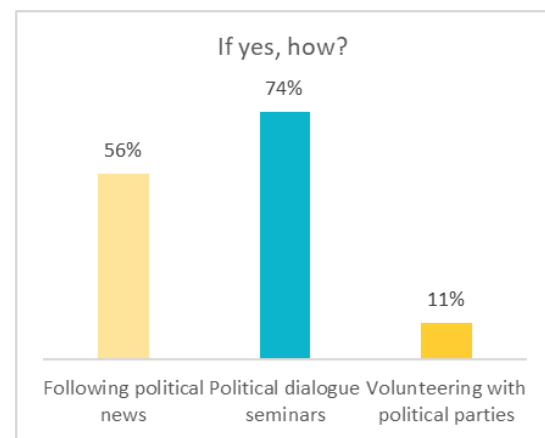


Figure 17

As presented in **Figure 16**, respondents were asked whether they had ever participated in local political events. The results show that **75% reported “no,”** indicating they had not taken part in such activities, while only **25% reported “yes.”** This considerable gap suggests that although a majority of respondents have participated in electoral processes (as shown earlier), their involvement in broader political events remains limited. The low level of engagement may be explained by structural obstacles identified in earlier sections, such as limited opportunities, lack of political spaces for youth, fear of societal judgment, or insufficient confidence in public institutions.

For those who had participated in political events, **Figure 17** provides insight into the specific forms of engagement. The most common activity reported was **attending political dialogue seminars (74%),** the primary avenue through which youth engage in political life outside elections. This suggests that respondents are more inclined to participate in structured, discussion-based political spaces rather than partisan or campaign-related activities. Following this, **56 % indicated they follow political news,** reflecting a form of passive engagement that contributes to political awareness but does not necessarily translate into action. **Only 11% reported volunteering with political parties,** highlighting minimal integration of youth into formal political structures.



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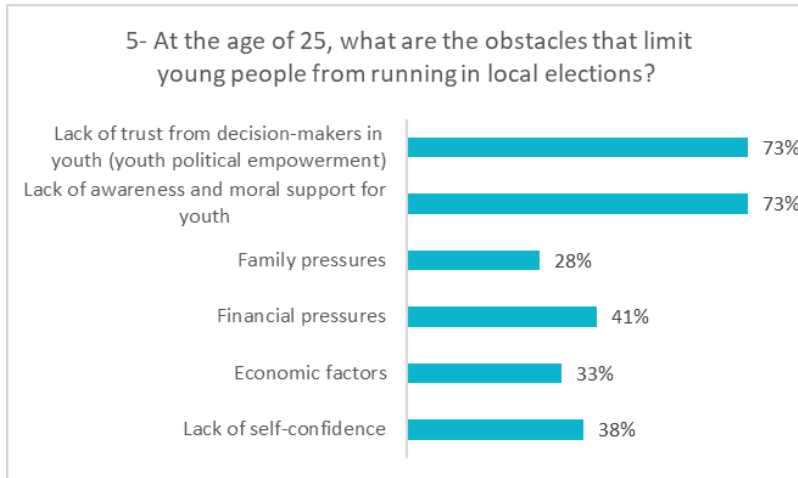


Figure 18

Figure 19

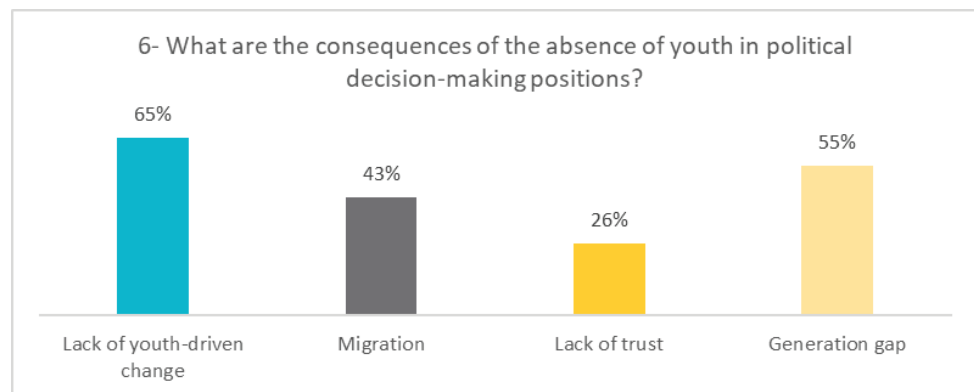


Figure 18 examines the key obstacles that prevent young people, particularly those aged 25, from running in local elections. The findings reveal several prominent barriers. **The most widely acknowledged challenges are a lack of trust from decision-makers (73%) and a lack of aware-ness (73%),** indicating that both institutional distrust and insufficient political knowledge significantly hinder youth ambitions for candidacy. These barriers point to a systemic problem in which young people feel excluded from political structures and lack access to the information and mentorship needed to navigate electoral processes.

Additional obstacles include **financial pressure (41%), economic factors (33%), and family pressures (28%),** which collectively underscore the socio-economic constraints that limit youth political engagement. These findings align with interviews indicating that financial instability, household expectations, and the region's economic reality discourage youth from pursuing public roles. Moreover, **38% reported a lack of self-confidence,** reinforcing earlier survey and interview insights showing that psychological barriers—often shaped by social norms and limited opportuni-ties—play a substantial role in deterring youth leadership.

Figure 19 addresses the perceived consequences of youth absence from political decision-making positions. **A significant majority (65%) identified lack of youth-driven change as the primary outcome**, reflecting concerns that innovative ideas, modern perspectives, and development-oriented priorities are not adequately represented in local governance. Furthermore, **55% high-lighted the emergence of a generation gap**, suggesting that without youth involvement, public decisions fail to reflect the needs, language, and aspirations of younger generations.

Other important consequences include **migration (43%)**, indicating that exclusion from political roles may fuel the youth's desire to leave the region or the country. This aligns strongly with interview findings, where experts noted that political stagnation pushes youth to seek opportunities elsewhere. Additionally, **26% pointed to lack of trust as a key consequence**, suggesting that weak youth representation further erodes public confidence in political institutions.

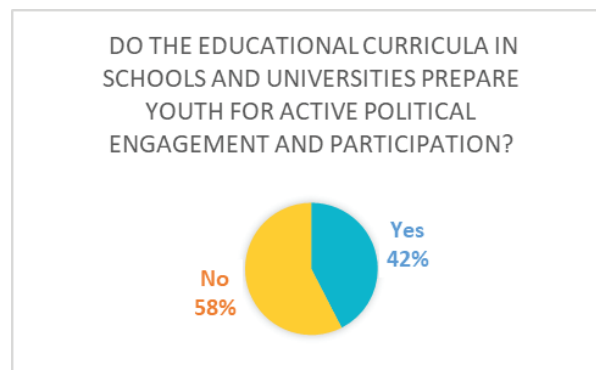


Figure 20

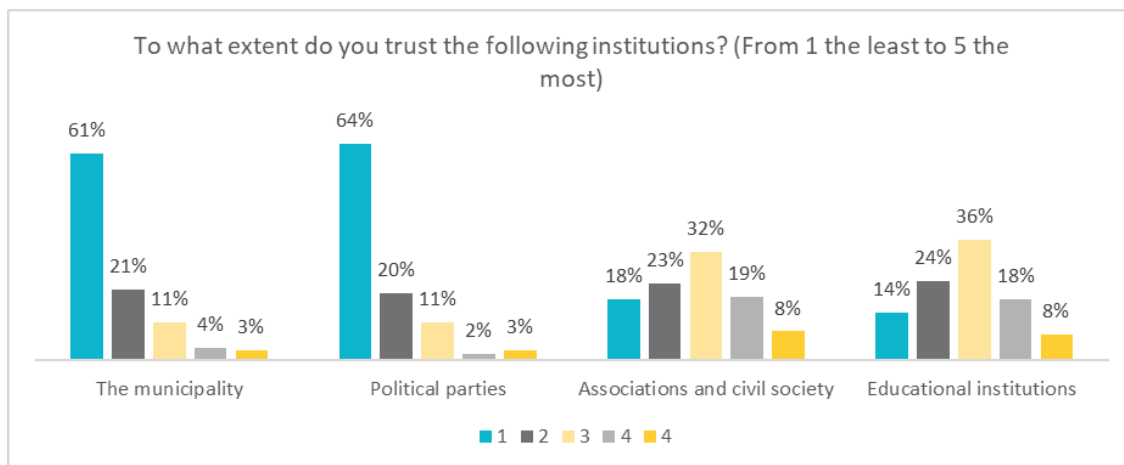


Figure 21



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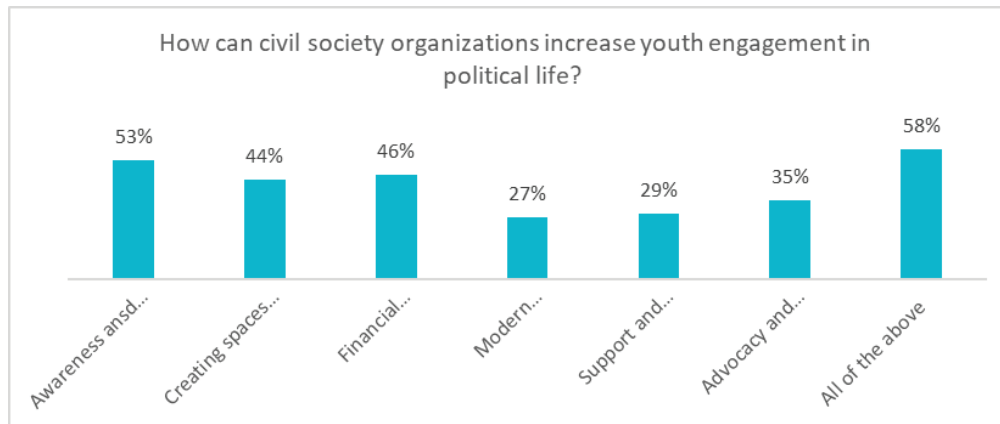


Figure 22

Figure 20 explores whether educational curricula in schools and universities adequately prepare youth for active participation and political engagement. The results show a divided perception: **58% say "No" and 48% say "Yes."** This split suggests that while a significant portion of young people acknowledge some level of political or civic preparation within educational systems, a slightly larger majority believes curricula remain insufficient. These findings are consistent with interview insights, particularly those from school and university administrators, who emphasized the need for experiential learning, civic clubs, student elections, and community-based projects to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Figure 21 evaluates levels of trust in key institutions, measured on a scale of 1 (least trust) to 5 (highest trust). The distribution highlights considerable variations across institutions. **Associations and civil society** received the highest trust ratings, with **32% rating them "3," 18% rating them "5," and only 8% giving them the lowest score ("1").** Educational institutions follow a similar pattern, with **36% rating them "3," 14% rating them "5," and 8% rating them "1."** However, **political parties remain the least trusted, with 64% rating them "1,"** indicating strong mistrust, as do municipalities, with 61% rating them "1."

These results show that **civil society organizations—not municipalities or political parties—are viewed as the most trustworthy institutions for youth engagement.** This finding aligns with in-interview insights, where many experts emphasized the positive role of civil society in providing safe spaces, training, and youth empowerment. Conversely, political parties and municipalities receive low trust scores, reinforcing the widespread perception of political inefficiency, corruption, and exclusion of youth issues repeatedly mentioned in interviews and the focus group discussion.

Figure 22 investigates how civil society organizations can increase youth participation in political life. The responses show broad consensus across multiple strategies. The highest percentage (**58%**) selected **"All of the above,"** indicating that youth believe engagement requires a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach. Individually, **respondents emphasized awareness and education (53%), creating safe and open spaces for dialogue (44%), financial empowerment (46%), support through mentorship (29%), modern communication tools (27%), and advocacy and debate programs (35%).** These findings resonate strongly with interviews, where youth and experts stressed the need for holistic programs combining training, exposure, resources, and sustained support networks.



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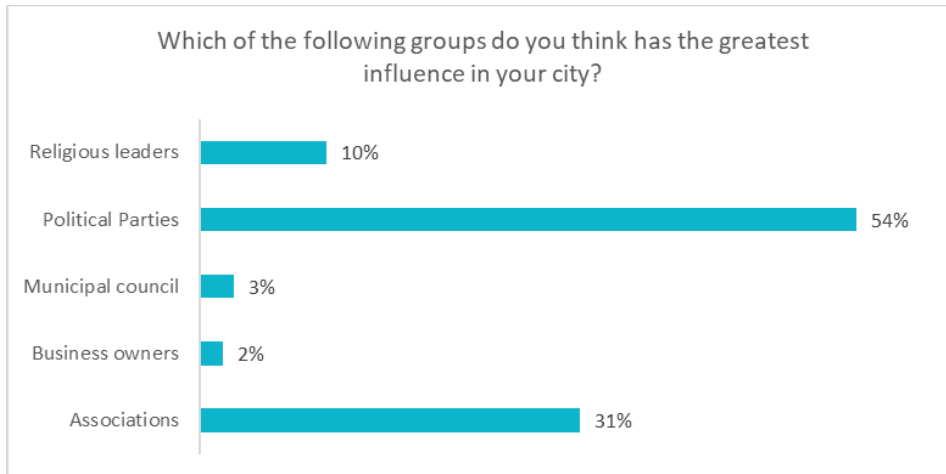


Figure 23

Figure 24

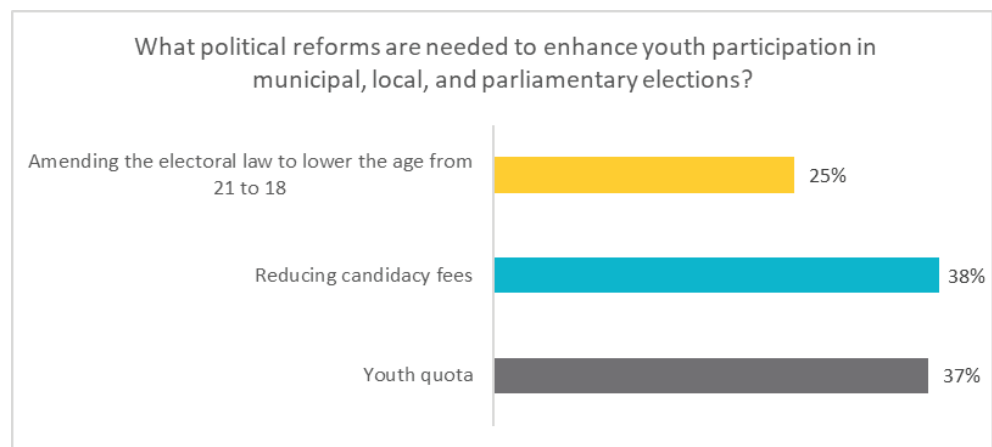


Figure 23 examines youth perceptions of the groups that hold the most significant influence in their city. The results show a dominant belief that **political parties exert the highest influence (54%)**, highlighting the strong partisan presence in local governance and public life in Baalbek. This aligns closely with interview findings, where several participants noted that political parties often shape municipal decisions, candidate selection, and even social initiatives.

Associations and civil society organizations were identified as the second most influential group (31%), reflecting their growing role in community development, youth engagement, and social programming. This perception aligns with interview insights from NGO leaders, such as Rawan Yaghi, who emphasized the growing involvement of youth in civil society and the transformative potential of community-based organizations.

Religious leaders were perceived as influential **by 10%**, indicating a more limited but still relevant role in shaping public attitudes and social norms. Meanwhile, **business owners (2%)** and the **municipal council (3%)** received the lowest influence ratings, suggesting that formal local governance structures and economic actors are viewed as having minimal decision-making power compared to political entities. This perception reinforces interview themes where youth and educators criticized the limited autonomy and impact of municipal councils due to political dominance and traditional leadership structures.

Figure 24 explores the political reforms that respondents believe are necessary to enhance youth participation in municipal, local, and parliamentary elections. The most frequently identified reform is **reducing candidacy fees (38%)**, highlighting the significant financial barriers that prevent youth from running for office. This finding corresponds to repeated themes in the interviews, where young participants, including candidates and delegates, emphasized economic pressure and financial limitations as major obstacles to political engagement.

The second most supported reform is the introduction of a **youth quota (37%)**, indicating that many respondents see institutionalized representation as an important mechanism to ensure youth inclusion. This mirrors interview insights, in which youth expressed frustration with generational hierarchies and the lack of trust placed in young leaders by parties, families, and decision-makers.

Lastly, **25%** of respondents support **amending the electoral law to lower the voting and candidacy age from 21 to 18**, reflecting the belief that earlier political exposure and involvement can strengthen youth participation. This aligns with feedback from school administrators and university leaders who stressed the importance of involving youth in civic experiences earlier, particularly through school elections, community initiatives, and leadership programs.

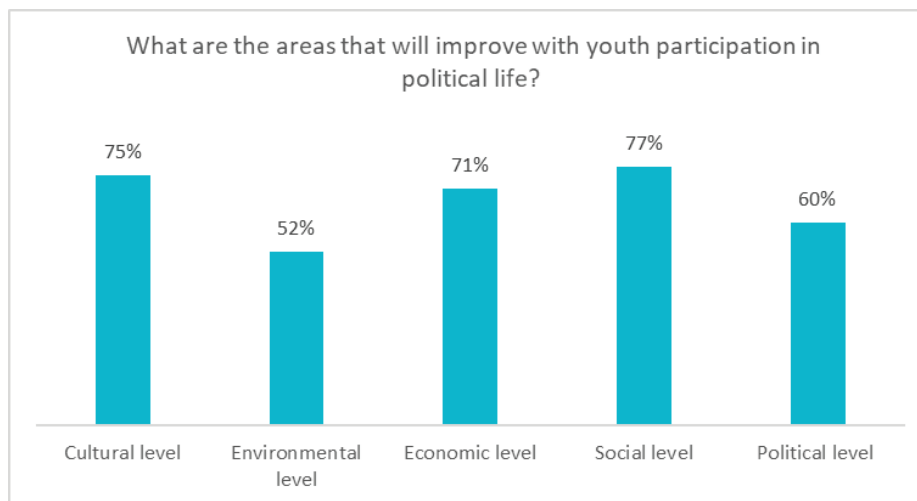


Figure 25



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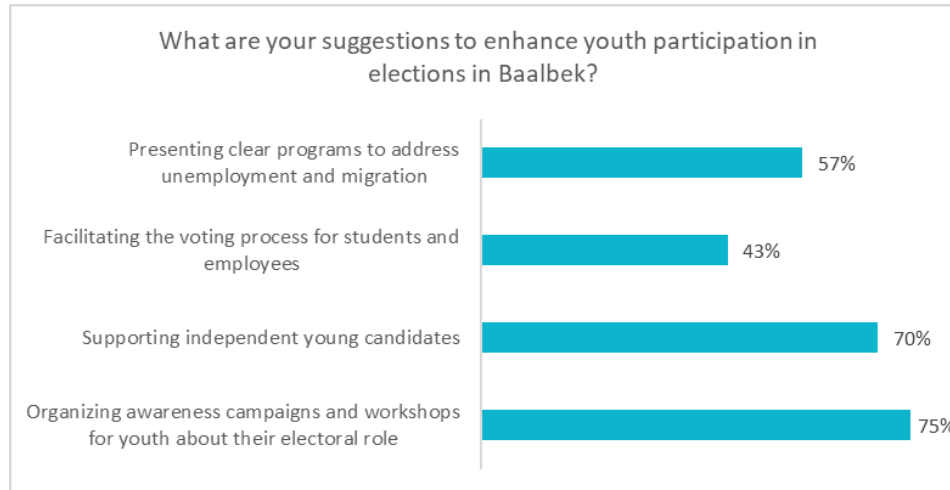


Figure 26

Figure 25 highlights respondents' perceptions of the areas that would improve most significantly if youth were more actively involved in political life. The findings show strong confidence in the transformative potential of youth engagement. The highest expected improvement is in the **social sphere (77%)**, suggesting that young people believe their participation can strengthen social cohesion, community initiatives, and collaborative civic behavior. This aligns with interviews in which school leaders and university administrators emphasized the ability of youth to foster constructive dialogue, inclusivity, and modern problem-solving approaches.

Similarly, **75%** of respondents believe that youth involvement would elevate the **cultural level**, which reflects the youth-driven innovation, creativity, and cultural revitalization—particularly through arts, media, and civil society activities.

Economic improvement also ranked high, with **71%** stating that increased youth political participation would improve the **economy**. This is consistent with insights from interviewees who stressed that young people bring new ideas, entrepreneurship, and development-oriented thinking that can address challenges such as unemployment, migration, and limited job opportunities.

Respondents also identified improvements in the **political (60%) and environmental (52%) spheres**, demonstrating confidence in youth to introduce more transparent practices, greater integrity, sustainability initiatives, and community-driven environmental solutions. These results are supported by experiences shared in the focus group discussion, where young candidates and delegates described their efforts to shift municipal priorities toward development and public service rather than traditional political competition.

Figure 26 presents respondents' recommendations for enhancing youth participation in elections in Baalbek. The most commonly selected suggestion was **organizing awareness sessions and workshops (75%)**, reflecting a clear need for structured, long-term educational efforts that build political literacy, confidence, and active engagement. This echoes interviews with educators and NGO leaders who emphasized the importance of safe spaces, civic education, and youth-focused training programs.



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A significant proportion (**70%**) recommended **supporting independent young candidates**, highlighting the desire to break away from traditional political structures and enable fresh leadership. This was a recurring theme in the focus group, where young participants shared experiences of mockery, exclusion, and financial barriers when attempting to run independently.

Additionally, **57%** of respondents emphasized the importance of **presenting clear programs to address employment and migration**, indicating that youth would be more motivated to participate politically if campaigns addressed their immediate needs and prospects. This aligns with in-terviews in which youth expressed discouragement due to unemployment, economic uncertainty, and lack of institutional support.

Lastly, **43%** suggested **facilitating the voting process for students and employees**, indicating logistical obstacles that hinder youth turnout. This speaks directly to observations by university leaders and young participants who noted that academic schedules, work responsibilities, and transportation barriers often limit youth participation in elections.

Open-Ended Questions

For the open-ended questions, respondents highlighted the significant role that civil society can play in supporting youth participation in local work. They emphasized that civil society organizations are essential for raising awareness, offering training workshops, and building youth leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills. Respondents also noted the importance of providing volunteering opportunities, safe spaces for dialogue, mentorship, and financial or logistical support to reduce barriers that often prevent youth engagement. Many added that linking youth with municipalities, forming youth committees, and successful youth experiences can strengthen their confidence and sense of belonging within their communities.

Regarding the extent to which social participation encourages political engagement, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that active involvement in social life positively influences youth participation in political life. They explained that volunteering, community service, and social initiatives help young people build awareness, expand networks, develop civic values, and gain confidence—skills that naturally translate into political involvement. While a minority felt that social participation has a limited impact due to mistrust or systemic challenges, the majority believed that social engagement is a critical pathway to deeper political awareness and future participation in elections, advocacy, and public decision-making.



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V. Conclusion

The results of this research reveal that youth in Baalbek possess significant educational potential, social awareness, and a clear desire to contribute to community development. However, their participation in both social and political life remains limited and uneven. Although a considerable proportion of young people are university-educated and express strong interest in social improvement, the majority report minimal engagement in local initiatives, limited access to meaningful opportunities, and a sense that their environment does not fully support or encourage active involvement.

The findings highlight several interconnected barriers that hinder participation. Youth repeatedly pointed to the lack of awareness programs, insufficient training centers, and the absence of accessible community spaces. Economic challenges, financial pressures, and the scarcity of employment opportunities further reduce their ability to engage actively. Cultural and social constraints—such as family pressure, conservative traditions, and limited trust from decision-makers—also shape their social and political participation, particularly affecting young women who continue to face gender-based obstacles to leadership.

These factors collectively contribute to reduced youth visibility in public life and to their restricted presence in local decision-making roles. The consequences of this absence are evident: slowed community development, deepening generational gaps, growing mistrust in institutions, and increased migration among young people seeking better prospects elsewhere. At the same time, the results show that when youth do participate—through community service, voluntary initiatives, or political processes—their involvement is perceived as essential. Respondents consistently believe that greater youth engagement would enhance cultural vitality, strengthen social cohesion, improve economic conditions, and introduce fresh perspectives into local governance.



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Despite the challenges, the results also point toward strong possibilities for progress. Many young people express eagerness to be part of change, recognize the value of collective action, and show willingness to assume leadership roles when provided with support. They also demonstrate clear awareness of the reforms required to enhance their participation, including improved civic education, better infrastructure, financial facilitation, and the creation of inclusive opportunities that strengthen their confidence and sense of belonging.

Overall, the results indicate that Baalbek's youth are not disengaged by choice but by circumstance. With the right support systems, stronger institutional trust, and more youth-centered spaces for dialogue and participation, they can emerge as active contributors to local development. Their potential—educational, social, and political—remains one of Baalbek's greatest assets, capable of driving meaningful and sustainable change if fully recognized and empowered.

VI. Recommendations

Based on the insights gathered from the survey findings, interviews with professionals, and the focus group discussion with municipal candidates and political academy participants, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance youth participation in social and political life in Baalbek:

1. Municipalities and Local Authorities

Youth Inclusion in Local Governance: Create youth advisory councils and participatory platforms that enable young people to contribute to municipal planning, development, and decision-making.

Spaces and Infrastructure: Allocate accessible public spaces for youth clubs, community activities, arts, sports, and digital innovation centers to address the current lack of safe and inclusive engagement spaces.

Transparency and Communication: Improve communication channels with residents, especially youth, by using clear, consistent, and accessible messaging regarding municipal programs and opportunities.

2. Educational Institutions (Schools, Technical Institutes, Universities)

Curriculum Reform: Integrate civic education, leadership skills, and participatory learning into school and university curricula to strengthen students' understanding of civic rights and responsibilities.

Student Engagement Programs: Encourage student-led clubs, debates, volunteering activities, and community service projects that foster initiative, leadership, and social responsibility.

Career and Skill Development: Provide training in digital literacy, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, and communication skills to improve youth readiness for public and political engagement.



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3. Civil Society Organizations (NGOs)

Awareness and Capacity-Building: Conduct regular workshops, training sessions, and awareness campaigns on civic engagement, political participation, and community leadership targeting both youth and their families.

Support Structures: Offer mentorship programs, safe dialogue spaces, psychological support, and small grants for youth-led initiatives addressing community needs.

Bridging Actors: Strengthen collaboration among youth, municipalities, universities, and community leaders by organizing forums, town hall meetings, and joint action projects.

4. National Policymakers and Legislators

Electoral Reform: Amend key provisions in electoral laws, such as lowering the candidacy age from 21 to 18, reducing candidacy fees, and considering youth quotas to promote fair representation.

Youth-Centered Policies: Develop national strategies that address youth unemployment, migration pressures, and economic exclusion—factors shown to hinder youth participation.

Investment in Youth Development: Allocate government funding for youth programs, innovation labs, vocational training, and support to local initiatives that enhance civic and political engagement.

5. Political Parties

Youth Integration: Promote meaningful inclusion of young members within party structures and decision-making bodies. Establish youth wings that offer leadership roles rather than symbolic positions.

Issue-Based Agendas: Shift from clientelistic approaches to development-oriented programs that address employment, education, environment, and cultural development—the issues youth identified as priorities.

Training and Mentorship: Offer structured training for young candidates and volunteers on campaigning, political communication, and policy analysis.

6. Families and Community Leaders

Supportive Social Environment: Encourage open dialogue at home and in the community, reducing pressure, stereotyping, and the patriarchal norms that restrict youth—especially young women—from participating.



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Role Modeling: Community leaders should demonstrate trust in youth by involving them in local initiatives, acknowledging their perspectives, and promoting diversity in public roles.

Early Empowerment: Teach young people active listening, respectful debate, and confidence-building from an early age to counter fear of failure and social discouragement.

7. International and Donor Organizations

Long-Term Programs: Support multi-year youth development programs that build civic competencies, mental resilience, and leadership skills.

Funding and Technical Assistance: Provide resources for youth-led initiatives, municipality-CSO partnerships, and capacity-building programs that strengthen local governance.

Policy Support: Assist national institutions and local actors in developing evidence-based policies that promote inclusive youth participation.

By implementing these recommendations, the various actors in Baalbek can collaboratively build a more inclusive, participatory environment where youth are empowered to contribute to social development and political life. The engagement of municipalities, educational institutions, civil society, policymakers, political parties, families, and international partners is essential to ensuring that young people are not only represented but meaningfully involved in shaping the future of their community.



Grateful to USPEaK and the U.S. Embassy for the countless empowering experiences.



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