

Dissent Interrupted: Settling Refugee Youth |
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In our work with young adult refugees (aged 18–35) from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) now resettled in Toronto, Canada, we have met passionate young people whom are interested in changing the social conditions of life. Through our interviews (with 38 participants), we have observed that for some young adult refugees, socially conscious aspirations include formal education and training in fields related to development or building social awareness of war and authoritarianism. We also noticed that competitive and divisive income generating activities were being narrated as feminist, empowering, or socially conscious. We, therefore, found reason to interrogate the types of programs that refugees encountered as they moved through cycles of relocation, migration, and resettlement. To this end, our research has been mapping the growing global network of youth focused non-government organizations (NGOs) that emerged in response to the Arab Uprisings as well as the the migration crisis and work toward building youth social participation.

Mapping the NGO/civil society sector has helped us to better understand the web of social relationships that connect NGOs, development banks, private firms, aid organizations, technology companies, and universities. While youth social participation could mean any number of activities, it has come to represent a general corrective for social exclusion and societal breakdown. In its various forms, including entrepreneurship training, employability programs, youth councils, and internships, youth participation is said to quell the unrest that grows from high unemployment, precarity, and diminished hope for the future. Youth participation, however, works toward professionalizing dissent, thereby seeking to absorb young adult refugees into the neoliberal political economy of development. We, therefore, argue that opening up space for youth participation has the paradoxical effect of interrupting protest and dissent. We do not mean to imply that interrupting dissent entails a simple thwarting or cutting short of social transformations initiated by social movements and community groups. Rather, the notion of interrupting dissent is intended to draw attention to the fact that youth dissent is historically and geopolitically contingent and as such the material grounds and possibilities of dissent are continually reshaped by the global forces of capitalism and imperialism.