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**Associative youth as agents of societal resilience in Algeria: an assessment
through their roles during Covid-19**

**الشباب الجمعوي كعامل للمقاومة المجتمعية في الجزائر: تقييم من خلال أدوارهم
خلال كوفيد-19**

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Abstract:

This article addresses associative youth in Algeria as agents of societal resilience basing on their roles during the Covid-19 crisis. To do this, it presents the experience of two youth associations operating in the city of Oran which are: the association of Intellectual Young for Charity and Humanitarian Work and the Bahia Youth Association. The results demonstrate that the role of young people was centered on actions of social and humanitarian solidarity. However, they also managed to transform the health crisis into an opportunity to acquire new skills related to the fields of health and communication, as well as questioning the role of the associative movement to manage crisis. Activism through these associations has also translated into demands for social citizenship, which have become weakened during Covid-19 due to the limits of social protection policies and the isolation of certain associations from real social problems.

Keywords: Youth, associative participation, societal resilience, Covid-19.

الملخص:

يقارب هذا المقال الشباب الجمعوي الجزائري باعتبارهم عاملا من عوامل الصمود المجتمعي و هذا بالاستناد الى الادوار التي قاموا بها خلال أزمة كوفيد-19. وللقيام بذلك، يعرض المقال تجربة جمعيتين شبابيتين ناشطتين بمدينة وهران وهما: جمعية الشباب المثقف للعمل الخيري والإنساني وجمعية شباب الباهية. وأظهرت النتائج أن دور هؤلاء الشباب تمحور حول نشاطات التضامن الاجتماعي والإنساني، ولكنهم تمكنوا أيضاً من تحويل الأزمة الصحية إلى فرصة لاكتساب مهارات جديدة تتعلق بمجالي الصحة والتواصل و المشاركة في فتح نقاش حول دور الحركة الجمعوية في تسيير الازمات. كما ترجم نشاط الشباب في هاتين الجمعيتين إلى مطالب بالمواطنة الاجتماعية، والتي عرفت تراجعاً خلال أزمة كوفيد-19 بسبب حدود سياسات الحماية الاجتماعية و انصراف بعض الجمعيات عن المشاكل الاجتماعية الحقيقية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشباب، المشاركة الجمعوية، المقاومة المجتمعية، كوفيد-19

1.3 INTRODUCTION

This article examines the roles played by young people to face the effects of Covid-19 pandemic on the population, particularly in the context of youth associations. To do this, my research perspective considers young people as promoters of social change and agents of societal resilience. The adoption of this view on young people follows their growing role in social and political life since the new millennium, during which several forms of political and civil society initiatives have been led by them to achieve multiple goals. For example but not limited to, I can mention the movement led by the unemployed young people in the Algerian Sahara to fight against forms of regional inequalities in terms of wealth distribution. Young people also contributed to the creation of the Coordination for Change and Democracy in 2011, which constituted a platform for greater demand of democratic the political life. There is also the National Coordination for the Defense of Master's and Doctorate holders and the National Coordination of Pre-Employment Contracts¹. These forms of activism and others have shown that young people no longer constitute just an age group, but have become a movement and an actor in political and social life through actions and forms of mobilization around issues that affect them and society in general.

In the context of the health crisis that hit the world in March 2020, studies on the situation of young people reflected a negative image of the impact of Covid-19 on them. This age group was considered the first victim of this pandemic due to shift towards online or remote education platforms which raised concerns about

efficacy of these means, especially in settings where educational institutions faced difficulties related to the availability of distance education technologies and the readiness of students and educational staffs to engage in this form of education. On the other hand, the lockdown decreased the economic growth and aggravated the difficulties of young people to maintain their jobs or find stable and permanent positions. In this context, it has been reported that young workers with less experience and skills were more likely to lose their jobs, while those who were working in temporary and service jobs found themselves outside the workforce. Psychological and mental health is also an impact that Covid-19 exerted on young people. Lockdown constraints have limited direct social interactions of young people and their access to places of entertainment. Psychologists' reports had warned of the spread of depression cases and despair among young people due to social isolation and called for searching alternatives strategies to reduce their effects².

In parallel with the pessimist view of Covid-19 impact on young people, there is a trend which addresses them as an actor who has contributed to confronting the Covid-19 crisis and limiting its effects on society. This trend builds on the role played by youth organizations, particularly during the pandemic. For example, the study conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development indicates that about three in four youth organizations have created online campaigns to inform young members with appropriate measures to protect themselves and their families from the pandemic. More than half of the organizations studied have also turned to

digital and online tools to provide practical advice to young people on how to manage mental and physical health, stigma and discrimination³.

This trend considers young people as a resource and a positive actor in society once their capacities are framed and well oriented. It builds such view on the characteristics that specify the stage of youth itself. During this age stage, the individual has usually physical energy and a greater capacity to learn new skills. They are also more able to enter in processes of change due to the coincidence of this age period with the process of self -construction and liberties from the social responsibilities (such as family and professional responsibility). The optimist trend on young people during Covid-19 indicates also that the pandemic, as much as deteriorated the social conditions of young people, has on the other hand represented an opportunity for them to discover and engage in new paths, like young people who turned to e-commerce or continued a specialized training experience via the Internet and gained new experiences through participation in civic initiatives. From this perspective, youth has become an agent of resistance and flexibility to face the rapid fluctuations that societies experience, whereas it was previously framed as a factor of social and political instability due to the spread of unemployment, drugs and extremism among its members.

My article is situated within this trend and attempts to show the roles played by young people in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Algerian context. I will specifically shed light on the role of youth associations by presenting the cases of the Association of Intellectual Young for Charity and

Humanitarian Work and the Bahia Youth Association. Operating in the city of Oran, young people active within these associations have contributed to numerous solidarity and humanitarian initiatives in order to mitigate the effects of Covid-19 on citizens in general and young people in particular. By analyzing the reasons for their participation and the pattern of their activities, I questioned their perception of the concept of citizenship in the context of the crisis and their expectations regarding their participation in these associations.

The article is organized as follows. I first present the conceptual framework of the study. I move then to explain the methodological part relating to data collection and analysis. I conclude by presenting the results of the study and the most important conclusions learnt from them.

2.3 Conceptual framework of the study

Since my study addresses particularly associative youth, it adopts for a sociological perspective of young people which I will explain its core assumptions of in the first section of this part. I move then to define what I mean by associative participation and finally, I found it important to give an overview about the place of youth associations within the national associational fabric.

2.1 A sociological perspective to youth

Although the word “youth” refers to the period separating adolescence and adulthood of individuals’ life course, there are differences about the length of this stage. The United Nations definition determines “youth” as those individuals whose age ranges between 15 and 24 years. During this

period, individual usually had have completed their education, integrated into the labor market, and achieved financial and social independence. However, the United Nations definition ignores the peculiarities of societies, since achieving the transition to the stage of adulthood is linked to the economic and social conditions that facilitate or complicate the integration process at an early stage. Accordingly, we find in some countries and societies that the youth stage can reach 35 years, like the African Union determination. In addition to this, the United Nation definition don't take into account cultural standards in determining when an individual achieves the transition from youth to adulthood, such as the ability to assume social and family responsibility⁴.

Youth definition poses challenges related to the diversity and difference that characterize it, as young people are not similar in terms of social status, ideas, and orientations. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu pointed out that any definition of young people must include a sociological determination of its components, otherwise, youth risks to be only just a word. On this basis, youth are not just a group of individuals united by belonging to a specific age stage, but there must be other ties that bring them together, such as belonging to a specific political movement, university students, unemployed youth, or youth from popular neighborhoods. In this sense, young people acquire a sociological content that makes them a homogeneous category and more susceptible to analysis. Here, the concept of the "social field" developed by Pierre Bourdieu can be useful in providing a better definition of youth. Youth in the political field is not the same as in the cultural, educational, economic, or legal field,

because it is linked to how the actors of each field define this age group within their field of activity⁵.

Drawing on these observations, my definition of youth in this article adopts two criteria. The first is the age criterion, which means here individuals who belong to the age group extending from 15 to 34 years. I consider that this period is appropriate to the Algerian context, as studies has already affirmed that the transition of young people to adulthood is linked to achieving social integration, which has become difficult in Algeria due to the economic crises, delayed entry into the labor market, and achieving social and financial independence⁶. The second criterion is sociological, and concerns only young people that are committed with a youth association, or what I call here the "associative youth" .

2.2 Associative participation

Associative participation is considered as part of citizen participation which is defined as the degree of citizens' involvement in the management of public affairs and processes of decision-making. There are several forms though which citizens' involvement is manifested. It can be structured within organizations or unstructured in the form of street movements and sits-in. It can also take place individually or collectively, formally and informally, and it can also take place in political channels of expression such as parties and elections, and civic initiatives such as associations and voluntary activities⁷.

The literature distinguishes between participation and engagement, given that participation is not always accompanied by engagement, such as an individual who vote for certain ideas or ideologies without engaging in political party, or people who

participate in the activities of a political party without voting for it, or donating a sum of money to an association without engaging in its activities. Likewise, engagement cannot be always accompanied by participation, such as an individual who have certain beliefs and ideologies without engaging in activities and actions to realize them. As a result, participation often takes on concrete and manifest forms, while engagement may limits to beliefs, attitudes, and convictions⁸.

Real and effective citizen participation is generally connected to the existence of a political governance system capable of providing frameworks and channels that involve and incite individuals to contribute in the decision-making process and to the implementation public policies. Nevertheless, citizen must also show what is called "active citizenship", that is, citizens whose citizenship is not limited only to possessing rights and duties within the framework of a national state, but to the exercise of this citizenship by involving in various forms of activities that reflect an individual belonging to a group and the wish to contribute to solving its problems and managing its affairs.

Concerning the associative participation, it is classified in the category of organized and peaceful citizen participation frameworks that seek to involve the citizen from the bottom up, that is, to influence public policies and decisions through structured initiatives and to create a force of proposal from bottom to top⁹. The Algerian law defines it as follows:

“Associations are grouping of natural or moral persons on a contractual basis for a fixed or indefinite period. These people participate in the development of their

knowledge and devote their means voluntarily and for a non-profit purpose with a view to promoting and encouraging activities, particularly in the professional and social fields, scientific, religious, educational and cultural, sport, environmental, charitable and humanitarian”¹⁰

According to this definition, associative participation is part of a voluntary and contractual logic, which is based on the free will of the individuals and their conviction to exploit their resources to promote and serve a specific area or society in general. Therefore, the presence of civic awareness and awareness of challenges is necessary for inciting the associative participation.

Associative participation takes several forms. The associative participant can be a volunteer and devote more or less time to his organization. He can also be a beneficiary of the services offered by associations. Finally, there are participants who, through their commitment, aim to defend a specific cause or rights. They are generally named “involved participants” because their participation has a militant objective¹¹.

2.3 The place of youth associations in the Algerian associative fabric

Since independence, the associative fabric has experienced upward development, particularly since 1988, a period which saw an accelerated dynamic in the creation of associations. Indeed, ten years after this period, the number of associations has tripled, passing from 12,000 associations in 1988 to 57,400 associations in 1998, despite the circumstances of the national tragedy and the scarcity of economic resources during this period. This dynamic continued in the following years at the same dynamic. The number of associations increased from

75,000 associations in 2007 to 96,150 associations in 2017. Although there is no data on the percentage of citizens involved in the associative fabric, this percentage can be estimated at 20.2% of citizens aged 18 and over, by multiplying the average size of associations, which is around 50 members per association, by the total number of associations¹².

Relevant studies report that the Algerian associative fabric was able over a period of three decades to cover several areas. In this regard, the data provided by the National office of Statistics in 2018 indicate that the associative fabric is notably present in the following areas: culture and art, sport, social, humanitarian and health solidarity, education, training and professional integration, environment, and religion. Cultural activities occupy the forefront of the national associative fabric, with a percentage estimated at 64% of the activities carried out by this sector, followed by actions in sport, social, humanitarian and health¹³.

Regarding youth associations, they represent in 2023 4.8% of the total number of the associative fabric, which is equivalent to 4638 youth associations across the country. These associations were able to mobilize 542 294 young persons, with an average of 117 young persons per association. In terms of gender, they mobilize 353 257 young men and 189,037 young women, meaning that this associative sector is dominated by young men¹⁴.

Although there is insufficient data on the composition and activities of these youth organizations, their geographic distribution and their sources of financing, certain studies on the associative fabric in Algeria provide some insight. In this context, it is

reported that the associative fabric is characterized by its urban character, since 80% of associations are concentrated in urban areas, and that it suffers from the problem of continuity and regularity of activities, in addition to the rapid disappearance of associations after a short period of operation. The associative fabric generally is also faced with financial and material challenges, particularly in terms of ensuring the locations of the activity and the means necessary for funding activities, and the inability to transform into associative professionalism¹⁵.

3. Data and method

This study followed the case study method through collecting qualitative data at the level of two youth associations operating in the city of Oran from July 10th to 30th, 2022. These two associations are: the Association of Intellectual Young for Charity and Humanitarian Work and the Bahia Youth Association.

The Intellectual Young for Charity and Humanitarian Work is a social association. It was created on April 19, 2013 by a group of young people, mostly from the scout movement, and currently includes more than 160 volunteers. The association mainly strives to develop the abilities of young people to become positive and effective citizens in society by spreading the culture of volunteering and strengthening the spirit of citizenship. It also works to protect children and women, to spread the culture of first aid, to care for the homeless, to create educational clubs for children and to contribute to the reintegration of prisoners, and helping people with disabilities and protecting the environment. Most members of the association are university students or already terminated their university

education, with an average age of 24, and include activists of both sexes¹⁶.

The Bahia Youth Association was founded in 2015 by young people with a university education level and which currently has around 108 members with an average age of 24 years. It is an association of a social and solidarity objective which strives to help others through solidarity and social assistance programs, such as the allocation of monthly allowances to needy families, school bags and visits to children at hospital. It also aims to strengthen the capacities of young people to become effective citizens in society by training them in associative and voluntary work. It offers training courses in associative management. The association also focuses on the category of autistic children, especially through the care center which has created for patients with autism at the level of the municipality of Ain al-Turk in cooperation with the local authorities by transforming a school annex into a center to deal with this category¹⁷.

To collect data in these associations, I used the technique of semi-structured interviews with the leaders of these two associations and their members, and secondarily, by monitoring their Facebook pages. If the prior knowledge of the leaders and members of these associations had motivated me to take an interest in them, however, the roles they played before and during the Covid-19 crisis in the city of Oran is another reason to take them as two research cases, because they were able to maintain the dynamism of their activity during the pandemic and implemented several initiatives despite the sensitivity of the context and fear of the pandemic.

The questions addressed to the leaders and members of the associations were organized

into three main axes. The first axis concerned the collection of information on the history of the associations and their activities before the Covid-19 period, while the second axis focused on the interaction of the associations with the Covid-19 pandemic and their reactions depending on the evolution of the pandemic. The last theme examined the most important lessons learned from collective activity in the context of the health crisis.

Data processing applied a reflective thematic analysis¹⁸. Through this method, I was able to generate codes and themes basing on an interpretive reading process, which means that all the results produced, were based on my understanding of the data collected. Even if this method is generally used in cases where the researcher is the sole producer and analyzer of the data, the dimension of objectivity is not completely abandoned. The production of interpretations is conditioned by the respect of certain steps which include 1) data familiarization, 2) Coding, 3) generating initial themes, 4) Themes review 5) defining and naming themes, 6) creating a report¹⁹.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data processing resulted in three main themes which reflect together how young people acted as agents of social resilience in the context of Covid-19 crisis. These themes are as follow: immersion in charity and humanitarian work, a capacity of learning and transforming crisis to an opportunity and finally, defending values of social citizenship.

4.1 Invest in charity and humanitarian work

Due to the long period of the pandemic and the rapid changes that accompanied it, the

reactions of the two associations and the type of activities they carried out were different. The first stage of the pandemic was the difficult period, as both associations were forced to suspend many of their activities due to quarantine measures and social distancing, such as visits to the children's hospital, to the elderly people's centers and meetings at the association's location. However, the two associations announced on their social networks platforms that they would contribute to confronting the epidemic by participating in major solidarity campaigns and maintaining support for certain social groups, such as needy families, children with disabilities, school items and the food basket during the month of Ramadan.

After the Corona pandemic effects aggravated, especially in terms of health and limits of social protection system, the role of these two associations began to emerge. Both associations started investing in their experiences in humanitarian and charitable work. This included providing families affected by quarantine by food and medicine. Their activity expanded to include also hospital and medical staff by providing them with meals and some medical equipment.

The experience that both associations have accumulated in the field of charitable and humanitarian work helped them to effectively contribute to dealing with the epidemic, since they had a network and experiences in organizing charitable and solidarity work. They were already acknowledged of the precarious families with whom they had dealt before the Covid-19 period. Their legal status and cooperation with local authorities have facilitated them the acquisition of permissions to carry out

their activities. In addition, their relationships with economic operators allowed them to get financial support alongside human resources they already trained to set up and manage charitable and humanitarian projects which facilitated distribution of food, medicines, reaching isolated areas in the city of Oran, and organizing fund collect campaigns, especially during the second wave of Covid-19 and crisis of oxygen concentrators.

Another activity undertaken by the two associations during the quarantine period was the launch of several recreational, educational and entertainment activities in order to alleviate the psychological effects of quarantine. For example, the association of Young Intellectual for charitable and humanitarian work launched a program called "Challenge Accepted", which included the publication of positive photos of association members while they were carrying out voluntary work over the past years. This activity aimed to raise the positive spirit among members and create interaction during the quarantine period by posting commemorative photos and commenting on them by members and sympathizers of the association. Presenting and explaining a Hadith of the Prophet is another activity initiated by the members of the association, which included the selection of a Hadith of the Prophet and publishing it via a video composite for teaching and educational purposes. This type of activity contributed to break isolation and reduce the psychological effects of distancing and creating interactions in critical period.

4.2 Covid-19: from crisis to opportunity

Beside the solidarity and humanitarian activities, the two associations were able to

enter new areas of activity and acquire experiences different from those they used to do before Covid-19. Their presence in hospital establishments during peak periods to help and support medical staff have provided them with experience in the field of health care and to learn skills related to epidemic prevention and management. What has enriched the experience of the two associations in this area is their participation in the supply of medical equipment that hospitals needed to deal with the growing people infected by Covid-19, such as masks, protective clothing, medicines and oxygen bottles and concentrators. Furthermore, these two associations have participated in campaigns to disinfect public places in cooperation with local authorities or other associations.

Awareness related to protection from Covid-19 is also an area in which both associations were engaged in. They have set up awareness videos oriented to the large population, showing them how to avoid infection and explaining the risks and particularities of the epidemic, and invited people to respect distancing measures and quarantine deadlines, as well as the systematic use of disinfectants. An example of awareness activities is the "Stay at Home" program, which includes reciting poetic verses in song form to produce a greater influence on the population about the danger of the epidemic. Furthermore, the two associations participated on Bahia radio and national television in programs dedicated to raising awareness of the dangers of the pandemic, and they contributed to promoting the vaccination campaign against the epidemic and to refuting the rumors circulating about the effectiveness of vaccines and their biological effects on humans.

Rethinking and making the post-Covid-19 era is another opportunity that interested the two associations who invested in the Covid-19 crisis in order to open a discussion at the level of associations' action in terms of developing mechanisms and specialized training of volunteers in emergency crisis management. This is what the Association of Young Intellectual did through launching a program called "Gathering of Volunteers", in which the theme "Civil society and the crisis: efforts and challenges" was discussed. It was a meeting organized remotely and over several periods in order to benefit from the Covid-19 experience and improve the performance of association movement. In the same context, in December 2020, the same association organized a forum to discuss the theme of the role of young people in the face of crises and disasters. This forum is an extension of the annual forums that the association organizes each year on "young people's associational engagement people", which aimed to highlight the roles that youth organizations can play in confronting crises on the basis of which has already been accomplished during Covid-19 period.

In addition, the activities of the two associations intersected during the Covid-19 period, with the Ministry of Youth and Sports initiative which launched national dialogue in order to unify national policies for youth in the areas of economy, media, political participation, volunteering, education and training. Through their participation in this dialogue, the two associations provided numerous suggestions which then formed the basis of the government's youth program for the period 2020-2024.

Covid-19 as an opportunity for these two

associations also manifested as follow:

- 1) Some young people pointed out that their participation is connected to personal development and that the association represented for them a framework for acquiring new skills and obtaining training to help them integrate into professional life. For some, the Covid-19 period represented a new experience during which they were able to acquire skills related to health care and crisis management. The contact with hospital institutions allowed them to discover their work and organization system.
- 2) The association provided a space to create a network of relationships with others, and a channel through which they were able to communicate easily with different services (examples: State, municipality, youth and sports, management of social solidarity) and with donors, philanthropists and businesses. The associations provided an organized framework for achieving and facilitating this communication, and was a more reliable and credible space in terms of seeking financial resources.
- 3) During the period of quarantine and closure, these young people benefited from a space for entertainment and movement, benefiting from their participation in associative activities which constituted for them a space to break isolation and routine at a time when public authorities have imposed restrictions on travel and freedom of movement. In addition, the association offered a legal

framework for these young people to be able to go out and circulate in public spaces without risking being sanctioned because of the violation of quarantine procedures.

4.3 Claims for social citizenship

Youth as agents of societal resilience can be understood, during Covid-19, through their explicit and implicit demand for social citizenship. This was manifested at the level of the social and solidarity actions itself which constituted the main work of these associations. These young people preferred and defended social cohesion, the help of deprived social categories, as well as channeling their voice and suffering to public authorities and society.

In this context, young people of these associations considered that the social problems and issues of marginalization and poverty constitute the fundamental challenge of associative action. They believe that many associations no longer take care of real problems, and their role became limited to attending either formal events or organize occasional activities with the aim of creating buzz, without seeking the real impact on society.

Thus, these young people consider that solidarity with others is the true expression of the feeling of citizenship. In this sense, the expression of “get down on the filed”, which has been used by the leaders and members of the two associations during interviews, reflects this attitude. It invites activists in the associational movement to going out and communicating with society.

On the other hand, the choice of the associative framework to claims for this type of citizenship can be explained by the ability

of these organizations to impulse soft and bottom-up change while avoiding involvement in political acts that these young people consider conflicting and limited to achieve social impact. In this regard, many young people I interviewed in these associations were looking to participate and contribute to the development of society without getting involved in politics. Charitable and humanitarian work in associations was an appropriate option for them, because it is an action that mediates the situation of passivity towards society problems and the state of involvement in conflicting political actions. Due to the association, these young people were able to realize their desire and be active in society while avoiding being judged as passive or careless citizens towards their community.

5. CONCLUSION

In this article, I attempted to draw attention to the positive role of young people in society by presenting them as agents of societal resistance. Through this attempt, I alleviate the concerns expressed by several studies about the transformation of young people into a threat to social harmony due to the spread of unemployment, illegal immigration and deviance among their members.

Covid-19 crisis, like many others (such as the popular movement of 2019), represented context for this study to examine and defend young people as agents of societal resilience. In the context of this pandemic, a fraction of this age group could show that young people are capable to protect and develop society, particularly in times of crisis.

Within the limits of young people involved

in the associative movement and more particularly the two cases of youth associations I have studied, I can estimate that young people are not unaware of the interests of society. During Covid-19, they engaged in acts of social and human solidarity to alleviate the impact of Covid-19 on the population. They have shown an ability to transform this crisis into an opportunity for learning skills related to health care and crisis management. On the other hand, they evaluated public policies related to social protection. This was manifested by their demands for more investment in social citizenship, through the intensification of acts of immersion into society in order to better integrate the marginalized and deprived population.

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